Redditch History Society

Newsletter

Vol 8 Number 5
September 2026

A Word from the Editor...

So, here we are in September, at our first meeting after the August break, and it has certainly been a busy month.

On Sunday 13th September, we held the Heritage Open Day at Forge Mill Needle Museum. I have organised this event, with plenty of help from staff and volunteers, for several years now (although I prefer not to think about exactly how many!). We are fortunate to have some superb contributors. However, the event is beginning to feel a little familiar, and I am keen to refresh it. If anyone has any ideas, I would love to hear them.

The following day, Monday 14th September, was our history meeting, at which I gave the talk (see the report on pages three and four). This took a bit of effort after the busy day at Forge Mill, but it went well and was certainly worth it.

At last, we have had some rain, making it possible to start working in the garden again. Anticipating losses caused by the heat and drought, I had already ordered quite a few plants to fill the gaps. As a result, I had no choice but to get them into the ground.

September Meeting

For our September meeting we saw another good turnout: 38 Members, and 7 Visitors, making 45 in total. Our meetings usually attract and audience between 40 and 50, mostly members, but, also, varying numbers of visitors depending on the subject.
Once again, we were delighted to see the Redditch Standard feature us with another great article, thanks to Pat's press release.



Our September speaker, was, yours truly, Tony Green and I explored the history of the fishhook from the earliest times right up to the present day. It's remarkable that such a small object — essentially just a bent piece of wire with a point and a barb — can have such an enormous and far-reaching story.
With a history stretching back around 10,000 years, we looked at how they evolved from a simple tool for catching food into an essential part of a major international sport. Along the way we looked at how Redditch became the centre of the fishing-tackle industry, and, sadly, how that industry eventually declined.



Exhibitions and Events



September has been a very busy and successful month at Forge Mill Needle Museum. On the 13th we had Heritage Day with over 300 visitors, on the 18th, 19th and 20th Indigo Arts had their hugely successful 'Eye of the Needle – the Musical' in a gazebo in the grounds, and throughout, the month there were talks, and workshops as part of the 'Sew Civil War' programme supported by Visit Worcestershire as part of Civil War 375.

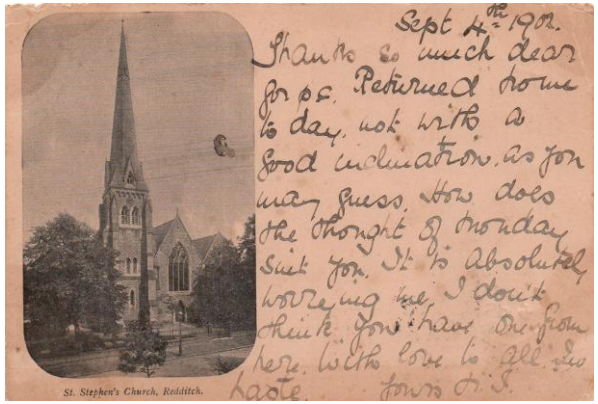


There is also more to come including current and final exhibitions and the Christmas Fair on the 6th and 13th December.

Details of events and activities at the Museum including costs involved can be found at https://www.forgemill.org.uk/web/ 'What's On'



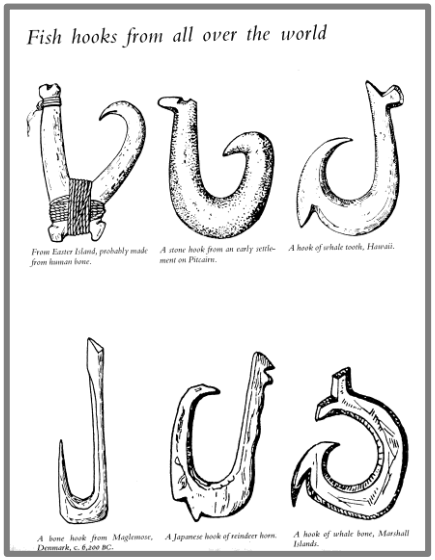
Next Meeting – Monday 12th October
Through the Letterbox
By Chris Jackson



