



Whitcombe Road Factory

Beaminster

Whitcombe Road Factory, Beaminster

Sometimes known as Whitcombe Road Flax Mill. Beaminster

NB Much of the information is tenuous and also conflicting

History of mill

Whitcombe Road Factory is now called Flax Mill House. The absence of any obvious power source suggests that all flax processing was entirely manual.

Probably the largest of the Beaminster flax mills bearing in mind that it was not a mill in the normal sense as it had no water power. The former Flax Mill, 7 Whitcombe Road, a plain, strong building with industrial archaeological interest¹.

The mill was originally a stone-built two-storey building (1500-1600)².

The present occupier believes it was built in the 16th century, with the third storey added in brick to the stone original in about 1680, possibly to house spinning and weaving operations. It seems likely that the business also had a retting capability⁶. The third storey of brick was added in the early 1700s^{3, 4}.

1670-1680 approximate building date⁵². If the dates are correct it does suggest that late in the 1600s production of thread was on a larger factory scale than we had believed, more than just work in individual cottages⁶.

The mill was used as a shelter from the fires of Beaminster because it had either a stone or a slate roof⁷.

A couple of things. Attached are two screen shots of the location. If you compare them, one is the tithe map the other the 1880s OS, then it appears that the cottage is in fact part of plot 176, not 177. The field boundaries help to locate or the maps can be overlaid.

Plot 176 is owned and occupied by Richard Warr, builder etc. He is bankrupt in 1845 and the property is sold, being described as house with lawn in front and garden behind with LARGE YARD ADJOINING WITH THREE STALL STABLE, SADDLE ROOM AND HAY LOFT. TOGETHER WITH COMMODIOUS WORKSHOPS, WAREHOUSES used in his extensive business. (Sherborne Mercury 6/12/1845 p1 col5)

This implies that the cottages was a warehouse, which is what it looks like. Warr took it on in 1839, jury records at Ancestry.

This would also sit well with George Silk with the weaving workshops parallel to the road and the warehouse at right angles.



Extract from tithe map⁸



During World War II it was the headquarters for the Beaminster Air training Corps. A radial air engine was housed behind the pair of doors at road level and the top floor was a rifle range⁹.

The General who owned the mill previously started the conversion. There were 32 new windows put in by Mr Brown after discussion with the local authority historic buildings advisor¹⁰.

Owners

It is thought that one of the Hine family may have owned the flax mill⁴. Philip Hine lived at Hitts House across the road.

Location

The factory building is the large three storey brick building in Whitcombe Road, at right angles to the road opposite Hitts House.

OS Explorer 117 483011.

Processes

Before long, even the flax shops (often in small barns) were proving too small to deal with the quantity of crop being grown. The entrepreneurs who had rented large amounts of land to grow flax needed larger buildings and some control on the quality of the processing. Larger manufactories, or more simply, 'factories' were offered. They were often three-storey buildings with large open floors, such as Whitcombe Road Factory, Beaminster. The factories offered permanent employment to many local residents, including women and children. The processing was still done by hand. Dried flax was typically brought to the factory for centralised preparation, which helped guarantee uniform fibre quality. This form of factory working lasted until the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when machinery was being invented and patented to replace much of the manual work¹¹.

There is a suggestion that the dried harvested Flax was taken to the 'mill' retted in a natural 'pond'/depression in a/the field behind the mill, then put through the various processes to produce the flax thread¹².

The retting soaks were behind The Manse, fed by a drain from the hills, the outflow going across Whitcombe Road between Edgeley Cottage and the Toll House and out beyond the house opposite into the small river. The drains were willow lined of which some recent evidence has been found¹³.

When the current owner's parents bought the cottage, say 40+ years ago, the Mill came with it. It was simply a 3 storey building each floor wholly open and unused at that time¹⁴².

The building itself may have been for flax drying on the ground floor, possibly breaking, scutching etc. on the first floor. The top floor may have been added for spinning rather than weaving as there were already weaving sheds in East Street. All would have been carried out manually.

Products

Spun flax or flax ready for spinning.

Possibly linen (or sailcloth) squares: this would also require spinning and weaving³ ... may be the cause of the third storey extension?

Goods went out through the doors on the floors onto the road. The road was 12ft wide, just about wide enough for a wagon to turn round. At the road level was probably a store for two or three wagons. In addition there was stabling for three horses and possibly a wagon in the grounds. The floor in the stables was sloping with a drain. The single storey extension of the stable was for the stable lad and had a bunk and small stove. Water would have been drawn from the well the other side of the mill¹⁵. It would thus appear that the factory transported its own goods.

Power Sources

No power source

Map from Tithe Map

There was no leat.



Factory building (shown in green) on an extract from the Tithe Map¹⁶

Employees

No information

Customers

George Silke could have been a customer (see sale information below). In addition there were weaving sheds at Farris, so another potential customer

Sale 1819¹⁷

Dwelling house (new built), 2 gardens, warehouse, weaving shops, stable and outhouses together with excellent pew in church and 5½ acres of meadow land.

