Industrial Archaeology Notes 1978

Compiled by Malcolm G. Knapp

CLAYPOLE A Former Flax Mill
(Grid reference SK842480)
J. A. Sass

The preparation of this paper has been greatly helped by the loan of extensive notes on the history of Claypole and the mill compiled by Mr. W. H. Tinsley. A survey of the buildings and surrounding site by the author and Barry Brooke in July 1977 was rendered possible by the kindness of Mr. Arnold, the present owner.

Plate I North view taken 1955 before tailrace filled in.

The mill is situated on the eastern bank of the River Witham at the extreme southern end of the parish of Claypole near Newark. There has been a mill known on the site for nearly 900 years. The Domesday survey of 1086 AD records 'one mill rendering 10 shillings'.

The greater part of the parish was enclosed at the end of the 18th century and the Parish Council have a copy of the enclosure award and map. The enclosure award, dated 1 May 1772, on sheets one and two reads 'There has been for time immemorial an ancient water corn mill upon part of the said lands'. These belonged to the Revd. William Rastall D.D. lord of the manor and had been the subject of an earlier enclosure. The map accompanying the enclosure award is dated 1770 and shows the water mill site precisely where it is today and it is possible that this is the position it has occupied since Saxon times.

A map, dated 1729, shows an earlier mill building on the same site with an external water wheel at the opposite end of the building to the wheel in the surviving structure and, also to the south of the mill, an extensive mill pond providing a reservoir of water to drive the mill leaving the River Witham clear for navigation.

The Flax Mill

Unfortunately it is not at present known precisely when the processing of flax commenced at the mill nor when it ceased. The enclosure award mentions a corn mill, not a flax mill. The first definite proof of a flax manufactory is contained in a Sun insurance policy of 17 October 1797. This was taken out by a John Wriglesworth of Claypole on his 'Spinning Mill'. The clockmakers work, carding machines and braking engines and all moveable utensils therein were valued at £600. Bryant's excellent 1 inch to 1 mile map of 1827 shows a sailcloth manufactory on the site.

Plate II Old trade card.

Some years ago when a mantelpiece was removed from one of the houses a trade card was found behind it and preserved by the owner the late Mr. G. Arnold. The undated card (Plate II) shows the water mill and bears the following inscription:

Claypole Flax Mill, Near Newark,

Wriglesworth, Jalland & Co.

Spinners of Linen Yarn, Wick Yarns etc., and
Manufacturers of Sail Cloth, Sheet etc etc.

(Size of card 3 ½ in. x 2 ½ in.)

Miss Astling of Claypole has two engraved brass plates which obviously were used for printing bill headings.

Plate I reads:

Wriglesworth Jalland & Co.
Claypole Mill — Newark.
Manufacturers of Wick Yarn, Sail Cloth, Sacking,
Wool Sheet etc.

Plate II reads:

John Wriglesworth.

Claypole Mill — Newark.

Manufacturer of Candlewick Yarn.

The trade card gives a view of the mill showing the tailrace of the water wheel and without the later building additions seen in the 1797 survey. The bell in the dome surmounting the tiled roof was used for timekeeping purposes for the employees and possibly was operated by the 'clockmakers work' referred to in the 1797 policy. The bell tower has since been removed. None of the plant used in processing flax now survives in the mill.

The mill is half a mile from the village and had its own colony of about a dozen houses and workshops, obviously built at the same time as the present mill building, to house its employees. At the time of the 1977 survey only one cottage and the main house were still occupied.

An indication that the mill colony was firmly established by the turn of the 19th century is seen by a note in the church register (Vol. III) where in 1803 the following appears at the bottom of a page: 'where the word mill is inserted after any register in this book it implies that the subjects at the time of insertion lived or died at the Mill Manufactury. (Author's italics.)

The church records of the north mediety for baptisms between the years 1804 and 1812 give the fathers' occupations of persons living at the mill variously as bleacher, Barker, salesmen, flax-dresser and weaver.
White's directory of 1842 records Jas. Welbourne flaxdresser and in 1856 James Welbourne, flaxdresser and ropemaker.

Further evidence of the linen mill came to light in 1962 when a Mrs. Blanche Hampson Vrooman of Vancouver, Canada wrote to the village for details of her ancestor F. Hampson who was recorded as being a weaver in Claypole in 1837. She had in her possession a piece of damask linen woven at Claypole Mill.

It would be fair to assume that the heyday of the flax manufactory would have been during the Napoleonic wars when the growing and processing of hemp and flax was encouraged by the payment of a bounty. Apparently many of these local industries died out when the protective duty was reduced in 1832.

The Corn Mill
Graffiti carved on some wooden panels within the mill prove that the building had ceased to be a flax mill by 1872 and had been re-equipped as a corn mill. In White's 1882 Directory G. Arnold is listed as miller and corn merchant, Claypole Mill.

The Right Honourable Lady Ada Marian Wilmot of Stubton Hall, and owner of considerable property in Claypole, sold the water mill together with 276 acres of farm land and buildings in 1918. The mill was described in the sale catalogue as having two pairs of stones for flour work, two pairs of stones for offal work, dressing machine, wheat screen and bins, bran duster, elevator and worm and silk reel (for producing fine flour). The mill continued to be operated separately from the farm for some years by a Mr. A. Lewin who, prior to the sale in 1918, run the mill commercially as a tenant of the Wilmot family. The farmer/owner, Mr. Richards, ultimately took over.

The mill and the farm are at present in the occupation of Mr. M. Arnold whose father, the late Mr. G. Arnold, had purchased it in 1940 and worked the mill until the winter of 1947 when the severe frost caused extensive damage to the water wheel which was considered at the time too costly to repair and the mill was abandoned.

