

The Flaxmill

Flax

The plant is cultivated both for its fibre from which linen yarn and fabric are made, and for its seed, called linseed, from which linseed oil is obtained. Flax is one of the oldest textile fibres.

The leaves, alternating on the stalk, are small and lance-shaped. The flowers, borne on stems growing from the branch tips, have five petals, usually blue in colour but sometimes white or pink. Small globular bolls, composed of five lobes, contain the seeds.

The plant, adaptable to a variety of soils and climates, grow best in well-drained, sandy loam and in temperate climates. In most areas, planting of the same land with flax is limited to once in six years to avoid soil exhaustion. Cool, moist growing seasons produce the most desirable fibre.

Harvesting usually takes place when the lower portion of the stalk has turned yellow and before the fruit is fully mature. The fibre is obtained by subjecting the stalks to a series of operations, including soaking, drying, crushing and beating.

Since early days, and up to fairly late into the last century, much flax was grown in the vicinity of Pinchbeck. Robert Cust who resided in 'the great house at Crosswithand' in the late 15th century did much to encourage the industry. Three qualities of linen were produced: First - linen woven from finest flaxen threads. Second - 'hardyn' from hard or coarse fibres. Third - 'mingtowe' a mingling of tow or hemp with flaxen thread.

The Flaxmill in Crossgate was built in 1851 at a cost of £6000 and by 1856 there were 100 employees. Charles Green, a builder who was born in Pinchbeck in 1833 and lived in Crossgate helped to build the large chimney. His son Walter, born 1876 was one of the men responsible for converting the drying shed into cottages for the use of employees at the mill.

In 1879, however, the mill was closed as a result of the agricultural depression. In 1897 a company was formed to work the mill but it was not successful and so it was never re-opened for its original purpose of flax scutching. See newspaper cuttings.



The Flaxmill

PINCHBECK and SURFLEET, Lincolnshire.
FLAX MILLS and valuable FREEHOLD ESTATES.
 To be SOLD by AUCTION,
 By Mr. J. LAMING,

At the White Hart Hotel in Spalding, on Tuesday, 29th
 March, 1892, at 5 o'clock in the Afternoon,

ALL those valuable **FLAX MILLS**, together
 with Two Residences, numerous Cottages, and
 86A. IR. 2SP. (more or less) of very superior Grass and
 Arable Land, upon which a very extensive business was
 for many years carried on by Messrs. Aitkin and Co.,
 flaxdressers.—The Mills, which are well built, are
 situate in the heart of the richest flax-producing dis-
 trict in Lincolnshire, and very near to the Surfleet Sta-
 tion on the Great Northern Railway. Tramways run
 from the Mills over the drying grounds. The Residences
 are suitable for occupation by owners and managers.
 The Cottages are desirable for occupation by workmen
 engaged in the business.

The district produces Flax of superior quality, great
 length of staple, and excellent colour.

Early possession will be given.

The Estate will first be offered in one lot; but, if not
 so sold, it will be divided and offered in 18 lots.

Printed particulars, with plans, are in course of pre-
 paration, and may shortly be had on application to the
 Auctioneer; to Messrs. Phillips, Evans, and Phillips,
 solicitors, Stamford; or to

Messrs. CALTHROP and BONNER, Solicitors,
 Spalding, 5th March, 1892. Spalding.

THE FLAX MILLS.—It will be in the recollection
 of our readers that Major Fraser, the managing
 director of the Lincolnshire Flax and Hemp Com-
 pany, visited Spalding about two years since and
 several of our townsmen were induced to take
 shares in the company with a view of re-opening
 the flax mills at Pinchbeck, near Spalding, and
 working them in connection with the mills of the
 company at Crowle, which were then and are still
 working. The statement put forward at the time
 by Major Fraser did not show a probability of any
 large dividend, and no doubt the parties who sub-
 scribed were influenced by the hope and belief that
 a revival of the industry would be a benefit to the
 neighbourhood. It would seem, however, that they
 are doomed to disappointment, and all hope of
 seeing the once thriving industry re-started in their
 locality must be abandoned, the local shareholders
 having just received the directors' report of the
 working of the company from the commencement,
 which states that it has resulted in a considerable
 loss. Unremunerative contracts, together with
 the reft charge of the Pinchbeck mills and the
 claim made by the owners for compensation for the
 determination of the lease, principally accounts for
 the great loss on the year's working. **MAY 99**