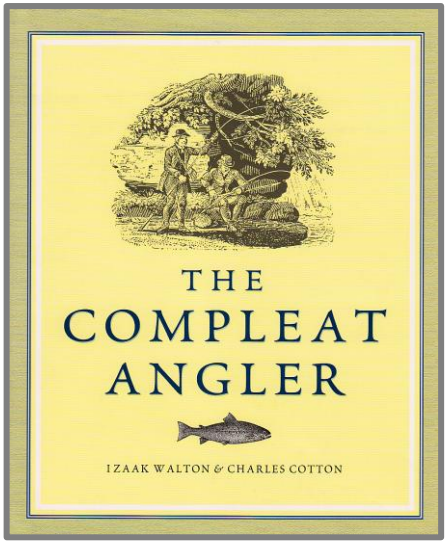
Chris has probably the largest range of original postcards of Redditch which exist, and we have been fortunate that he is a member of the Society and is willing to present a selection of his archives for us.

To date, Chris has given us a tour along the A441 from Bordesley Corner to Crabbs Cross, and postcards from the areas around the town centre including Alcester Street, Church Green and roads which no longer exist, including the Palace Theatre over many decades.
For this talk Chris will be giving us a history of the postal service plus more postcards from the local area.
I don't know, as I write this newsletter, exactly what Chris is going to give us, but I am sure that it will be fascinating.

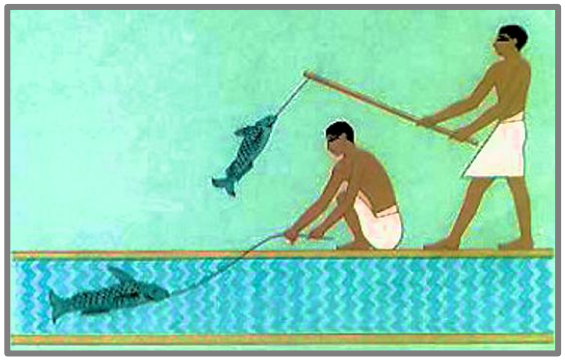
Report by Anthony Green
Meeting on Monday 14th September
A History of the Fishhook by Anthony Green (1 of 2)



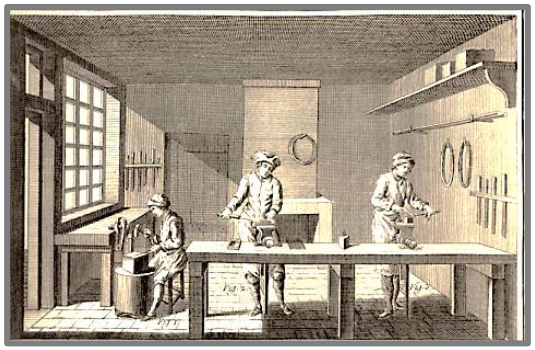
Above –Hooks made from bone
Below - The Compleat Angler by Izaak Walton

