Rope Making in Colwall by David Hodgson

Rope makers have resided in Colwall for at least 140 years. In 1871 we find Thomas Collis from Leicester listed as a rope manufacturer employing 2 men and a boy. Thomas lived at 'The Pink'. 'The Pink' was an ancient cottage which housed 4 families but was demolished in the 1950's. The cottage was situated just below the lane which runs behind New Court in Old Church Road, Colwall. Thomas Collis resided at 'The Pink' for around 10 years. On the O.S Map of 1904 there appears to be outbuildings which could have been used for rope making. In 1881 we find Daniel Murphy living at 4, The Pink, and George Smith living at 3, The Pink, both of whom were Rope Makers.

The Pink

By 1881 Thomas Collis was residing at Aston Cottage which is the cottage north of Colwall Library. However by 1891 he had moved down the road to the Royal Oak Public House in Colwall, which was situated next to the Butchers Shop. At the 'Oak' he is listed as Publican and Rope Maker. Both of these properties show out buildings on the O.S. map of 1904 which may also have been used for rope making.

In 1841 Hannah Nash is listed as a Glove Maker and in 1842 marries James Mason. Around 1860 the couple have a son, Allen who becomes an apprentice rope maker and is significant later.

In 1861 Henry Horton is a Manufacturer of Ropes, Marquees, Tents and Rick Sheets etc., in Worcester. In 1871 we find that he has moved from Worcester to 'Fields End', Colwall, to the property now known as 'Rope Walk'.

If we look at a map of 1904, several large buildings are situated on the property behind Fields End Cottage. These would be the Rope Walk, where the rope would have been made. The other buildings are where the machinery was housed, the storage of hemp, sisal etc., and a weaving shed for canvas. The material for canvas making was similar to that used for rope.


Field End Cottage and Rope Walk circa 1904

The fine strands of sisal would have been worked on an upright loom to form the fabric which then would have been treated to become waterproof.

Henry Horton married Sarah Bennett Kendrick at Claines, in 1852. Sarah was the daughter of William Kendrick who was a miller at Upper Mill in Colwall. Upper Mill was situated on the old road which was the route from Colwall village to the Church until the 1920's

There were several children from this marriage but they did not follow in the rope trade. William Henry, son of Henry lived at 'Fields End'. In 1891 his occupation was a farmer and by 1901 he was a gamekeeper living at 'Melrose' in Silver Street, Colwall. By

1911 William Henry had married, he was now publican at The Crown Inn, Colwall, also living at The Crown was George Paton and his daughter Isabella. Emily the wife of William Henry was also the daughter of George Paton.
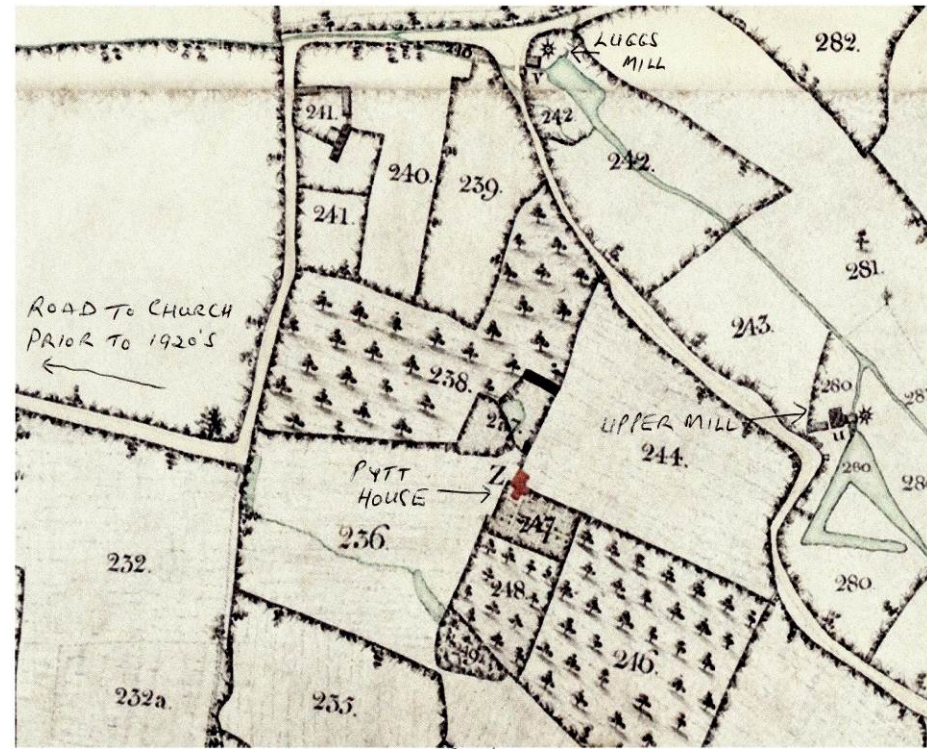

