

Dorset Flax and Hemp Industry

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When Keith and I go on holiday we always seem to find something interesting. This time we visited Dorset. We stayed near **Burton Bradstock** and were thus well-placed to explore **Bridport** and **West Bay**. (No, we didn't go to photograph the Broadchurch locations, although a lot of people seemed to be doing so!) We had taken Peter Stanier's *Dorset in the Age of Steam* published in 2002 and we bought a copy of English Heritage's *Bridport and West Bay – The buildings of the flax and hemp industry*, which was published in 2006. This article is based on information from these two books and our own photos.

From the 17th century hemp (for ropes) and flax (for twine, netting, and sailcloth) was grown in the Bridport area. It was harvested by hand and threshed to remove the seeds before being left in the fields to 'dew-ripen' in order to release the long tough fibres. In later centuries the process was called 'retting' and the plants were stacked in tanks or ponds to allow their soft parts to rot away. The process of separating the raw fibres was called 'swingling' or 'scutching'; they could also be crushed with water-powered tilt hammers or edge runners, a process described as 'balling' or 'bolling'. The fibres were further cleaned by 'heckling' or 'combing' to draw out the fibres and remove short broken tow, at first by hand but later by machinery. They were then spun into yarn by hand in a walk, and then further twisted together to make a rope or twine. Bridport has a lot of open rope walks which, although no longer in use, are fossilised in the layout of the gardens and back alleys of the town.

As time passed, the industry became more mechanised, and purpose-built mills sprang up around the town and beyond. Even today, it is a major centre for the manufacture of all sorts of nets.



Richard Roberts transformed Burton Bradstock's cottage industry by building the country's first flax swingling and balling mill in 1803. It was originally called **Grove Mill** but since being converted to residential use it has become **Burton Bradstock Mill**.

Grove Mill was sold in 1840 and became a corn mill. Its water wheel was replaced by a 15hp Armfield turbine in 1946. The penstock of the water wheel is still visible. This turbine (*right*) displayed outside the newer Grove Mill also built by Richard Roberts as a balling mill appears to be French, but we couldn't find any further details.



Mangerton Mill (left), north of Bridport, originally had two water wheels which drove a corn mill and a flax mill. Originally breastshot, they were later rolled out and reversed to become overshot. The flax mill became a saw mill, and

its wheel was replaced by a turbine. The corn mill has been restored and is sometimes open to the public. When we visited it was closed, so we were unable to enquire whether the two metal edged stones displayed outside (*below*) were used in the balling mill.



A self-contained industrial village north of Bridport at **Pymore** was built in the mid-19th century by Gundrys, one of the major owners of mills and rope walks in Bridport. In addition to a steam powered flax mill, the site also contained warehouses, stables, a dyeing room, a rope walk, a manager's house, workers cottages, and a small school. The site supplied flax twine to other

manufacturers in the Bridport area, and therefore had especially large warehouses (*below*). Most of the mills have been demolished but when the



site was being redeveloped in the early 21st century, HMG's Heavy Gang was invited to assist with the rescue of a large triple sluice gate (*below left*). We were pleased to see that the sluice pinions were still there as a garden feature (*below right*).



The early 19th century flax warehouse (*above*) which I photographed then has been converted to flats with ground floor garaging. The whole area has been sympathetically converted to a residential village, with a lot of new houses, but the watercourses have been retained as a feature.



Stephen Whetham & Sons' **Priory Mills** (*below left*) was the first purpose-built steam-powered mill in Bridport. Dating from 1838, it has a lot of similarities with other textile mills. The tall arched window on the right was the beam engine room. Balling, heckling, carding, drawing, spinning, and also cabling, twisting, and polishing was carried out here.

In contrast, **North Mills** (*below right*) was an early 19th century water- and steam-powered twine, netting, and sailcloth works established by William Hounsell & Co. The prominent stone warehouse survives amongst more modern twine walks and net weaving sheds.



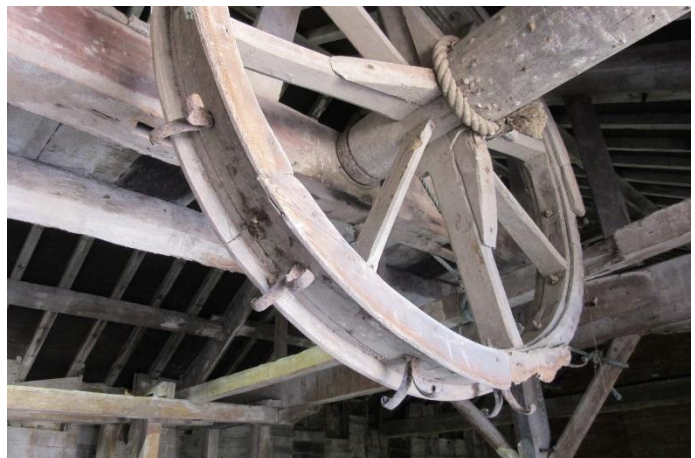
These include the largest surviving covered rope walk in Bridport (*above*), which unfortunately has now been subdivided. The shorter rope walk pictured below gives some impression of what it might have looked like.



Many of the cottages fronting Bridport's main streets were occupied by twine spinners or net makers, employed as outworkers by the larger factories. This photo is of South Street.



West Bay developed as Bridport's harbour, and was instrumental in the growth of the hemp and flax industry in the area. The earliest and largest warehouse named **Good's Yard** (after its owners, the Good family) was certainly in existence in 1787 and used to store flax, hemp, iron, and wine. It is now a vintage and antiques emporium.



An original wooden crane and hoist survive. Does anyone know how the 'hooks' on the hoist wheel were used?