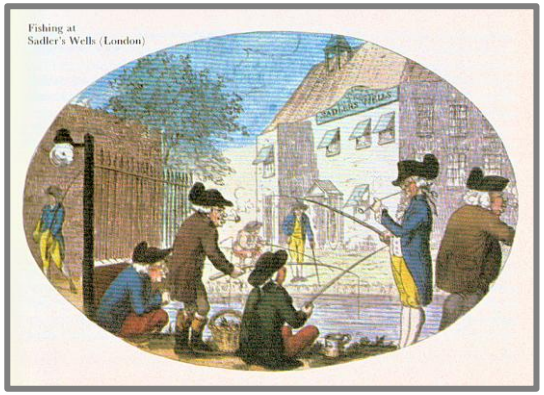


It is rather strange to write a report on one's own presentation. It feels a little like marking your own homework or completing a self-assessment, but I shall do my best to provide a brief summary.
The presentation covered a considerable amount of information and demonstrated how remarkable it is that such a small object, little more than a piece of bent wire with a point and a barb, should have such a long and significant history.
I have never worked in the fishing trade, nor have I ever been particularly interested in fishing as a hobby. However, my immediate family were heavily involved in the industry, and my brother was the last fishhook manufacturer in both the town and the country.
The history of the fishhook stretches back some 10,000 years. The earliest examples were made from bone, including human, fish and animal bone, as well as shell. Later, hooks evolved from carved bone to cast bronze and copper, and it is at this stage that we begin to see the development of the modern hook, complete with eye and barb.
Numerous illustrations of fishing and fishhooks survive in carvings, mosaics and ancient manuscripts, many of which were featured during the first part of the talk dealing with their early history.
In England, the first printed book devoted to angling was written by Dame Juliana Berners. Believed to date from before 1450, it was written in the language of Chaucer and remains an important milestone in angling literature.
A major step forward came with The Compleat Angler by Izaak Walton, first published in 1653. Walton retired from his ironmongery business in 1644 and spent much of the remainder of his life expanding and refining the work. Numerous enlarged editions followed, and the book has never gone out of print, being surpassed only by the King James Bible in longevity and influence.



Above –Fishing in Ancient Egypt
Middle - Early Manufacture in France
Bottom – Fishing at Sadlers Wells

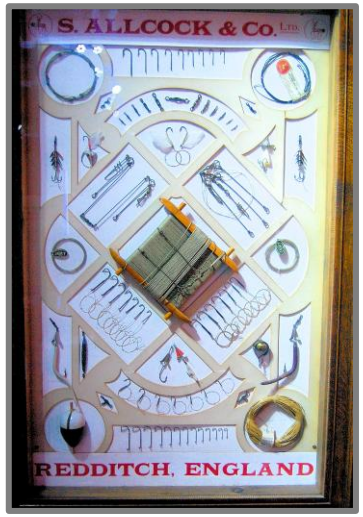




Report by Anthony Green
Meeting on Monday 14th September
A History of the Fishhook by Anthony Green (2 of 2)



Above –The Allcocks Model Perfect Hook
Below – Allcock Display Cabinet at Forge Mill Needle Museum



The impact of The Compleat Angler was profound, helping to establish fishing as a pastime for the leisured classes of Britain. With the Industrial Revolution, however, ordinary workers began to acquire leisure time, and fishing as a sport expanded across all sections of society.

Redditch needle manufacturers quickly recognised the commercial potential of fishhook production, as many of the processes were similar to those already used in the needle industry. The most successful needle manufacturer in the town, Henry Milward, was among the first to expand into this growing market.

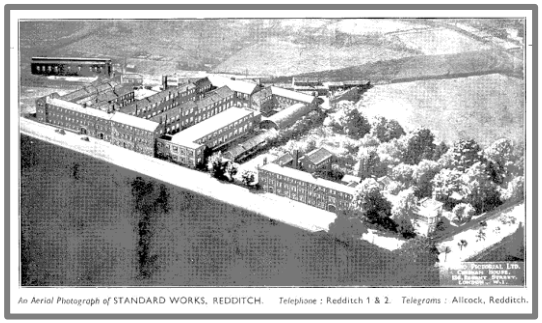
It was not long before specialist fishing tackle companies emerged in Redditch. The largest was Samuel Allcock & Co., which produced virtually everything that a fisherman could require.

Alongside the needle trade, Redditch consequently became an international centre for fishing tackle manufacture during the nineteenth century and remained dominant well into the twentieth century.

There were, however, two main factors behind the industry's post-war decline. First, as living standards improved from the 1960s onwards, people had access to a wider variety of leisure activities and participation in the sport gradually declined. Secondly, Redditch, like much of British industry, failed to invest sufficiently in modern machinery and continued to rely heavily on manual labour. As a result, an increasingly competitive market was filled by cheaper imported products.

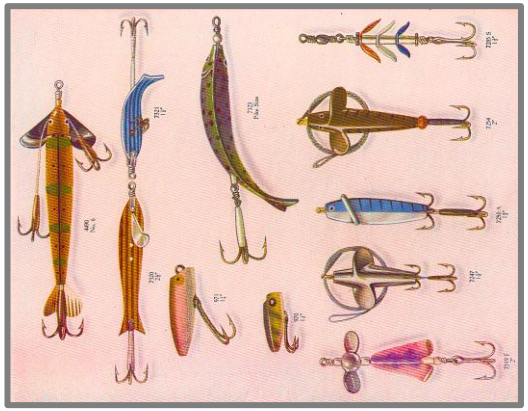
The last fishhook manufacturer in Redditch was my brother, Vince, who specialised in hooks for fly-tyers. He finally ceased trading in 2012, bringing to an end a local industry with a history stretching back more than two centuries.