Extract from the Lincs. Free Press
 dated 22 January 1918

'The Government have taken over the Old Flax Mills at Pinchbeck near Spalding, in connection with an emergency scheme for flax production and the treatment of the resultant crop, in order to increase the supply of linen for aeronautical and other urgent war purposes, and South Lincolnshire is one of the first districts in which the Government has decided to carry out operations. The Flaxmill has been closed for a number of years and the proposed re-opening has caused great interest in the district.'



(Left) Flaxmill workers children outside the cottages around 1920.

(Below) Flaxmill workers in 1920. Included are Miss Chase, sixth from left, and Mrs Healey, fourth from left, - Supervisors.



Recollections of Arthur Healey

The Flaxmill in Pinchbeck possessed both blue and white Flax, according to the rotation of crops in the fields. After harvesting, the flax was bundled in small stacks at the back of the mill, then passed through the dutch barn on rollers into the mill where the straw and seed were separated. The straw was packed loose onto lorries and the seed riddled and graded into 20 stone sacks. Both straw and seed were then sent into Peterborough, where the straw was made into sacking and the seed processed into oil.

Mr. Healey lived in one of the eight cottages adjacent to the mill, as his mother was the night supervisor - the workers were employed on three eight hour shifts and 40 to 50 were still employed there at the end of the First World War.

In the 1920's the cottages were sold to Frank Wells when they were no longer needed.

The premises since then have been used for various purposes. The Pinchbeck Transport Company had its Depot there for several years up to 1929 with F. H. Smith and C. F. Turner as Directors. Mr. Arthur Limming was a driver with the Company for several years, he recollects:-

"Lorries were Ex. W. D. 3 ton Thornycroft on solid rubber tyres. Seats were wooded bench type and you had to provide your own cushion. There were no side windows and the drivers' windscreen was split into two parts, one of which could be opened for ventilation in summer and to give better visibility in fog. There were hand operated windscreen wipers fitted to some vehicles. In frosty conditions to help keep ice off the screens, drivers used to cut a potato in half and rub them on the glass. Regulation lighting consisted of two oil lamps to the front and one red one to the rear. These frequently blew out but providing the front offside and rear one were on there was no trouble with the police.

There were no Universal Joints on the transmission shaft. The joints consisted of fibre packings between flanges secured by six nuts and bolts. These often had to be renewed by the driver during a night journey with the aid of one of the oil lamps.

Some drivers acquired acetylene lamps and generators by devious means and fitted them themselves. These were a great improvement to lighting. Under the driving seat boxes of tools and spare parts were carried and drivers often had to make running repairs. Speed limits were 12mph and police used to set speed traps but most drivers learned where to expect them. Usual journey time from High Bridge to London Market was about 7 hours but it was possible to do it in 6 hours by slipping out of gear downhill and getting a good run at the next uphill.

These runs to London were usually made after drivers had worked locally through the day and it was necessary to leave Spalding by about 8 p.m. to catch the early market, they would then pick up a return load and deliver to its destination.

Brakes on the vehicles consisted of a foot brake which worked on the drive shaft and a hand brake which worked on wheel drums.

For local work trailers were sometimes drawn and total weight carried was about 10 to 11 tons. These trailers were fitted with hand brakes and if the lorry brakes would not hold the drivers mate had to get out and run alongside whilst holding on to the trailer brake.

Loads to London usually consisted of potatoes and green vegetables collected from the Spalding and Boston districts and return loads were of general goods."

When the Transport Business ceased in 1929, the lorries were sold but F. H. Smith and C. F. Turner continued at the mill running a Potato pre-packing business.



Pinchbeck Transport Company, 1928.