

The Old Flax Mill, Tuddenham Lane

A brief history

Establishing the history of any house of a certain age involves research that almost always turns out to be interesting and enjoyable, however incomplete it may turn out to be. As Nick Barratt writes in his *House History Starter Pack*, published by the Public Record Office: “For most people, it is the pleasure of stepping back in time on a detective journey, the thrill of uncovering a document that sheds light on how former inhabitants of their house would have conducted their lives, the realisation that their property formed a living, integral part of the community that surrounded it”.¹ The history of The Old Flax Mill (also known in its time as the Flax Factory) in Witnesham ticks all those boxes.

It has not proved possible to state with certainty the year in which the original structure was built. The date range is somewhere between 1845 and 1850. We know this because the Tithe Apportionment Survey and Map for Witnesham of 14 November 1844 shows and lists the fields on which The Old Flax Mill now stands. Field 478, just over two acres, is shown as pasture running north and up the valley from the River Fynn (*Findford River* on the map). Field 479, just under two acres and adjacent to the lane, is described as a hop garden - but no house or any form of structure is shown on the map. The occupier of both fields is named as John Cobbold Esq and the owner of the land as Harriet Wise (her total holding in and around the Fynn valley running to some 80 acres). Harriet Wise does not feature as a landowner or farmer in any of the county directories of the mid-nineteenth century so she may have been an absentee landlady. The total tithe she paid was £27- 8- 0 shillings.

1844 was also the year in which White’s Directory for Suffolk reported on a meeting held the previous year by Ipswich and Ashbocking Farmers’ Club, at which the growing and cultivation of flax was strongly encouraged. One hundred local farmers were each asked to grow one acre of flax in 1844 by way of experiment. The advocacy for this initiative (inherent profitability of flax, import substitution and local employment, especially for young women) is recorded by Dorothy Barker in *Other Days in Witnesham*² and by I.E. Moore³, although neither author can make a direct link between the initiative and the establishment of the Witnesham Flax Mill. But it seems likely that they were linked and the timing fits. Incidentally, Barker and Moore seem to underestimate the scale of the Witnesham operation, both stating that “the flax was grown in a nearby field”. In the light of what follows, it seems much more likely that the flax was grown in many of the one acre fields referred to above and that the site chosen for the flax processing was convenient to a number of those involved in the venture.

Construction

The structures that were erected by about 1850 were these. The Flax Mill was a single storey red and white brick rectangular building, approximately 50 feet by 10

¹ Nick Barratt *House History Starter Pack*, Public Record Office (2002) p 3

² Dorothy Barker et al. *Other Days in Witnesham*, Salient press (1985) p 16

³ I.E. Moore *A Witnesham Flax Factory*, Suffolk Review (1973) Vol 4 issue 2 p 24

(500 square feet in all) adjacent to the lane. The retting tanks (rectangular brick ponds in which the flax was rotted for several days for ease of subsequent processing) were eight in number, about thirty yards down the valley from the flax mill and on either side of a large well. Each retting tank was twenty-one feet long and nine feet wide, and about four feet deep. Their total capacity thus comes out at 6,048 cubic feet – given that the flax stalks spent no more than four or five days being ‘retted’, this implies a throughput far in excess of the crop from one field, as earlier authors have suggested. In this connection, the two surviving pen and ink drawings dated 1864 of Winesham Flax Factory Girls show seventeen girls working on the premises. This too implies that the venture was more than a cottage industry.

In *A Survey of Suffolk Parish History, East Suffolk*, researched by Wendy Goult⁴ the entry for Winesham types of farming states: “Flax mill in Sandy Lane (1850 – 1870)”. A separate entry for occupations states: “Flax Mill (1850-70) in Sandy Lane (otherwise Factory Lane)”. This is certainly the right period, although the only mention in any Trade or Post Office Directory of the time seems to be the one in Kelly’s PO Directory of 1865. Here, under Flax Manufacturers, there is an entry: Boyd & Company, Winesham, Ipswich.