Map showing Upper Mill, Colwall - 1806

William and Emily Horton

The Colwall Ropery was well established during the late 1800's at 'Fields End'. Attached to the house was also a shop which was run by Mrs Horton, selling sweets and groceries. Sugar, butter and cheese would arrive in bulk and would be weighed out as required; many of us recall the blue bags into which the sugar was placed and the greaseproof paper in which cheese was wrapped.
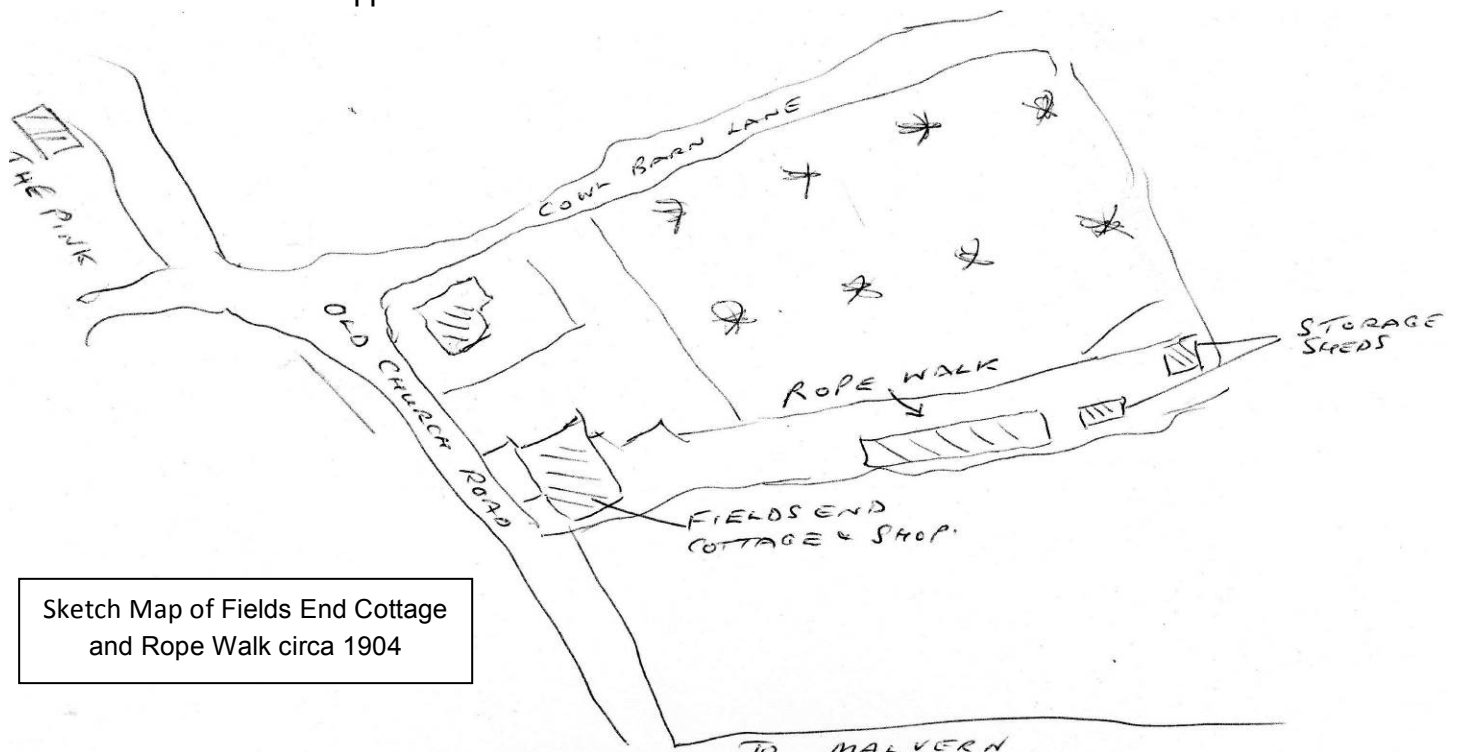
Sketch Map of Fields End Cottage and Rope Walk circa 1904

