

Great Progress on researching the People of the Flax Mill

The Friends' Documentary Research Group have now reached an exciting stage in their project to reveal the stories of the people who worked at or were associated with the Flax Mill.

Stage One : Collecting Names

The first stage of the project was aimed at collecting at least the names of all those who had lived in the Castlefields and Ditherington area in the 19th century. We have now transcribed all the Census entries for the area between 1841 and 1881, nearly 22,000 records. The Census gave us information on each Individual's **Age, Where they were living,** and their **Occupation.** From the 1851 Census onwards it also provided their **Place of Birth** and their **Relationship** to the Head of the Household.

We also transcribed the names listed (Heads of Household only) in the 1821 Census, the owners and occupiers of land (including the Marshall and Co allotments) recorded in the 1851 Tithe Award Map, the people recorded on the headstones in St Michaels Churchyard, and from the Annual Church Rate Books from 1800 to 1823, the people renting houses in the vicinity of the Flax Mill

In addition some of the local Parish Registers were worked through to extract records for people with Flax related occupations and we have recorded the Apprentices assigned to Marshall and Co by the local Parishes. This Summer some lists and other sources of peoples' names were transcribed for us from the Marshall Company records in Leeds by Florence Sturt-Hammond, a History student who had just completed her finals, Recently, Tony Carr transcribed references to the half time Mill Boys from the 1860s Log Book of St Marys School, established near St Michaels Church in the 1830s.

Stage Two: Searching for Individuals and Families.

Many of these records have been uploaded into a database which now contains nearly 25,000 records relating to named Individuals. From this we can generate generate checklists in date order of all the records relating to a particular Surname. This checklist then gives us names to search for in the wonderful new resource that became available online in April this year, namely the Shropshire Parish Registers on the Find My Past Website. This development offers the opportunity of filling in more details of some of these people's lives – not just when they were baptised, married or buried, but also where they were living at the time and what their occupation or their father's or spouse's occupation was.

Early in November I gave a talk to the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society on some of the early results from this.

The Parish Apprentices.

I have started trying to track down what happened to the young children indentured to the Mill by their Parish. Already I have managed to find out quite a bit about one of them, called **Joseph Woodall.**

Joseph Woodall of the parish of Fitz was indentured to the Flax Mill at the age of 10 in 1809. He then appears in the Church Rate Books from 1821 to 1823 and beyond. From the Parish Registers I have found that he married Hannah Pheasey in 1821 and that between 1822 and 1843 Joseph (described as a Flax Dresser) and Hannah baptised 6 children at St Marys.

In the 1841 Census, Joseph and his 2 eldest children are Flax Dressers and in 1844 when his eldest son married, Joseph was still a Flax Dresser. In the 1851 Census Joseph was an Agricultural Labourer,

but 3 of the 4 children living with him had Flax Mill type Occupations, and in the Tithe Map Schedule he had one of the Marshall Company Allotments.

In 1858, his daughter Harriet was working at the Factory when she baptised an illegitimate son John. In the 1861 census Joseph is a Thread Dyer, and Harriet and her son John are living with him and Hannah. Ten years later, in 1871 (aged 72) Joseph is just described as a Labourer but still may be working at the Flax Mill, as might his grandson John Woodall, also just described as a Labourer.

So Joseph remained associated with the Flax Mill for most of a reasonably long life

It did not turn out so well for some of the other Apprentices. So far in the St Marys Parish Registers I have found these four records.

John Richards, described as an Apprentice at the Old Factory, was buried in January 1805, aged 12.

Ann Bates, assigned to the Flax Mill aged 9 in August 1805 was buried in January 1806.

Sarah Oliver, an Apprentice living at the Old Manufactory, was buried aged 15 in July 1811.

Emma Franks, assigned to the Flax Mill in March 1812 at the age of 13, was buried in May 1817, aged 18.

The Whitwell Family

From 1804, the Flax Mill was managed first by two Leeds men, William Hutton, and then from 1810 Robert Atkinson. In 1821, Peter Horsman and **William Whitwell** and took over and ran the Mill jointly until their deaths in 1848 and 1850 respectively.

Payments to William Whitwell between 1805 and 1850 have been found in the company Archives. A succession of seven Baptism records show that William and his wife Elizabeth had moved to Shrewsbury (probably from Yorkshire) by 1804. In these William was usually recorded as a Book Keeper. William signed the Indenture of 1809 whereby Joseph Woodall was assigned to the Flax Mill on behalf of Marshall and Co.

