

Local History News

The newsletter of the
South Molton & District Archive
Local History Society

The Constables Room, Town Hall, Broad Street, South Molton EX36 3AB

Charity No. 900293

website: www.southmoltonmuseum.org

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Editor – Shirley Bray

The last few months have been quiet ones for members of the Archive. Due to work on the Town Hall we have been unable to use the Archive room or to display photographs in the foyer.

Our annual slide show was well received in March, with a large and enthusiastic crowd attending.

Members enjoyed the village walk around Georgenympton and are looking forward to the walk around Swimbridge in July.

This edition contains the 1st part of a narration on the South Molton woollen industry that I put together a few years ago, it will be concluded in the September edition which will be my last as editor as I shall be resigning from the post at the AGM in October.

South Molton Woollen Industry

The earliest known reference to a fulling mill at South Molton was recorded in 1326. Fulling was the first woollen process to be mechanised, and from the 12th Century fulling mills were water powered. Fulling is a process that thickens the cloth, by causing wet woollen fibres to mat together.

In 1634 there is reference to three fulling or tucking mills in South Molton:

- ❖ the fulling mill of the King
- ❖ that of John Mallet
- ❖ the third of Alex. Marshall, called Haynes or Middle Mill

South Molton produced serges for export. Lysons says that “*South Molton was one of the five chief manufacturing towns of the County.....making coarse woollens for Spain, Portugal, Italy and Germany.*”

The woollen industry at South Molton probably reached its peak of prosperity during the 18th century. The Mayor and Justices admitted Mr. William Badcocke, Mr. Samuel Duning and Mr. Peter Stoneman freemen of the Borough in 1705 when they promised to provide work of spinning and such other work “*touching the woollen manufacture*” for all poor people sent to them. When the Blue Coat Charity School was opened in 1711 one of the rules was that the children should be provided with clothes made from cloth manufactured at South Molton and that Thomas Tepper be “*desired to make Six pieces of Long Ells for the said Clothing, and to be died blew*”. In 1716 a new Borough Seal was

made, this replaced the Tudor Rose with a Fleece between a Crown and Mitre, representing the monarchy, episcopacy and the woollen trade.

During the 18th and early 19th Centuries, the majority of the inhabitants of the town were working in their cottages as wool combers, spinners and weavers. Wool was also spun in the villages, and brought into the town to be woven. Blankets were made as well as cloth for men's coats and women's cloaks. Trade was not always good, an article in the Daily Post, London, dated July 4th 1743 tells us that owing to a decline in trade, only 303 Serges a week and sometimes less had been made instead of the 500 a week that had been produced previously. This had resulted in the deaths of 200 people in South Molton in one year of poverty and "*gaol pestilence*". There was a similar situation throughout the West Country.

The Piggot & Co's Directory of 1822/3, describes South Molton as having "*long been celebrated for its manufacture of serges, long ells, baize, flannels, druggets, etc., with considerable quantities being exported to Spain, America and the West Indies*". Three Woollen Manufacturers were listed; Bawden & Co., William Hitchcock and William Maunder & Sons.

Bawden & Co.

In 1800 the firm Bawden, Cresswell & Bawden opened a woollen manufacturing Company at the bottom of East Street by the river Mole and this was to become the first factory in the town in which machinery was used. All the goods were woven by hand, mainly serges for the East India Company. Bawden & Cresswell had the bulk of the wool combed and made into *Tops* for the Yorkshire market, the lower quality being made with long wool with the short wool being used to produce the best quality. The number of inhabited houses in the town increased to accommodate the growing numbers of workers; unfortunately this

often led to sub-standard shanties being built. Scores of houses were built without a back door or the “*commonest conveniences of civilised life*’.”

The town celebrated the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1814 with a grand parade through the town in which the woollen workers took part. “*250 women weavers with their shuttles, some gilded, some painted blue, but all fastened on the top of white rods with garlands and ribbons*”.....*then the combers in Holland shirts, white stockings, and their hair powdered.....the combers had all caps and belts made of wool and ribbons*”.

In 1824 Maunder & Son opened a new lace factory at a time when lace manufacturers were fleeing from the Midlands as a result of the destruction of machines in their factories by workers fearful of losing their jobs². Four years later, the lace and woollen factory caught fire, the flames could be seen 20 miles away and the building and its contents were entirely destroyed. Although the premises were insured for £3,600 this was considered inadequate to meet the loss. The catastrophe resulted in a large number of people being thrown out of work at a time of year when no other work was available. The cause of the fire was unknown.³ but the factory was rebuilt and continued manufacturing.

The factory had not been without accidents in April 1837 the North Devon Journal reported that William Widgery aged 11 had broken both arms whilst working at the woollen factory. In August 1841 a woman named Partridge badly scalded her legs by stepping on the cover and falling into a large furnace at the woollen factory of Messrs. Bawden’s.⁴ Bad conditions also caused ill-health; Dr. J. E. Cutcliffe, one of the medical officers for the South Molton Union wrote in 1843 that the children employed in lace-work and the woollen factories were not so strong and healthy as agricultural children owing to working together in large numbers in confined spaces, and that many suffered with breathing problems. At the time this Report was written children as young as six

were being employed. Many of the females employed at the woollen factories were single and as a consequence many local farmers found it difficult to obtain female servants.

In the same Report, James Flexman, a South Molton surgeon said that a great number of females and children were required in the factories and that medical aid was more often needed as the workers were more prone to disease than the agricultural workers. The lace-makers in particular suffered illness due to the working conditions, low wages and diseases of the eyes and chest. In his opinion the agricultural labourer and his family lived in quite a state of luxury and comfort compared to the families of females employed in lace making.