This brief report can only touch on the main points covered in the presentation. As I now give talks only to the Redditch History Society and, at the age of 83, this was probably the last occasion on which I shall present this particular talk, I was especially pleased that it was so warmly received.



Above –Allcocks Aerial Photograph of Clive Road Works.
Middle - Fishing Fly Display from Forge Mill Needle Museum
Bottom - Allcocks Spinners





FORGE MILL NEEDLE MUSEUM (page 1 of 2)
yes... it is really a museum! (Part One of Four)

With so many activities taking place at Forge Mill Needle Museum for local people, it's easy to forget that this is not just a community museum. It is the National Museum of the Needle Industry and the only museum of its kind anywhere in the world.
Visitors often travel considerable distances specifically to see the museum. They are invariably fascinated by the historic building, the displays and, in particular, the original water-powered scouring mill that remains on site.

What many people do not realise is that the museum also holds an extensive archive relating to the needle and fishing tackle industries of Redditch and the surrounding area.
Much of this material comes directly from former needle and fishing tackle manufacturers, thanks to a handful of forward-thinking individuals who recognised the importance of recording and preserving their companies' histories.
Although the collection has been assembled over many years and from a variety of sources, it provides a unique insight into how local businesses responded to changing markets, both at home and overseas.

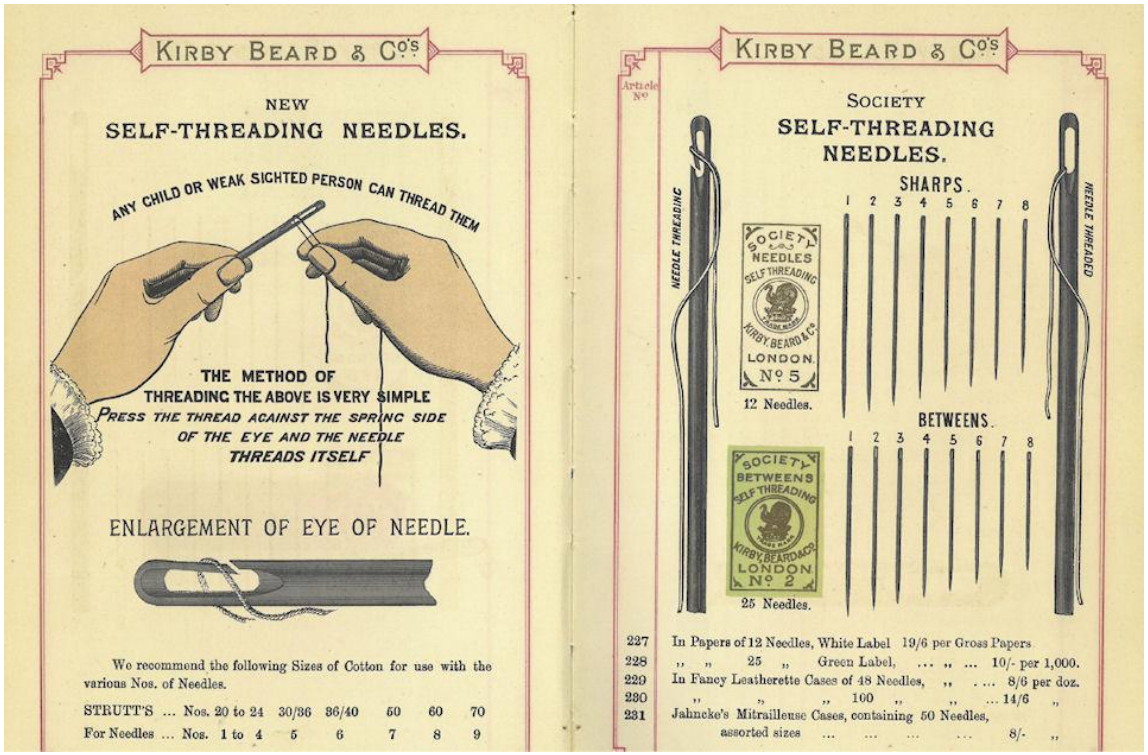


The archives reveal how innovation, continual improvement, diversification and effective advertising were essential to their success and survival.