Lot 1 messuage or dwelling house (described) together with Bucking House, Warehouse, weaving shops, stable, outhouses, garden in front, yard and another garden behind in East Street in occupation of George Silke and his under-tenants and excellent pew in church. SAILCLOTH MANUFACTURER.

Landscape legacies

The building is still there although much altered internally with divisions. The windows on the South West side appear to be in the original positions whereas those in the North East side are much altered.

Photographs

(All photographs by Duncan Harris 14/08/2013)



Whitcombe Flax Factory showing bottom two stories stone and extension top storey in brick.



Flue through stonework.



Road end of Whitcombe Road Factory. The bottom door was probably for cart storage. The upper two doors for loading carts from the factory. The road width here is 12 ft, wide enough for a cart to turn round?



Original beam.



Original beams and in-fill brickwork



The stables and bothy. There were three stalls and probably room for a cart. The single storey extension was the bothy for the stable lad where there was a bunk and small stove. The water would be drawn from a well the other side of the mill.



Suggested as a Linen Press made from glass found near to mill building (could be a paper weight?)

Appendix

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13 August 2013

Dear Arnold

'The Old Flax Mill'

Unfortunately, I have to go and help our daughter with something urgent this morning so, rather than put our meeting off, I thought I'd write a few notes down.

We bought the Mill in 2001 and re-named it *Flax Mill House*, not wanting to foster the twee context the original name suggests!

It was converted to its present state in 1995 by Heather Fraser and her partner Michael Brown who spent a small fortune on it. It was previously part of the garden belonging to 5 Whitcombe Road which belonged to the Broads. The Broad's still own *The Cider Press* in East Street and you have met one of the brothers who lives at Charmouth.

It must have been he who was responsible for the original conversion of the *Old Flax Mill* and put a Stannah Lift for his mother on the outside of the building, going up to a re-positioned front door at first floor level. At that stage the ground floor was earth and they did not use it, as far as I know.

History.

We were told that the original stone building, nearest the road, was two stories high (1500-1600) and the brick extension to three floors high was built in the early 1700s. (There is a very old timber frame, brick-infill wall still in the sub-basement nearest the road).

We understand that flax was treated here by various hand-stripping/combing operations, and that it stopped being a mill in 1850 which ties in with the mechanized developments which came in with the industrial revolution. We do not think that it was just a 'storage building'. Why would it be referred to as the old Flax Mill if it wasn't one?

The evidence is that there is a 'soak'? (shallow pool for soaking flax) behind/to the side of *The Manse* and from there, there are drains which go

under the road, across the field behind the Barnard's house, draining into the small river at the bottom. The drain went across Whitcombe Road.

We have been told that sail cloth was made at the Mill. No one has ever mentioned that it was a storage building.

I have spoken to Heather Fraser who sold the house to us and she says that her husband Michael Brown is much more likely to know more about the house than she is. Their individual numbers are:

Heather Fraser	0208 944 0444
Michael Brown	01803 839 388

They both said that they would be pleased to speak to either of you.

There does not seem to be much other recorded use for the Mill until the 20th C. when various parts of it were used:

- in the great fires of Beaminster (1600s/1700s) people took shelter in the Mill because, we are informed, the Flax Mill had a stone or slate roof.
- to make coffins (we found a brass boss in the garden). There are signs of loading doors onto the road.
- the back bedroom overlooking the garden was used as a shooting range in WW2 (we found several 22. bullet cases under the floor boards!)
- in 1940, Ralph Bugler says he remembers standing at the one of the windows on the second floor, looking up Whitcombe Road with a rifle in his hand, waiting for the Germans to march down the hill!
- Nelson Hillier told me that the second floor of the Mill was used as the Signals Office during/after? WW2 (see article about him in *Around&About Beaminster*, Spring 2009).
- there were several large openings around the building at ground and first floor level. These were possible loading bays for lowering goods onto carts parked in Whitcombe Road.

June Cull
13.8.2013

References

- 1 **Beaminster Draft Conservation Area Appraisal**, Dorchester, West Dorset District Council undated (post-2009).
- 2 Letter from Jane Cull to Arnold Shipp 13th August 2013 (see Appendix) and discussion with Mr Cull, Arnold Shipp and Duncan Harris 1000-1100hrs 14th August 2013.
- 3 See 2
- 4 Beaminster Museum publication **Hanging by a Thread Our Flax and Hemp Heritage** Pg 53.
- 5 Note from Colin Bowditch. Source his neighbour at Seatown: Antony Broad as a child lived in what is now No 7 East Street. He has spoken to him several times.
- 6 As for 5
- 7 As for 2
- 8 Beaminster tithe map (copy in museum)
- 9 Information from Maurice Gibbs, former member of the ATC, January 2017.
- 10 Telephone conversation with Michael Brown, the previous owner, 15th August 2013.
- 11 Beaminster Museum publication **Hanging by a Thread Our Flax and Hemp Heritage** Pg 27.
- 12 As for 5
- 13 As for 2
- 14 As for 2
- 15 As for 2
- 16 As for 7
- 17 Angela Trotman's notebooks (copy in the museum reference section).

Duncan Harris (February 2019)

I wish to thank many people from the museum and the village who have provided the information for this document