When Bawden's business closed in 1850 Hitchcock Maunder & Hitchcock purchased it and the census of 1851 records the firm employing 65 men, 46 women, 23 boys and 80 girls. Messrs. Pearce, Tapp and Trawen also employed wool combers.

William Hitchcock 1779-1846

William Hitchcock⁵ ran his woollen manufacturing business from premises in East Street. In July 1833 a fire broke out at the rear of the premises, which destroyed the warehouse, barn, stables, a large rick of wood and a considerable quantity of wool. It was suspected that the fire was deliberate as three days earlier fires had been started in three separate places in the thatch of a garden wall that separated the buildings from an adjoining house. The blaze was discovered not long after the family had gone to bed but the alarm was soon raised and prompt action by neighbours and the fire brigade resulted in the fire being confined to the back of Mr. Hitchcock's property and the five adjoining houses.⁶

Less than a week later there was another attempt to set fire to the buildings but Mr. Hitchcock had the foresight to employ a night watchman and the fire was quickly discovered and put under control.

This confirmed the suspicion that the fires were a deliberate attempt to destroy the property. The local newspaper reported that Mr. Hitchcock employed at least 100 people and was a good employer. It goes on to say that he was considering closing his manufacturing business, which would throw many people out of a job.⁷

However, William Hitchcock did not close his business but went into partnership with his son, Francis Maunder Hitchcock, James Maunder, Edwin Maunder and Robert Maunder, with the firm taking the name of Hitchcock, Maunder & Hitchcock. The 1844 edition of the Pigot's Trade Directory for South Molton names three Woollen Manufacturers; Humphrey John Norris Bawden, South Molton; Hitchcock, Maunder & Hitchcock, East Street and Exweeke^{stet}, near Exeter; Maunder James & Sons, Heasley Mills, North Molton⁷

William Hitchcock was elected Mayor of the town for the year 1836-7. He died in 1846 aged 67. The partnership was then dissolved and a new one agreed between William's two sons Francis Maunder Hitchcock and William Maunder Hitchcock and Robert Maunder the firm's name to remain as Hitchcock, Maunder and Hitchcock.⁸ The firm bought the factory of Bawden & Co. after its closure in 1850.

Hitchcock, Maunder and Hitchcock

At first the business prospered. In February 1853 up to 34 carts laden with wool were seen to go through the town to the factories of Hitchcock & Co. On Blaize Day (St. Blaize was the Patron Saint of wool combers), about 100 woollen workers employed by the firm sat down to their annual dinner at the Ring of Bells in Duke Street. Everyone was in high spirits and Messrs. Hitchcock said that the factory would soon be enlarged, new machinery bought and the business extended.⁹

The Crimean War brought a boost to business when in January of 1855 Hitchcock & Co., won a government contract to supply blankets to the army. The end of the War was celebrated in June of the following year, with a large procession made up of the Mayor and Town Councillors, Gentlemen of the town, school children, bands and representatives of the various trades, which paraded through the town (it consisted of about 1000 people and extended for almost half a mile). The woollen industry was represented with the wool sorters carrying two decorated banners, two wool combers were shown at work in a carriage with the wool combers' large trade flag flying. Following them were wool combers, wearing sashes of wool, trimmed with red, white and blue rosettes. Female mill worsted spinners carried small flags and the spinners had bobbins with streamers on the top. The warpers were represented with banners displaying "Gentleness", "Love", "Peace", "Patience" "Meekness" and "Temperance". A power loom in full work was drawn in a gaily-decorated wagon; followed by the spinners and harness knitters. Lastly came the weavers with their Banner painted with a picture of a Power Loom and the words "Success to the Power Loom Weavers". Mrs. Francis Maunder Hitchcock presented all the 68 children working at the Factory with New Bonnets and Hats, "*nicely trimmed, which had a very pretty appearance.*"

Francis Maunder Hitchcock was elected Mayor of the town for the year 1854-55 and again in 1858-9.

But times were changing. M. Billings Directory of 1857 states that during "*the good old coaching days*" South Molton did a considerable trade but that since the introduction of "*steam*" a visible decline had taken place, "*though a good trade is still carried on by Messrs. Hitchcock, Maunder and Co., in the manufacture of woollens; there are two maunufactories belonging to this firm, employing a great number of hands*". The two factories, the upper and lower woollen mills, were situated at the lower end of East Street by the river Mole, which supplied the waterpower to run them.

Old Sayings

If the oak is out before the Ash we are in for a splash. If the ash is out before the oak we are in for a soak.

A wet Good Friday, and a wet Easter Day, make plenty of grass, but little hay.

Dirty days hath September, April., June and November.

All the rest have thirty one, without a blessed gleam of sun

And if any of them had two and thirty, they'd be just as wet and twice as dirty!

Dates for your diary

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| June 3rd | 7.30 p.m South Molton Archive – Meeting at Sheila's |
| June 21st | North Molton History Society – Illustrated talk on Exmoor MIRE project by Morag Angus |
| June 22nd | Filleigh History Society – Hatherleigh Moor – talk by Geoff Claverdon. |
| July 8th | South Molton Archive – Walk around Swimbridge |
| July 27th | 7.30 p.m. Filleigh History Society - History of families that lived at Hoar Oak, Exmoor by Mrs. Bette Baldwin |
| August 5th | South Molton Archive – Afternoon visit to S. Molton Masonic Lodge. |

Please send your contributions to the September issue of the LHN to Shirley, **if possible via email**, although any contribution will be gratefully received – ndlink@tiscali.co.uk
Deadline – August 25th 2016

The Local History News can now be found on the Archive's section of the South Molton Museum website, www.southmoltonmuseum.org