The collection includes a wide range of publications on the needle and fishing tackle trades. These contemporary accounts are an invaluable source of information.
Some were written by outside observers keen to understand why Redditch became so dominant within the global needle industry. As many of these books, articles and publications are now long out of print, they are included them within the archive listings.

FORGE MILL NEEDLE MUSEUM (page 2 of 2)
yes... it is really a museum! (Part One of Four)

Collectors of sewing tools and accessories will be particularly interested in the company catalogues held by the museum. These contain beautifully detailed illustrations of the products sold alongside needles, including scissors, thimbles, crochet hooks, hatpins and many other household sewing accessories.
The museum also cares for an extensive collection of fishing tackle catalogues, ranging from original editions to high-quality photocopies. These are a valuable resource for anyone looking to identify or date rods, reels, lures and other fishing equipment.
In addition, the archives contain a wealth of information about the families whose names became closely associated with the needle and fishing tackle trades. The Museum holds a substantial collection of family trees, compiled from historical records, census data and other research.
To make the archive easier to explore, the collection is organised into a number of themed categories.


KIRBY BEARD & Co's

NEW
SELF-THREADING NEEDLES.

ANY CHILD OR WEAK SIGHTED PERSON CAN THREAD THEM

THE METHOD OF
THREADING THE ABOVE IS VERY SIMPLE
PRESS THE THREAD AGAINST THE SPRING SIDE
OF THE EYE AND THE NEEDLE
THREADS ITSELF

ENLARGEMENT OF EYE OF NEEDLE.

We recommend the following Sizes of Cotton for use with the various Nos. of Needles.

STRUTT'S ... Nos.	20 to 24	30/36	36/40	50	60	70
For Needles ... Nos.	1 to 4	5	6	7	8	9

KIRBY BEARD & Co's

Article No

SOCIETY
SELF-THREADING
NEEDLES.

NEEDLE THREADING

NEEDLE THREADED

SHARPS.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

SOCIETY NEEDLES SELF THREADING KIRBY, BEARD & Co's LONDON No 5
12 Needles.

BETWEENS.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

SOCIETY BETWEENS SELF THREADING KIRBY, BEARD & Co's LONDON No 2
25 Needles.

227	In Papers of 12 Needles, White Label	19/6 per Gross Papers
228	" " 25 " Green Label, ... " ...	10/- per 1,000.
229	In Fancy Leatherette Cases of 48 Needles, " ...	8/6 per doz.
230	" " " 100 " " ...	14/6 "
231	Jahncke's Mitrailleuse Cases, containing 50 Needles, assorted sizes	8/- "

The lists available on the website are not exhaustive, and there is much more material available for research. If you would like to access the archives or obtain copies of documents, please contact the museum. Please note that a small charge may apply for photocopying and reproduction services.

This article was created by the editor based largely on information/ text / illustrations produced by Jo-Ann Gloger, the keeper of the collection at Forge Mill Needle Museum.
Jo-Ann has carried out extensive work on the archives over the past few years to make them available to the public.
Over the next three issues of the Newsletter, I will be exploring further into the archives available.

