

# 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](http://www.southmoltonmuseum.org)

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Editor – Shirley Bray

The Society's **AGM** will take place on **Friday October 21st**, 7.30p.m, at the Methodist Church Hall in North Street, South Molton.

None of the current committee is willing to stand for re-election therefore this committee feels that the only way forward is to dissolve the Society. A motion to this effect will be put before members at the Annual General Meeting. All paid up members (i.e. members who have paid a subscription for the year 1/10/2015 to 30/9/2016) are entitled to vote, so please come along to this very important meeting.

During the past three months several activities have taken place. Several of us enjoyed a village walk at Swimbridge, where we spent some time inside its pretty church and community garden. We also saw what was left of the Tannery, which closed in 1965, and this prompted a request to revisit the South Molton Tannery. This was arranged by Shirley and about 9-10 of us toured the tannery yard and buildings on Saturday afternoon 27<sup>th</sup> August. Sue Pearce went to great trouble to make this an interesting and enjoyable visit. We visited the South Molton Masonic Hall in August when Andrew Petherick took us around and told us the history of the

lodge. He also provided us with tea and biscuits. It was another enjoyable afternoon organised by Angela.

### **South Molton Woollen Industry** (continued)

**Hitchcock & Co.**, appeared to be flourishing but the 1866 Kelly's Trade Directory states that although there were two woollen factories in the town little business was done. By the mid 1860s Hitchcock, Maunder & Hitchcock were in financial difficulties – the firm had invested heavily into a declining industry.

The Hitchcock brothers owned several properties in South Molton one of these was present day No. 38 East Street. The deeds of this property included a mortgage dated 12th August 1864, which provided the following information. Francis Maunder Hitchcock and William Maunder Hitchcock had over the previous few years deposited the Title Deeds of this and several other properties, including the two South Molton woollen mills, at the National Provincial Bank as security for money loaned to them. The money owing the Bank amounted to £17,762.19.6d, and it was agreed that a formal mortgage should be taken out. The brothers had been executors of their father's will and legacies of £800, £800 and £1000 respectively, which had been left to their three sisters were still outstanding, these amounts plus interest of £203.12s 2d were added to the mortgage. It was agreed that the Bank would reconvey the properties to the firm when the conditions of the mortgage had been met, with the deeds acting as security. If Hitchcock, Maunder & Hitchcock defaulted on their payments to the Bank then under the mortgage agreement all the properties including the two woollen mills were to be sold by auction.

Hitchcock & Co., could not meet their financial commitment to the Bank. The Higher and Lower Mole Mills were put up for sale and on 7th March 1866 the following sale notification was printed in the Exeter Flying Post:

*Mr. John Blackford will sell by auction at The George Hotel, South Molton on Monday 26th March next at 2 o'clock precisely the old and well established woollen mills known as the Higher and Lower Mole Mills, together with plots of Meadow land adjoining thereto. These valuable properties have been for many years most successfully worked as woollen factories and are furnished with most abundant and powerful supplies of water. With each mill will be sold several acres of adjoining Meadow Land.*

*A commodious and well-built dwelling house situate in East Street, South Molton now in the occupation of Mr. F. M. Hitchcock. With this lot will be sold the warehouse, office, garden and outbuildings attached thereto.*

*A handsome modern residence\* in the town of South Molton now in the occupation of Mr. W. Hitchcock together with the splendid close of watered meadow known as Soper's meadow and the stables and farm building therein. The residence contains on the basement commodious and dry cellarage, light and well ventilated kitchens, scullery, dairy and larder etc; on the ground floor lofty and well proportioned drawing, dining and breakfast rooms and library; on the first floor five bedrooms and two dressing rooms with servants apartments over the same. The whole most substantially built and in good order.*

*Also will be sold the following prime plots of accommodation land*

	<i>A</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>P</i>
<i>Holes Ham Estate</i>	8	2	2
<i>Tucking Mill **</i>	3	3	2
<i>The Rack Closes</i>	1	0	23
<i>Quicks Ground</i>	12	3	1

*A most comfortable dwelling house and garden with front and side entrance thereto occupied by Mrs. Furse. And in convenient lots*

*thirteen excellent cottages situate near the factories above mentioned and now in the occupation of respectable tenants.*

*The whole of this important property is freehold or held for the residue of a term of 2,100 years, except Tucking Mill, which is held for the life of a gentleman aged 50 years.*

*Detailed particulars and maps and further information may be obtained from the Auctioneers or from*

*Messrs. Dymond & Son, Surveyors, Exeter  
or Messrs. Pearse & Crosse, Solicitors, South Molton*

\*This house is present day Eastleigh Residential Care Home

\*\* The Tucking Mill had burnt down in 1861 and was never rebuilt.

The next owner of the South Molton mills appears to be **J. Fulford Vicary** who also owned woollen mills at Chagford and North Tawton. The 1871 census records that the number of men working in the woollen industry had dropped to 14 whereas the number of women workers had increased to 89; only 7 boys and 8 girls were working at the factory. John Jacomb was employed as Factory Manager.

In January 1876 it was reported in the South Molton Gazette that Mr. Fulford Vicary had provided an annual entertainment for his employees at the George Hotel. Six years later there was an article in the same paper saying that machinery from Mr. J. Fulford's mills at Chagford had been brought to his mills at South Molton yet less than a year later the woollen mills were idle. In September 1883 an article under the heading "***Theres a Good Time Coming***" was published reporting that the woollen mills had been repaired and begun work again.

