

## A Flax Mill in Romsey by Jeff Hawksley

Some little while ago Sheila, our editor, wrote to ask about flax mills and flax processing in the Hampshire area. The answer is that there was a flax mill in Romsey, two in Fordingbridge and, no doubt, others too. The mills in Fordingbridge were on a larger scale and made sailcloth. Imagine how much of this would have been needed for the square-rigged sailing ships in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The first mention of a flax mill in Romsey appears in The Hampshire Chronicle of 4<sup>th</sup> November 1822 which carried a report of a young girl called Fielder, aged 14 years, who became entangled in the machinery and died. A year later a Trade Directory lists William Lintott, Flax Yarn Spinners, Abbey Mills, Romsey. Tax records show that Lintott already owned the site in 1813 so it is possible, if not probable, that he built and opened the mill shortly after. The sketch shows how the area may have looked in 1832 with the flax mill at the end of Abbey Water. Lintott lived in Abbey House and the coal yard and hemp processing area are also shown.



Flax Breaker photo by Jeff Hawksley

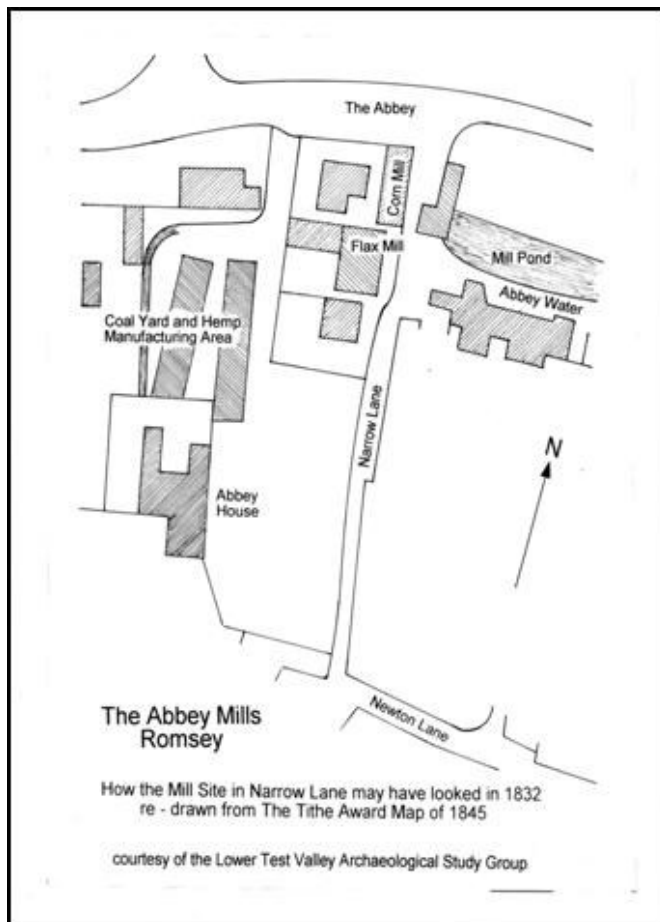
Lintott kept the mill until he died in 1832 when it was advertised for sale as “a superior water powered spinning factory, three stories high with a new bucket waterwheel 16 feet diameter”. Today the head, or fall, of water at the site is about 13 feet so, if this was also the case in the 1830s, this suggests the waterwheel would, most likely, have been a high-breast wheel. The advertisement includes “all those two extensive and well built brick and tiled buildings lately used by Messrs. Lintott as stores and workshops for manufacturing flax and hemp, with the coal-yard adjoining”. In 1838 the Parliamentary Return notes that the flax mill at Romsey had a waterwheel of 16 horse-power and employed 31 persons, over half of these being between the ages of 13 and 18 years. In 1840 there were 36 employees.