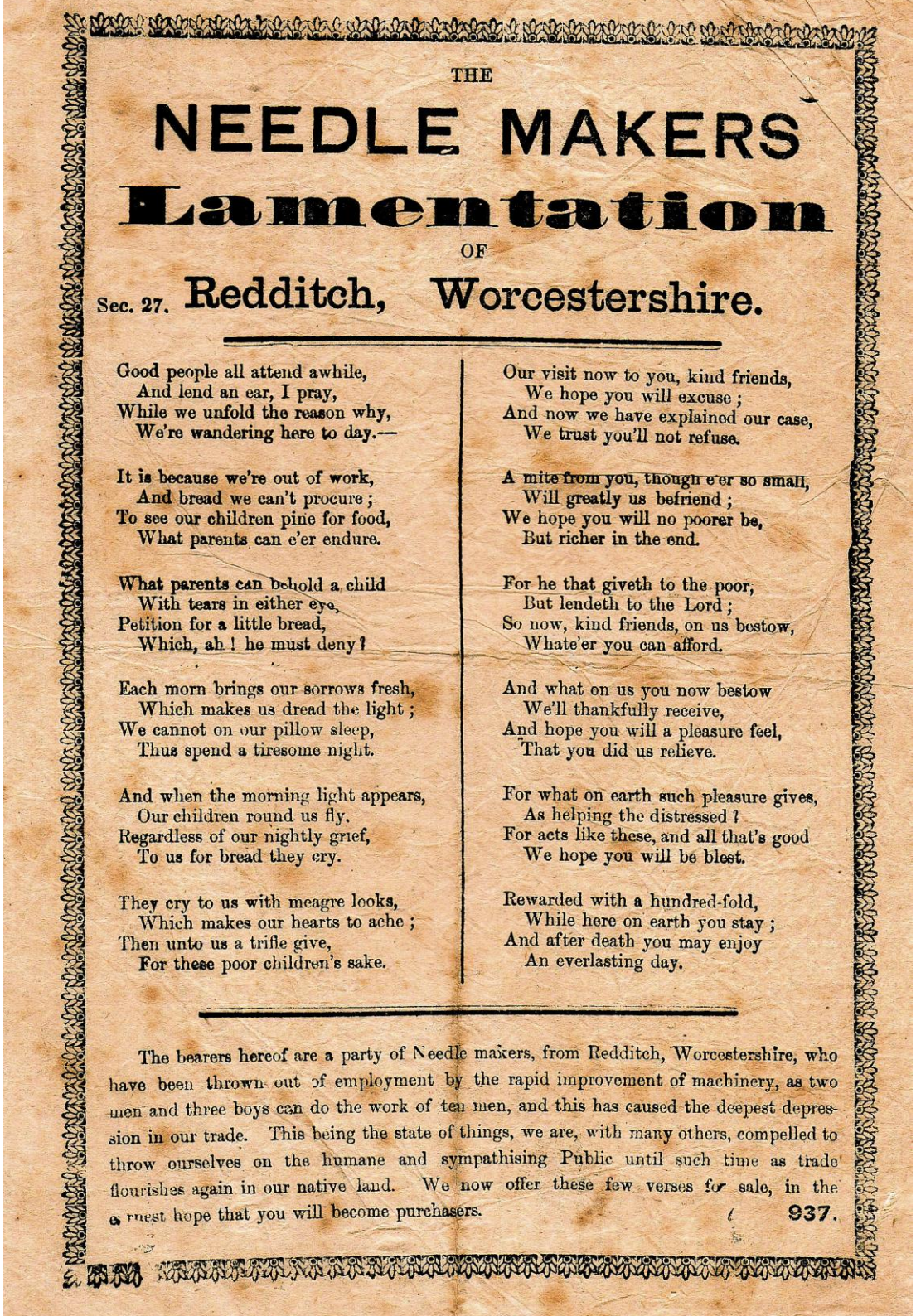
Redditch History Society

Page 7

The Needle Makers Lamentation Redditch, Worcestershire. provided by Chris Jackson

The original is very fragile, on very thin paper, not sure of the exact date but must be just after the installation of the new machinery that led to the riots. – Chris Jackson

The bearers hereof are a party of Needle makers, from Redditch, Worcestershire; who have been thrown out of employment by the rapid improvement of machinery, as two men and three boys can do the work of ten men, and this has caused the deepest depression to our trade. This being the state of things, we are, with many others, compelled to throw ourselves on the humane and sympathising Public until such time as trade flourishes again in our native Land. We now offer these few verses for sale, in the hope that you will become purchasers.



THE

NEEDLE MAKERS

Lamentation

OF

Sec. 27. Redditch, Worcestershire.

Good people all attend awhile,
And lend an ear, I pray,
While we unfold the reason why,
We're wandering here to day.—

It is because we're out of work,
And bread we can't procure;
To see our children pine for food,
What parents can e'er endure.

What parents can behold a child
With tears in either eye,
Petition for a little bread,
Which, ah! he must deny?

Each morn brings our sorrows fresh,
Which makes us dread the light;
We cannot on our pillow sleep,
Thus spend a tiresome night.

And when the morning light appears,
Our children round us fly,
Regardless of our nightly grief,
To us for bread they cry.