The trade card (Plate II) a brick extension with steep pitch roof was added to the wheel house end of the mill. This was used during the present century as a slaughter house and still contains remains of a crane that carried the carcasses of slain beast. The overall condition of the building is not good and several former windows have been bricked in to strengthen the structure.

On the northern elevation of the mill the two externally mounted brick ventilator shafts of chimneys of unknown use can still be seen. These are shown in the trade card drawing. These 'chimneys' terminate in bricked arches in the internal wall of the basement.

The Wheel House
This is contained within the main mill building at the western end. The crucifix shaped iron axle is all that remains of the former large water wheel. The wheel had wooden spokes mounted on three cast iron boxes on the axle, and had wooden buckets. From score marks on the walls of the wheel pit made by the revolving wheel, and the position of the sluice gate which allowed water on to the wheel it was estimated that the water wheel was approximately 13 ft. 4 in. diameter and the breadth of the wheel as 8 ft. 1½ in. From the remaining evidence of the brick sills and sluice gate grooves it was decided that the wheel had been either low breast shot or undershot. The two fine arched inlet and outlet tunnels remain and although the mill now stands waterless the wheel pit contains a certain amount of 'seepage' water.

The mill is now used for the storage of grain after harvest and the ground floor is supported by extra makeshift stanchions placed into the floor of the wheel pit and also on the iron wheel axle. The wheel house was originally entered by two doors, one from the basement and the other from the exterior, both doors are now bricked in.

The Basement
This is entered by steps down from ground level at the eastern end. It housed the iron pit wheel which was mounted on and turned by the iron wheel axle. All trace of the drive to the stones has gone and the pit filled in and the whole floor concreted.

This floor is lighted by a series of windows in the southern wall just above ground level. The basement also contains the arched recesses, resembling fireplaces, at the lower end of the two vents or chimneys already mentioned. The stone frames above are supported by cast iron pillars.

The Ground Floor
This floor is entered by a door at the eastern end or a loading door and platform towards the western end of the north wall.

There are bedstones still surviving at the western end next to the wheel house wall. Since the mill was abandoned to storage purposes they have been encased by a concrete floor. The bedstones are remains of four right hand driven pairs of overdriven millstones. Two pairs of French burr stones originally used for milling wheat for flour being 4 ft. 8 in. and 4 ft. 4 in. diameter respectively and two pairs of 'peak' or millstone grit stones of 4 ft. 6 in. and 4 ft. 8 in. diameter used for animal feedstuffs. The whole of this floor is now given over to storage and some modern plant has been installed for grain cleaning and elevators.

The upright shaft which took the drive from the iron crown wheel was a massive square baulk of timber, the wooden clasp arm spur wheel had applewood cogs. Unfortunately all the machinery was removed after the mill was abandoned. As with the other floors extra wood stanchions have been added to take the extra weight of the grain storage.
LINCOLNSHIRE, LINDSEY The Story of the County Council, 1889-1974 by Arthur Wickstead, x + 178pp., illus., Lincolnshire and Humberside Arts, 1978, £2.75.

What a splendid book the Chairman of our society has written! It must be admitted this was not your reviewer’s initial reaction, finding nothing amiss with the writing, not to mention the shape and size of the book and its weight in the hand. At first sight it seemed odd that it was the second volume of an account of a local government, one of the most important in the country. But then the reviewer remembered the work had been completed under Mr. Wickstead’s supervision and then under the careful guidance of Mr. H. B. Wickstead. The obvious alternative is ‘Whitehall’, with a tone of voice and a special face too, but Mr. Wickstead’s comment in regard to public health as ‘the service which has suffered most from interference and lack of confidence so ably supplied by central government in its mishandling of local government’ (p.130) improves on the obvious. It must not be thought, however, that this is a polemical work, although hard things are also said, and rightly, of the lack of communication and of common courtesy regarding the final government decision on the shape of the new Lincolnshire (p.148).

It is a purpose, from the beginning of the book, to show what local government does, with specimens from all aspects of the council’s business for 1900, 1930 and 1960 and with an account of how committees were set up, bit by bit, as new functions were imposed. This begins with notes of the first clerk, John Francis Burton, specifying committees that would be needed, finance, county rate, highways and contagious diseases of animals, joint committees with other authorities for Lunatics, Police and the County Committee and a General Purposes Committee to make nominations. Most of these committees continued, others came and some went. Something is said also of the consequences of the joint holding of the offices of clerk of the county council and clerk of the peace.

These are the bare bones, but they are clad with illustrative incidents and human interest. There are complete lists of councillors and chief officers from 1889-1974, with some analysis of categories, sketches of personalities and stories handed down by word of mouth of those beyond living memory. One prominent person was Viscount Oxenbridge, the Monson of his day, who was a national figure in Liberal politics and not too proud to stand for election as a councillor rather than accept the alternative of nomination as alderman. ‘He was Chairman of Quarter Sessions, Chairman of Visitors of the Lunatic Asylum and clearly the obvious chairman for anything.’ So he became the first chairman of Lindsey County Council. Another character, of whose many good stories have been told (not all of them here) was Sir Hickman Bacon, Bt., of Thonock. He was zealous in local government, reporting with vigour against river pollution, welcoming the first lady mayor of the council Mrs. Croft-Baker, after the 1914-18 war, enquiring how the proposed Humberside bridge was to be got rid of if prejudicial to land drainage and navigation, active in all kinds of council business long before he became chairman and was regarded with affectionate amusement for his eccentric personal economies (p.117). He was a pioneer of motoring and toiled, unsuccessfully, with J. D. Sandars, for the first registration number BE1.