By 1843, maybe earlier, the mill had been taken over by Samuel Thompson. Thompson already owned the East Mills in Fordingbridge which, in 1840, employed 200 hands. It was quite a substantial business manufacturing ticking (a striped linen or cotton cloth for mattresses) and sailcloth. He also had the West Mills in Fordingbridge in West Street though at that time it was known as Back Street

Back in Romsey, in 1842, a man was prosecuted for stealing sacks from Thompson's Mill which tells us that this mill was also producing sacks. These were important items at that time; all the grain would have been brought to the corn mills in sacks and sacks would have been used again to carry the flour away.

It is clear that the Abbey Mill in Romsey was spinning flax by machine in 1822 or earlier. At this time mechanical spinning of flax was difficult and, up to 1825, only the coarser grades of yarn

could be produced in this way. This would not necessarily have been a disadvantage in Romsey where, as we have seen, sacking seems to have been the primary product.



It is also clear that the Romsey mill was spinning hemp, which makes a rather coarser yarn. Hemp and flax differ from other textile fibres such as wool and cotton in that several preparatory processes are needed to separate the useful fibres from the stems before spinning can begin. And, whilst flax and hemp come from different plant species, the preparatory processes are very similar for both. After the stalks have been pulled from the ground, rather than cut, the first step is to remove the seeds. Later these may be crushed and pressed to extract the linseed or hemp seed oil. The stalks are dried and then soaked in water to break down the woody material which, later, has to be separated from the useful fibres. This soaking was done either by immersing bundles of stalks in a pond or river, called “retting”, or by spreading the stalks on grass fields so that they are wetted by the dew. Retting in ponds or rivers polluted the water and,

apparently, smelled awful.

After a suitable time the plants are dried and subjected to further processing to remove the woody outer layers. There are three steps. First the dried stalks were crushed in a “break”, then bunches of fibres were beaten to remove more of the woody material, a process known as “scutching”. Finally the fibres were drawn through a “hackle” to align the fibres and remove any last traces of woody material; a process analogous to carding wool. The final result, after all this work, is a handful of lustrous silky strands of flax.

Initially all these processes were carried out by hand using simple wooden tools built to traditional designs. The three photos show a breaker, scutchers and a hackle. On the Continent almost any small country museum has examples of breakers, scutchers and hackles on display – they were an important in the lives of country people. The photographs were taken at a village fete in Germany where the traditional tools and materials appear to be readily to hand and maidens in local costume have the skills to demonstrate. Presumably the same work was part of rural life in England but neither equipment or memories remain. This could be an interesting area for further study.

From about 1790 machines began to appear to break, scutch and hackle the flax and there is a considerable literature available for Northern Ireland. But not much for England. Nor has it yet been possible to discover how much of the preliminary processing was carried out at the mill in Romsey or what was done in the Hemp Manufacturing Area. The census of 1851 for Romsey lists three hemp dressers along with flax spinners, weavers, sack makers etc.

With so few dressers it seems likely the flax or hemp was delivered ready for the final combing but, so far, this is only a guess.



Flax Hackle photo by Jeff Hawksley

In Fordingbridge, in 1853, there was an exhibition at the Mechanic's Institute where "Messrs. Thompson exhibited specimens of their sail-cloth manufacture, from its commencement in the green flax to its completion". From this it would appear that they did all the processing themselves but it is not known whether the flax was grown locally – another area for research perhaps ?

What happened to the Romsey Mill ? The flax mill was still working in 1864 but by 1865 it appears to have changed hands. By 1867 the corn mill had closed and by 1873 a new building had been erected on the site which was used as a classroom. This building is still there. Meanwhile the flax mill had re-opened as a corn mill. In 1892 the whole site was taken over by the Sisters of La Sagesse, a religious order of nuns from the Vendee region of France and they are still there.

Abbey House is home to the Sisters and Saint Joseph's Church stands in the place where Hemp was processed 150 years ago. The corn mill continued until 1925 when it was destroyed by fire. It was replaced in 1928 by a single-storey building which also served as a classroom. A glimpse of this building can be seen today above the brick wall at the end of Abbey Water; the dome at the southern end surmounts a small chapel. It is very difficult now to visualise this peaceful corner of Romsey as a busy industrial area but that is what it was.



Flax Scutchers photo by Jeff Hawksley