

Was Melford a 'Suffolk Oasis'?

In 1883 someone, identity unknown (at least to me), published the report reproduced below in the Bury and Norwich Post and Suffolk Herald. I was introduced to it many years ago by Liz Wigmore, and I've been meaning to transcribe it and make it better known for years, and I've just got round to it. When you get to the end, it's obvious that the author has a particular point of view he (presumably) wants to make. Whatever you feel about that, I think it's a remarkable description of the industries in the early 1880s.

I have just recently discovered that 'Veritas' wrote a similar lengthy article on some Bury industries (published in August 1884), and another long one about the Lavenham industries, which was published in December 1884; the latter gives a lot more information about the horsehair industry and related topics. Veritas may well have been an accepted name used for reports written by someone working for the paper.

Lyn Boothman

A SUFFOLK OASIS — MELFORD AND ITS MANUFACTURES

Is it horsehair that is grown from seed by Suffolk and Essex farmers in the vicinity of Melford, and made up into brushes and mats. Or is it cocoa-nut fibre that is steeped, 'skutched' and made up into crinolines? These are the questions which I do not hesitate to say will puzzle the mind of anyone who 'does' the six or seven factories of Melford in the course of a short day in this uncertain period of the year, when snow unexpectedly drapes the earth in purest white, and elongated icicles are pendant from every eave. Those who know Melford will appreciate to the full the accuracy of the term 'oasis' when applied to a village, or shall I say a town, which, islanded as it were by agricultural ruin and desolation, still maintains an uninterrupted flow of prosperity, and a well-nigh unstinted run of employment. Except in one particular Melford is independent of agriculture, and when in Bury and other towns tradesmen are bitterly lamenting the badness of the times, and men are idly lounging about street corners, in Melford no able-bodied unemployed person is seen, trade is brisk, and at regular intervals every day its long street is filled with buxom lasses, and respectable artisans, all decently and some of them even well dressed. So unusual a state of things must possess features of interest to towns not so favourably circumstanced. The industries which have raised Melford to its enviable position comprise the manufacture of horsehair cloth, of cocoa-nut matting, and of flax, with subsidiary industries, and the extensive establishment of Messrs. Ward and Silver, who are well-known as competent manufacturers of agricultural implements of all descriptions. The first-named industries had their origin in the active

energy of men who were born in Melford, who did not stop for government to help them, but who boldly grappled with things as they were, and achieved undoubted success which time has only served to consolidate.

The Flax Works

I first visited the Flax Works, situated a mile and a quarter from Melford Street; to reach them on Friday was a matter of some inconvenience, involving, as it did, a scramble through drifted heaps of snow if once the route was missed. These works were first started by Mr. T. B. Grubb, in comparatively recent days, but are now carried on by a company, the undertaking lying really in the hands of one or two persons. About 160 hands are employed by this company, the majority of whom are at work on the premises: about 80 of these are men, about 50 boys, and about 30 women and girls. The wages weekly average somewhere about £100. The sole object of the company is to prepare flax for the spinners, and beyond this they do not pretend to go. Mr Grubb became familiar with the process in the North of Ireland, and now sends all the flax he can make to Belfast, where it is utilised in the manufacture of the far famed Irish linen. As a rule a flax rettory, as it is called, has nothing to do with the seed of the flax plant, and prefers to have the plant delivered free of the seed. Here, however, to induce farmers in the neighbourhood to grow it, the company takes the crop precisely as it is, stipulating only that it shall be pulled instead of cut; and on the works the seed is separated, refined, stored, and sold again, while the straw is treated and made into flax. The last two years have been somewhat adverse to flax growers, and this year promises to be more so, but when I say that the former acreage of 150 acres, with which the company started, has increased to 2100 acres in 1881, it will be clear that a growing and extensive business is done. The seed is supplied to the farmers in the vicinity at a certain rate, and the crop is purchased at prices ranging from £9 to £12 and £12 10s. per ton. The operations at the works divide themselves into two — the threshing of crops, and the preparation of the flax. The former is carried on in the winter, and the latter in summer. The works are flanked by an imposing array of stacks, and one by one these are threshed — that is, the seeds are separated from the straw. When the proper season comes round the straw is put into tanks, of which there are 17, about 30 feet square, and five feet deep. Here they are laid in cold water, which is raised by means of steam pipes to a temperature of 80 or 90 degrees, beyond which it must not go. This steeping lasts eight or nine days, and should not be commenced till the season is sufficiently advanced to allow of the drying process. The fine weather that commenced last week induced the company to begin steeping, and on Friday the process of fermentation going on in the tanks was evidenced by the pungent odour that filled the air. After the straw is steeped it is subjected to a wetting process and laid out on the higher land to dry. As is well known the fibre from