Who was Boyd and who else was in his company? Detailed research has failed to provide the answer (there are no Boyds in any of the census returns for Winesham of the period), although there is one intriguing conjecture. The Ipswich Journal of 17 April 1847 refers to a John Boyd of Manor House, Ashbocking. Was he one of the hundred local farmers in the Ipswich and Ashbocking Club who became involved in this flax venture? Did he site the Flax Mill conveniently between Ipswich and Ashbocking, i.e. in the Fynn Valley at Winesham? This can be no more than guesswork in the absence of further documentation.

Conversion

By 1870, market forces (cheaper alternatives such as cotton) were moving against indigenous flax production and processing. In *Other Days in Winesham*, Dorothy Barker says that a fire seems to have led to closure of the flax factory “*and subsequently the building became a house and laundry run by Mrs Cotton...the market garden was functioning by 1889*”. What is certain is that at some stage between 1871 and 1881, a second storey was added to the structure of the Flax Mill and it became a family home. In the census return for 1881 the occupants of the dwelling, then called Factory House, were recorded as John Cooper, 57, head of household, gardener of four and a half acres, Edward Cooper, son, aged 24 and Ellen Robinson, housekeeper. It seems therefore to have been John Cooper who turned the Flax Mill land into a market garden.

Ownership

In 1844, as stated above, Harriet Wise owned the land on which the Flax Mill stands. At some stage thereafter Winesham Hall must have purchased it from her, because on 29 October 1886 a tenancy agreement for the property was made between Jeremiah

⁴ Wendy Goult BA, *A Survey of Suffolk Parish History, East Suffolk I – Y*, SCC 1990

Gooding, then living as the tenant of Witnesham Hall and Alfred Cotton, a 26 year old domestic gardener born in Ipswich. The 1891 census records the Cotton family living in the house (Sandy Lane or Factory Lane has now become "Bye Road" and Factory House has become "Cottage" but the location is clear) in some number. Alfred Cotton is head of household and market gardener, aged 29, his wife is Miriam and their children Jessie, Stanley, Beatrice, Hilda and Leonard are aged 12, 9, 5, 3 and 2 respectively. Even more significantly for the family, in June 1891 Witnesham Hall decided to sell off two properties by auction: they are named in the auctioneer's particulars as the Valley Farm and the Springfield Garden, the latter being described as a freehold market garden. The sale to Alfred Cotton as sitting tenant was evidently made, and the property was conveyed to him by the trustees acting for James Greville Clarke (owner of Witnesham Hall) in a conveyance dated 12 October 1891.

What's in a name?

The house now enjoyed its longest period of stable ownership. The 1901 census records Alfred and Miriam Cotton living in an unnamed house in the "Lane", together with their children Beatrice, Hilda, Leonard, Madge and Ena. Alfred Cotton is still described as a market gardener. Finally – in terms of old records – the 1910 Land Valuation survey records Cotton A. as head of household in Factory House, a property of 4 acres and two roods with a total value of £250 and a tithe or tithe rent charge of £25. In fact the Cotton family continued to live in the house until 1969, when the last remaining daughter died, and after a brief period of modernisation and conversion it passed into its present hands.

Given its history, the house could therefore be called the Old Hop Garden, Old Factory House or Old Springfield Garden. The choice of the Old Flax Mill is however a permanent reminder of a unique twenty or so years in Witnesham's history when Boyd and Company formed part of the village's industry. Incidentally, the surnames of the girls shown in the two pen and ink drawings of 1864 are not to be found in the census returns for Witnesham of the period, with the exception of the name of Farrow – and Mary, Mary Anne and Joanne Farrow are all depicted. But the 1851 census return for Great Bealings shows an eight year old girl called Harriett Warne – and the 1864 drawing shows a Harriett Warne, apparently in her early twenties. Are they one and the same and did she walk daily from Great Bealings to work at the Flax Mill? Further research, on this and many other counts, is clearly required!

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