In the **1821 Census of Population for St Marys**, William Whitwell's family is living in John Williams' houses. William's two eldest sons William (b 1804) and James (b 1808) were recorded in the **Electoral Roll of 1832** as Freemen of the Borough of Shrewsbury, entitled to vote in the election of MPs

In December 1835, William Whitwell was one of six Town Councillors (all Whigs) elected for Castle Ward (Without) under the new Corporation Act. He was still a Councillor for Castle Ward (Without) in 1840, alongside Peter Horsman, the Manager of the Flax Mill, according to Robson's Directory, of 1840.

William Whitwell died in 1850 at the age of 76, and was buried at the Abbey Cemetery. His son William had predeceased him in 1835, but the 1851 to 1871 Censuses show that his widow, remaining son James and five unmarried daughters carried on living in Shrewsbury. His widow (who died in 1860), and the five daughters are recorded as living off the income of houses and property. James appears to have worked as Commercial traveller or Agent for Marshall and Co, at least until the 1861 Census.

The Clift Family.

In contrast to the Whitwells, the Clifts were economic refugees. In the late 1830s the textile industry in Gloucestershire was in deep recession. Between 1837 and 1838 some 66 people were relocated by Bisley Parish in Gloucestershire to Shrewsbury, to seek work at Marshalls and Co. The Clift Family seem to have been one of the families that came to Shrewsbury this way.

In the 1841 Census the Head of the Clift Household living in St Michaels Street is **Susannah** Clift aged 45. Her husband William had been buried at St Michaels in 1840. All the other six people in the household are named Clift, are aged in their late teens and early 20s, and **Work at Factory**. They include John, born in Chalford, Gloucestershire who had married Ann Hunt, also from Chalford, at St Marys in 1838. From later records, all the others in the household were born in Gloucestershire

By the time of the 1851 Census, three Clift households have emerged.

John Clift (33), a Labourer, and wife Ann are living at 4 Davies' Buildings. Their oldest son George (12) is **At Thread Manufactory**

Henry Clift (28) a **Dyer** is Head of the Household living at 1, St Michael's Gardens. Henry, born in Bisley, had married Emma Trotman, also from Bisley in 1847. Living with them is Mary Clift (30) a **Thread Reeler** from Gloucester

William Clift (23) a **Thread Dyer**, born in Bewdley, is Head of a Household in Spring Gardens. Living with him are his widowed mother, Susannah (68), and his Sister, Eliza (28), a **Spreader of Flax**, both from Bewdley, plus Eliza's daughter, Harriet, whom the unmarried Eliza had baptised in 1844.

In the 1861 Census two of the families are still associated with the Flax Mill.

John Clift (43), a Day Labourer and wife Ann are living at Factory Gates. Harriet (12) and Emma (10) are working as **Factory Operatives**.

Henry Clift (38), a **Dyer**, and wife Emma are living in St Michael's Gardens. Edward (14) is a **Thread Carrier**, Henry (12) is a **Thread Parter** and Alfred (10) a **Thread Seamer(?)**.

Ten years later in the 1871 Census only one Clift household still has explicit links to the Flax Mill

John Clift (53), Labourer, and wife Ann are at No 8, St Michaels Gardens. Their son William (17) is working as a Labourer. In October 1864 William, then aged 12, had been sent back to St Mary's School for half time teaching having been found to have been working at the Factory full time for 6 months.

Henry Clift, **Factory Operative**, (48), and wife Emma are living in Heckfield Place. Also in employment in the household are Alfred (19) an Engine Cleaner, Louisa (18) and Harriet (14) **Factory Operatives**, and Clement (14), a Painter's Apprentice.

Only two years later, when Louisa Clift, **Factory Operative**, marries in 1873, her father Henry is described as a Painter and by the time of the 1881 Census Henry Clift is now a Master Painter. However, his two young daughters, Alice (19) and Annie (14) are a **Linen Thread Spinner** and a **Linen Thread Knotter**, respectively. So the Clift Family link to the Flax Mill continued into the Mill's final years.

One of the grandsons of William and Susannah, Clement Clift, born to Henry and Emma in 1856, became a Town Councillor for Ditherington Ward in later life. Three of his sons, William, Clement and Alfred, and a nephew (also Alfred) were killed in the First World War and are recorded on the St Michael's Church War Memorial.

We have a working List of over 50 Surnames associated with the Flax Mill to research in this way. If anyone would like to volunteer with this project, please do get in touch.

In addition to those mentioned above, the Documentary Research Project has been made possible by the contributions of the following people, who have dedicated long hours and considerable skill to transcribing the records.

Robin Haseley, Isabel Jones, Sheila Laurens, Lesley Ann McAleavy, Helen Scarisbick, Sally Stote, Charlie Wainwright.

Penny Ward