which the flax is made is the bark of the straw, and it is to separate this bark effectually that the succeeding processes are directed. It would take too long to describe these, but from room to room I passed scores of men, women, and girls, all busily engaged in rolling, combing, or 'skutching' the straw. This latter process consists in holding a handful of straw over a ridge where it is exposed to the blows of rapidly revolving fingers of wood attached to wheels, which effectually beat the strong fibre free of the straw itself. The fibre is still further combed and cleansed, its best refuse being sold as tow, and its worst for the manufacture of common paper. The qualities are divided, the finished product is packed, and, supremely indifferent to local trades, is transmitted direct to Belfast. The works are well supplied with water power from the Stour, as well as with steam power, and are a source of profit to the farmers around as well as to the community of Melford. A good skutcher can earn £1 a week, the girls and women from 5s. to 10s. a week, and lads from 4s. 6d. to 8s. and 9s. a week; the employment is regular, for the demand undergoes but little change. Mr. Grubb and his foreman, Mr. Ross, are most courteous and polite, and readily offer information as to this interesting branch of industry.

The Horsehair Factories

The manufacture of the horsehair texture, which still holds its own in the higher and more expensive branches of trade against the cheap and less reliable American cloth, is the oldest product of Melford looms, and Melford cloth still retains the high name it has ever enjoyed. This industry is carried on in Melford chiefly by Messrs. List and Sons, of London, represented by their competent and courteous manager, Mr. H. Smith; by Mr. J. McDonough, of Manchester, represented by Mr. William Woodrow, and by Mr. T. R. Churchyard, each employing a large number of hands, chiefly girls and women. The process of manufacture is precisely the same in each case. and I shall not therefore detail my experiences at each of the works I visited. The texture is manufactured of various widths, but in "pieces" 52 feet long, by means of looms, which are either hand-loom, worked at home by two persons (probably a mother and child, or an elder and a younger sister), arm-loom, worked at the factory chiefly by girls, but sometimes by men. of steam looms, which are only met with on the works of Messrs List and Sons. The hair is purchased from South America, Australia, Russia, Germany etc, although English hair is much preferred. The hair is cleansed, combed and divided into proper lengths, when it is distributed to the looms. The warp, of linen, is carefully prepared, and each girl, as she sits at the arm-loom, has on her left two bundles of hair, one with the butt end foremost, and one with the point foremost. As she works the treadle the long arm comes through the warp, and, more quickly and more regularly than can easily be conceived, she attaches a single hair from each bundle alternately to its end; this is pulled through, and the arm returns for another hair. The

texture is thus kept even by hairs being alternatively taken. Of course it takes some time to acquire dexterity, but an apt girl with complete a piece, 52 feet long, in nine days, and if it is 16 inches wide she will receive for it 16s. The busy rattle of the looms as I entered the different rooms, and threaded a somewhat perilous path through the rapidly returning arms, was most interesting when first seen.

At Mr Woodrow's and Mr Churchyard's, arm looms alone are used, Mr. McDonough keeping his steam looms at Manchester, and leaving to Mr. Woodrow the weaving business alone. At Messrs List's, however, I saw a spacious room filled with over one hundred steam looms – half of them of American, and half of English invention. In both the mechanism is striking and remarkable. In the English the two bundles of hair are firmly held, and the arm of the loom, worked by steam of course, comes through the warp, and actually picks one hair from each bundle alternately, carrying it through the warp and returning for another with the precision and certainty of the human agency. The American machines do more than this. The hairs are all mixed in one bundle, and just before the arm comes through to pick out one hair, a little metal finger selects one from the bundle and holds it up till the arm catches it and pulls it through the warp. These machines are perfectly automatic, and one girl can easily attend to six or seven of them at one time. Here also the 'pieces' are brushed by machinery, and pressed with a hydraulic press till the surface is as smooth and as shining as glass. The shorter hairs are picked out, and prepared for the manufacturers of brushes.

At Messrs. List's works over 200 hands are employed, and large numbers are engaged under Mr. Woodrow and Mr. Churchyard. At the works of the latter gentleman I saw the process of curling applied to the shortest pieces of hair, a process that imparts an elasticity of the hair that renders it valuable for stuffing and padding purposes. Here also I witnessed the manufacture of the materials from which crinolines and dress improvers are made. The weaving process is the same as that pursued in the manufacture of horsehair cloth, but the warp consists of cotton, and the woof of alternated horsehair and cotton. The fabric is then starched and passed through hot rollers, whence it is delivered as stiff as the most ambitious devotee of fashion would require.

The wages of the girls employed upon these three factories are similar, the masters having agreed upon a certain rate of payment that puts all on the same level. From 9s. to 11s. a week may be reckoned a fair average. The beneficent employment that is thus afforded does not extend simply to inhabitants of Melford, for from several of the surrounding villages men and women come in to obtain supplies of hair which they work up into pieces and return. Some years ago, Mr. Woodrow informed me, fining for bad work was a common occurrence, but now it is quite unusual for him to have to inflict such a penalty on work

brought to him. Speaking as a whole, trade is not quite what it used to be, the cheap American cloth having seriously affected the supply of genuine horsehair.