By 1901 the rope business had changed hands and was now being run by Allen Mason who has been referred to previously. Allen Mason was now married to Julia Eagles. Julia was the daughter of Barbara Eagles' great grandfather. The shop continued to trade as a Grocery and was run by Mrs Mason. The introduction of synthetic materials for making rope led to the decline in the use of sisal and in 1934 Allen Mason is listed as Grocer.

How was rope made?
Various plants were processed for this purpose, such as flax, cotton, jute, manila and sisal, but the main material was hemp, its coarse texture provided a good grip. Hemp used to be grown in Britain, particularly in Dorset, but its cultivation, possession and sale has been illegal without a permit for many years. Now hemp is more famous as the herb that is turned into the drug cannabis, than the plant that was made into rope.

Sisal was the preferred material when hemp was not available. Sisal comes from a species of Agave Sisalana. The sisal plant has a 7-10 year life-span (longer in Mexico where growth is slower) the leaves growing up to around six to seven feet long. It is usually cut first after 2-3 years and then at 6-12 month intervals. A typical plant would produce 200-250 commercially usable leaves in its life-time (hybrid varieties up to 400-450 leaves) and each leaf contains an average of around 1000 fibres. Fibre was extracted by a process known as decortication. Sisal leaves were cut from the plant with a machete, the leaf was then washed before being placed onto a wooden board and beaten by a wooden baton until its skin was "pulped" away, exposing the 'sisal fibres' these were then separated tied and hung to dry. The fibre was subsequently cleaned by brushing, and then it was baled.

Decorticated leaf
Bales of fibre would come up the River Severn either to Gloucester or Worcester and then be transported to the rope works, in the early days by horse drawn vehicles. The railway had also arrived by this time.
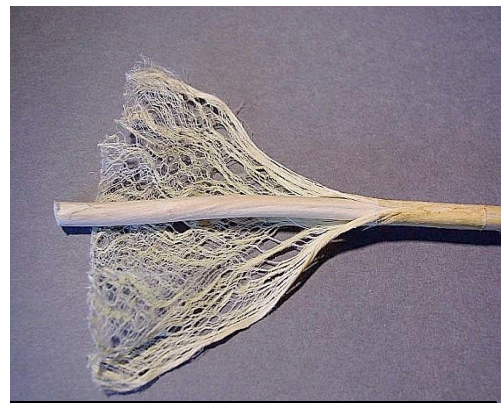
Sisal Decorticated Leaf

At the ropery the dry fibres were pulled through hackles on a hackling board – a wooden base with iron spikes, which acted like a giant comb to clean the fibres to make sure that they ran in the same direction. Grease or linseed oil was used to speed the process. The gauge of hackles varied from coarse to fine. Different types of cordage required different grades of fibre. Hackling was similar to the carding process in the woolen industry. This process was usually carried out by young boys.

Hackle Board.
Rope making was a manufacturing process, transforming fibres into a useable product.
The first process was to spin the fibre into a yarn; this was a continuous series of overlapping fibres which had been twisted together so that they were forced together by friction to make the yarn strong. Traditionally spinning was done manually; it was spun on a 'spindle whorl'. This was a weighted stick which was rotated, often by rolling along the thigh in order to twist the fibres together. Later a machine called a 'Jack' or 'Twister' was used; this was a frame about waist height fitted with three hooks which were rotated by a crank handle.