South Moltonian, Mr. Sidney Warren (Town Clerk during the 1950s and 1960s), said, in a recorded talk given to the South Molton Archive in

1981 that his uncle, Billy Bradford, had started work at the mill at the age of 9 as a half-timer. Billy and the other boys were employed to crawl underneath the looms so that if the thread broke they would spin it together again; if they were feeling a bit tired and wanted a day off, they put their fingers between the cogs and squeezed just enough so that they could not do the work. If their parents could afford the pennies, they would perhaps go to school for a week, but if not, they went to work. Mr. Warren said that the cottages that ran alongside the factory each had a loom in the back garden, and that he had been told that his grandfather had learned his trade on a loom in the backhouse of one of the cottages. Many of the cottagers would take in rolls of serge, each roll would be set up on a holder similar to an easel and the black flecks in the wool would be taken out with a pair of pliers.

## **The end of the Woollen Industry at South Molton**

By the end of 1886 the woollen factories at South Molton had finally closed and over 100 people were thrown out of a job. The closure had a devastating effect, not only affecting those who had lost their jobs at the factories but also the tradesmen of the town. In July 1887 Mr. Fulford Vicary died at the age of 55. It had been anticipated that on his death the factories would come under new ownership and reopen but unfortunately this did not happen. There was an attempt to salvage the industry through the South Molton Woollen Factories Company in 1888. The price being asked for both factories, with machinery, steam engine, fields, cottages etc., was £3000 but the response for shares to raise the necessary capital was not sufficient and the scheme failed.

The factory plant and machinery was sold over two days in 1889 after which, according to Mr. Warren, the factories lay derelict for two or three years. On Saturday December 14th 1889 The South Molton Gazette reported on the sale of the plant and machinery, which had been held the week before and included the whole of the contents of the Higher & Lower Serge & Woollen Mills at Mole Bridge. Among the

items sold were a 12hp steam engine with Cornish boiler; 100 weavers' looms; blower; sharking, breaking and carding machines; turn lathes; carpenters' benches; valuable shafting with drums and pulleys; complete working plant for small gas-works etc. The amount raised was £400 in addition to the engine, which was subsequently sold for £60. The report goes on to say that it was once a thriving business that had employed several hundreds of workers making South Molton a centre of industry. The lower woollen mill was sold in 1890 to Mr. Sanders, who used it as a corn mill. During the 1920s and 1930s David and George Hobbs were the proprietors. At this time barley was fetched from the boat at Avonmouth and brought to South Molton by rail and then delivered to the mill where it was tipped into a bunker. The mill acted as a "bank" for local corn dealers such as Frank Morrish and Tom Vickery. Barley meal was then sold on for feeding pigs. In the mid 1990s the building was converted into flats and named Riverside Apartments.

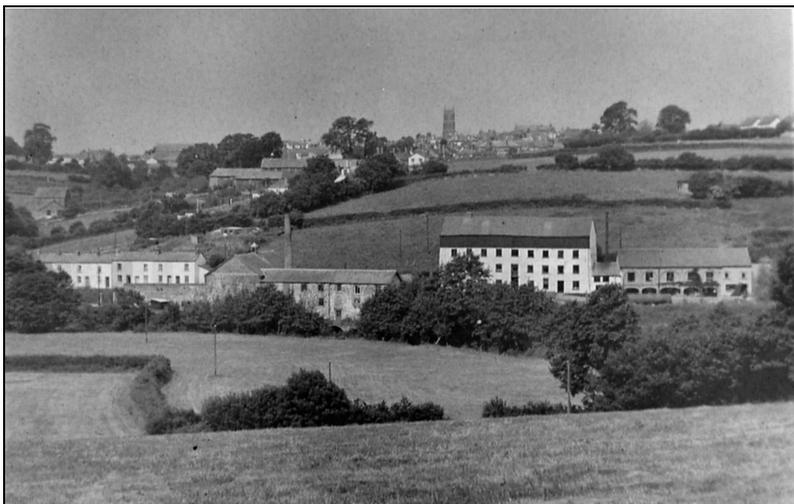
In 1890 the South Molton Shirt & Collar Company opened as a Limited Company and occupied a portion of the warehouses of the higher woollen factory. This factory provided employment for about 30 people, mainly women. The Shirt and Collar factory survived until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

During the first half of the twentieth century the Exe Valley Electricity Company used the higher woollen factory as a power station producing hydro-electricity that supplied electricity to the town. On VE day, 8th May 1945, Barry Brayley and Gordon Dennis rang the former factory bell for 5 minutes - this was the first time that the bell had been rung in 60 years. The large mill chimney was taken down during the early 1950s.

At the time of writing, the former higher woollen mill is in the ownership of Brian Nichols who several years ago converted part into living accommodation and part into a vehicle repair business.

Legacies from South Molton's woollen trade can still be traced today - Mill Street was once known as Mill Lane and led all the way from Cooks Cross to the mills powered by the river Mole. A house in Poltimore Road is named "Tucking Mill" and a residential site of mobile homes is named "Mill on the Mole"

Contributed by Shirley Bray



**The former Higher Woollen Mill, warehouses and cottages c 1960s**

Photo by Gordon Bray



**The former Lower Woollen Mill c 1900 – converted to flats c 1990s**

### **Dates for your diary**

- Sept 20th** North Molton History Society – AGM
- Sept 28th** Filleigh History Society – Talk by Rob Wilson-North
- Oct 21st** **7.30 p.m - South Molton Archive – AGM at the Methodist Hall, North Street**
- Oct 26th** 7.30 p.m. Filleigh History Society – Letters to the North Devon Journal – talk by Peter Christie

As this is the last Local History News that I shall be editing, I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone for the support given me and especially to those who have sent me contributions during the past eight years.