Cocoa Nut Matting

The utilisation of the fibre of the cocoa nut is carried on most extensively by Mr. George Whittle, and on a smaller though still extensive scale by Mr. Wm. Richold. The former employs between 150 and 160 men, and Mr. Richold about 40. It is well nigh impossible to adequately describe a visit to the lines of looms driven by long rows of men, young and old, which one sees at Mr. Whittle's. This gentleman has his shells broken in London, and at Melford he deals only with the fibre, which he manufactures chiefly into matting of all sizes and qualities. The process is much the same as adopted in the horsehair factories, the warp being spun fibre that comes from Cochin, China, Zanzibar, or some such place, and the feeder weaving in the fibre. The mats are made in lengths, which are cut up, brushed then trimmed. The finishing touch is given by machinery, a rapidly revolving barrel armed with knives similar to a chaff-cutter doing this most effectually. The earnings of the men here average 15s. or 16s. each, and the mats are sent off in large quantities to London and all parts of the world, the trade of course being purely wholesale. Mr Richold breaks his own shells, and besides going into the manufacture of matting he makes large quantities of brushes of all descriptions. The shorter lengths of fibre are used for brushes. Mr Richold undertakes all departments of the business, and utilises every portion of the material he purchases. Even old pieces of matting are torn to pieces by machinery and used over again, while the last and worst refuse is valuable as a manure. A heated fire-proof shed is used for drying the fibre, and this process much improves its colour. I noticed also that Mr. Richold was making crinoline material both with horsehair and with fibre, while downstairs he had brooms made of the centre stems of the leaves of the cocoa nut palm.

As I have before said the demand for the materials made here is regular. There are one or two exceptions to this, and one is the demand for crinoline material. All those in Melford who made this had once accumulated a somewhat extensive stock, which they could find no sale for. The votaries of fashion decreed that crinolines and dress improvers should come in again, the Melford stocks were cleared out, and all who make it are now busily engaged in meeting the demand that continues.

The General Condition of Melford

This notice is already too long, but something must be said upon the general condition of Melford. Besides the works referred to, Mrs. Barker carries on a small weaving business, and Messrs. Ward and Silver conduct an extensive and well founded concern, employing a large number of hands. This enterprising firm undertakes a coal merchant's business, and provides

gas to whoever chooses to have it, their private gas works being upon their own premises. Mr. F. Branwhite also manages two large maltings near the station. It will thus be seen that Melford is most fortunate in possessing abundant employment, for in one place the husband finds work in another the mother and daughters can find employment, and in yet another the industrious lad can add 7s., 8s., and 9s., a week to the family store. There are cases of course where full advantage of these means cannot be taken but on the whole, poor able-bodied people are unknown in Melford, and, if the population chose, a high standard of industrial success and personal comfort might be attained. In the past, considerable sums have been spent in ways not altogether creditable, and the charities in the town, together with assistance given by the many influential persons who reside in the vicinity, have at times militated against a worthy standard of independence. Much cannot be urged against the community upon these grounds, however, and the Blue Ribbon Mission is effecting a marked improvement in one or two particulars. The social condition of the town is materially assisted by the influence of such seats as Melford and Kentwell Halls must exercise upon communities they overshadow. At Westgate House the Misses Faulkner reside, ladies who have done much for the town by the promotion of the coffee house, which will soon, it is hoped, become self supporting. The rector, the Rev. C. J. Martyn, is so well known that it is unnecessary for one to say how much the community is to be envied that has him as the representative of the establishment.

There is not an empty house in Melford at the present time, and any visitor walking into the town from the station will pass row after row of well-built cottages that have all been erected within the last few years. The poors-rate seldom exceeds, 6d. per quarter; there is no school board, the land contributing a voluntary rate of 2 and a half pence to swell the subscription list and the school fees; the highway rate is 5d. in the pound and there is a voluntary church rate of 2 and a half pence in the pound. The parish is well governed by overseers and churchwardens, the rateable value is £11, 650 7s. 11d., and the acreage 590 acres.

I do not deny that there are disadvantages at Melford as there are at other places, but there is no doubt that at Melford we have a striking proof of what enterprise and well directed energy can do, for here is a community dependent upon industries that might just as well be carried on elsewhere, and enjoying an expenditure of money and a utilisation of labour on a scale that is witnessed by no town in England of a similar size. Let care and forethought dominate the people of Melford, and what blessings they enjoy will result in still fuller fruition. VERITAS.

The Bury and Norwich Post and Suffolk Herald, 13 March 1883, page 4