They cry to us with meagre looks,
Which makes our hearts to ache;
Then unto us a trifle give,
For these poor children's sake.

Our visit now to you, kind friends,
We hope you will excuse;
And now we have explained our case,
We trust you'll not refuse.

A mite from you, though e'er so small,
Will greatly us befriend;
We hope you will no poorer be,
But richer in the end.

For he that giveth to the poor,
But lendeth to the Lord;
So now, kind friends, on us bestow,
Whate'er you can afford.

And what on us you now bestow
We'll thankfully receive,
And hope you will a pleasure feel,
That you did us relieve.

For what on earth such pleasure gives,
As helping the distressed?
For acts like these, and all that's good
We hope you will be blest.

Rewarded with a hundred-fold,
While here on earth you stay;
And after death you may enjoy
An everlasting day.

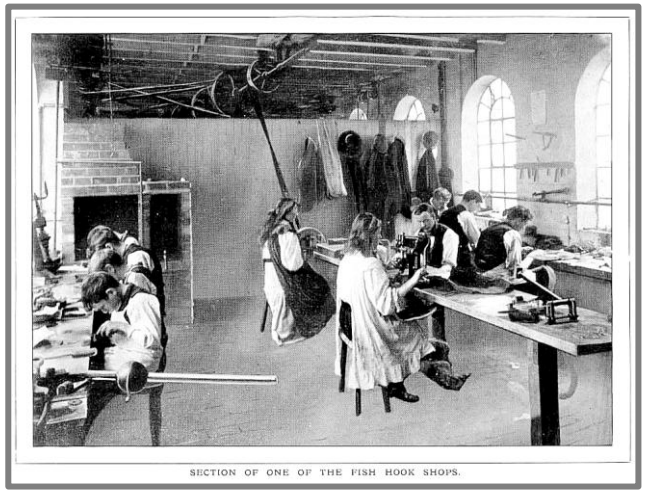
The bearers hereof are a party of Needle makers, from Redditch, Worcestershire, who have been thrown out of employment by the rapid improvement of machinery, as two men and three boys can do the work of ten men, and this has caused the deepest depression in our trade. This being the state of things, we are, with many others, compelled to throw ourselves on the humane and sympathising Public until such time as trade flourishes again in our native land. We now offer these few verses for sale, in the earnest hope that you will become purchasers.

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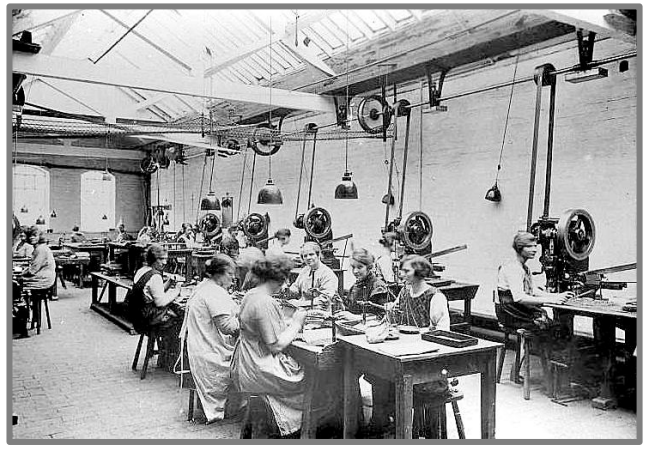
and finally....

Fishhook making over the years.....

In my presentation on the fishhook industry, I mentioned the decline of the industry due to overseas competition using a higher level of mechanisation than the Redditch manufacturers.
This was not just fishhooks but also needles and springs and was typical of UK industry which was based on a low-wage economy where people cost less than investing in more advanced methods.
The three pictures below illustrate this very well.
On the left we have a picture of George Moore fishhook manufacturing from the lete 19th Century (I don't know the exact date), the middle picture is fishhook manufacturing at Millwards factory in 1924, and, on the right is the Alcocks fishhook department in 1952. The only real difference is the clothes they are wearing!



George Moore pre 1900



Millwards 1924



Allcocks 1952

This Newsletter is edited and published by Anthony Green, Society Secretary, Redditch History Society and is produced on behalf of the Society.

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Redditch History Society