

Letitia Veevers (c.1798–1870)

Philanthropist, inventor, teacher

175 years ago, Irish woman Letitia Veevers blended craft, design and sustainability by inventing and producing botanical lace.

In 1851, Letitia Veevers travelled from her home in Mohill, Co Leitrim to exhibit her inventions at London's Great Exhibition. She won a special award for her botanical lace shawls, scarves, parasols, collars and bonnets – all made from the fibres of plants and flowers such as nettles, sweet pea, honeysuckle and nasturtiums. Amongst the 14,000 exhibitors, Veevers' skilled, inventive work generated excitement, curiosity and bemusement, and was reported widely in London and Ireland.

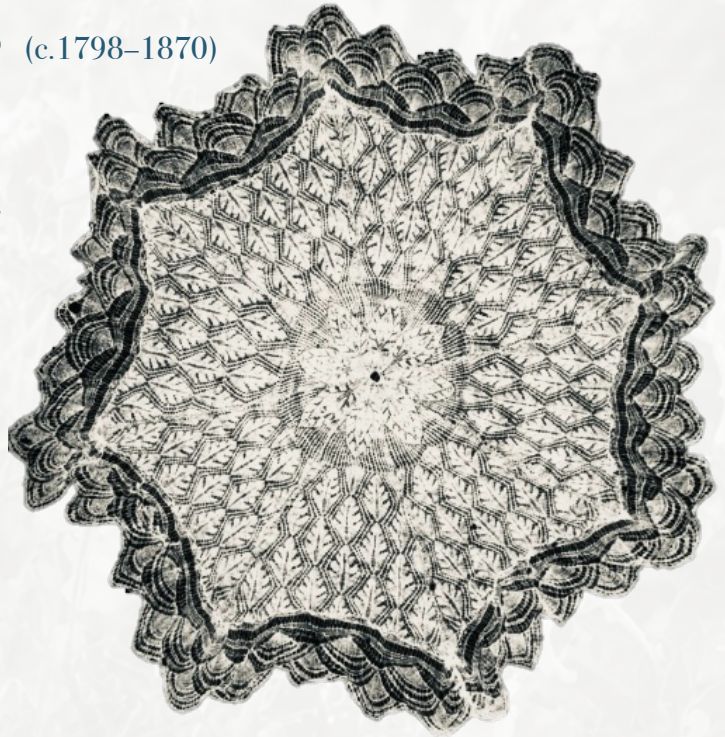
324 VEEVERS, LETITIA, Mohill, County Leitrim, Ireland
—Producer and Inventor.

Articles manufactured from the fibres of plants and flowers, viz. :—From the common nettle, pocket handkerchiefs trimmed with lace of the same material, shawls, scarf, bonnet, parasol, lace collar, and veil; from the hemp nettle, parasol and veil; from the nasturtium, parasol and veil; from the honey plant, parasol and veil; from the sweet pea, bonnet and lace collar; from the honeysuckle, bonnet and lace collar; from the nasturtium, bonnet and lace collar; from the Keria japonica, bonnet; from the silk, mittens; from the Shawl of nettles.

Rare works of art

Botanical lace emerged from Irish experimentation with unusual fibres, from hedgerow flowers to wool from French poodles. Veevers was active at least from 1845, and supervised lacemaking in schools from Leitrim to Antrim. As well as the Great Exhibition, Veevers exhibited lace at the RDS Dublin, 1850, and at Ireland's Great Industrial Exhibition of 1853. Veevers' intricate works of art were amongst the finest examples of Irish lace. One of her parasols, made from the common nettle, Solomon's Seal and nasturtium, is held in the Centre for Economic Botany, Kew. The original version was stolen in 1855 and was replaced with the assistance of Lady Doneraile.

The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations was the biggest event of the 19th century. Opened by Queen Victoria in May 1851, it occupied a ten-storey, 'crystal palace' in Hyde Park, and had over ten miles of displays. Some 100,000 objects from around the globe were showcased by 13,937 exhibitors, from textiles to locomotives, tapestries, ceramics and diamonds. By the time it closed in October 1851, over six million people – nearly one third of Britain's population – had attended the exhibition.



Teacher and advocate for the poor

Letitia Lambert was born c.1798, the third child of Joseph Lambert and his second wife, Mary Clendenning. After her marriage to John Veevers, Letitia moved to Mohill, Co Leitrim where he was Resident Magistrate. From 1845, as Famine approached, the couple were active in raising funds and aid for the starving, poor and aged. During the Famine, Veevers raised funds, established relief efforts, and dispersed financial and food aid. Veevers introduced lacemaking to the industrial school in Mohill (and later Bailieborough) to provide poor young women with employment options.

Images: Parasol by Letitia Veevers, (Kew cat. 65972); samples of sweet pea thread and lace (Kew cat. no. 60600); Great Exhibition catalogue entry, 1851; J. McNeven, interior of crystal palace during the Great Exhibition interior.

Sources: Dunlevy & Nelson (1995); Slevin (2020–26); NAI; *Great Exhibition official catalogue (1851)*; *The Peerage*; *Illustrated London News*, *Freeman's Journal*; *Kerry Examiner*.

