

Open Day at Dawe's Twineworks in Somerset

Report by Sheila M. Viner



Coker Rope Works, April 2010

Disappointment at not winning a Heritage Lottery Grant in the BBC's Restoration series turned to elation as the Coker Rope and Sail Trust hosted an open day on Good Friday, 2nd April, so that the general public could see the initial results of grants of £80,000 from English Heritage and £40,000 from South Somerset District Council, at Dawe's Twineworks, West Coker near Yeovil.

And what did they see? The whole of the 300ft long building, which had twisted and sunk as its posts rotted, supported by scaffolding which raised up, and was gradually realigning, the whole of the structure. The scaffolding had only been erected the week before and already the twisted shell was straightening. It had been an anxious but rewarding time as one roof slate had been the only casualty in the whole operation. Patrick Stow and the Carpenters Fellowship had just six weeks to complete their task of cutting away the rotted post ends, cutting in new and setting them in concrete. All of the original machinery for rope making was in place except for the boiler - and this was to be returned to the Twineworks by the Westonzoyland Engine Trust, along with offers of specialist help and money. The only fly in the ointment being how to transport the boiler! Anyone got a 4 ton crane and low loader?

The Trust's founder, Ross Aitken, was the man with a long held vision of reinstating Dawe's Twineworks, which dates back to the 19th Century and is believed to be the most complete surviving example of a rural rope works in the country. He has committed support from the whole of the village, which was very evident on the open day. Former workers' memories and advice are being digitally recorded, both for giving knowledge of how the works operated and for future generations to understand how the whole community was involved in the production of rope, twine and sail.

An informative exhibition of display boards, reports and photographs gave greater understanding of the importance of the industry, not only to the villagers but to our nation's sailing and warships; the most notable being Nelson's navy ships. (The renowned Coker Canvas equipped HMS Victory at Trafalgar.) We learned how flax and hemp had been grown extensively in Somerset and processed in the fields around the village.



Leg of portal frame rotted away Ross Aitken hopes that, one day, flax and hemp can be grown again locally and processed for many uses in industry as we look toward the lessening of derivatives of the oil industry; examples cited are: hemp (which is grown without the need for fertilisers) already being used in door panels, seats and Adidas trainers.

The Coker Rope and Sail Trust is to be commended for its perseverance, organization and vision for the future. Its progress will be watched with great interest. It is located at: 75 metres northeast of Millbrook House, High St, (north side) West Coker. BA22. Check the internet for update and openings. Museums at Crewkerne and Yeovil hold collections of artefacts and information on this important past industry.