Hackle Board
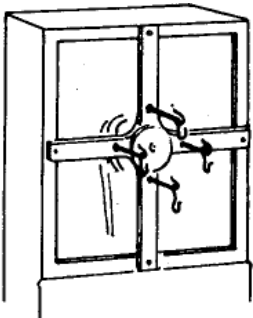
Twisting Machine
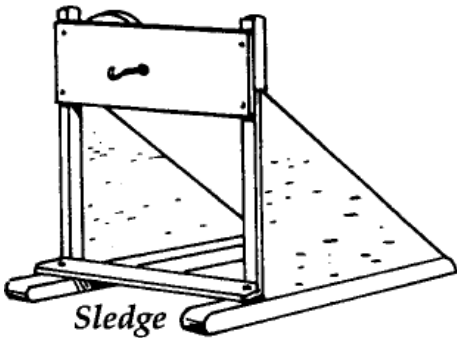
Sledge

Top

The Jack allowed the spinner to keep the yarn twisting continuously.
The yarn could be turned into rope by various methods. Yarns were also made by wrapping the fibres around the waist, and the ends tied to the Jack, when the Jack was being turned the person with the fibre around his waist would walk towards the Jack which was spinning the yarn; hence the term Rope Walk. Eventually the spinning wheel was a technological advance; these were similar to the spinning mules used in the cotton industry.

Rope was made by twisting yarns together. Two pieces of machinery were required the 'Jack' and a 'Sledge' which was a stand to which a hook was attached. Three strands of yarns would be attached to the Jack at one end of the ropewalk and the other ends attached to a swivel hook on the sledge at the other end. At the swivel end, the rope maker would take a top which was a conical shaped wooden block which had three grooves in it. A group of yarns were placed each groove, using the top prevented the yarns becoming tangled. The operator of the Jack then turned the handle and the strands began to shrink as the rope maker slowly moved along the walk. About a quarter of the way along the walk the twisting of the strands caused the swivel hook to rotate and the rope was formed behind the rope maker. Later steam and electric power was introduced to drive the machinery. Rope was required in large quantities for the boats and ships for rigging and anchor rope which had to be waterproof. At this time barges were pulled along the canals by horse and needed extra-long rope to avoid the animal being pulled into the canal. Many other trades also used rope.

Coddington Church records show an entry for the purchase of Bell Ropes from Mr. Horton.

Descendants of the Horton family are still dwelling around the area. Betty Horton passed away recently; sadly, just short of her 104th Birthday.

Henry Horton

Two of the boys, Henry and Joe were keen Sportsmen. Henry played professional football for Blackburn, Southampton, Bradford Park Avenue and Hereford. He also played County Cricket for Worcester in the 1940s and Hampshire in the 1950s and 1960s. Henry was also an Umpire. In 1964 for Henry's Benefit Fund, John Arlott, the cricket commentator, wrote a limited edition of 50 copies "Henry Horton, a Biographical Note". Joe and Henry both passed away within three days of one another. Several members of the family are buried in Colwall Churchyard.

Thanks to Jeremy Noyce for the use of 'Fields End' and 'The Pink' pictures, also to Tracey Chapman for information on William Henry Horton.
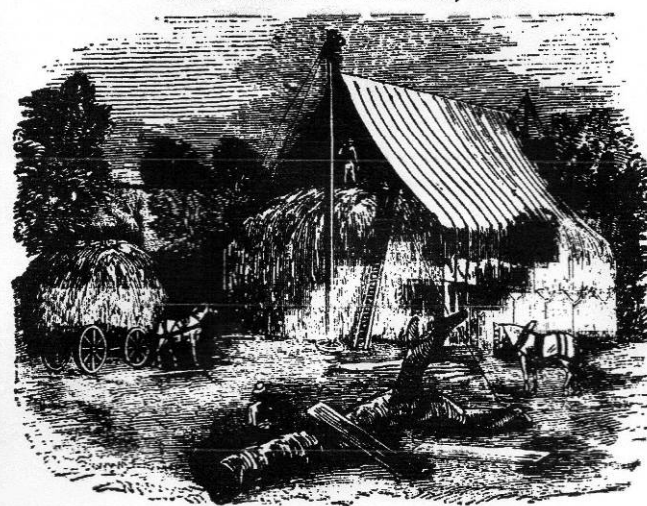
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COLWALL ROPERY, NEAR MALVERN.

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Future Talks

26th January 2015
'Stone Buildings and Structures in Colwall'
By Kate Andrew

20th April 2015 AGM
followed by 'Natural History in Colwall'
By Tim Dixon

14th September 2015
'Folklore of Herefordshire'
By Roy Palmer

From the Editor

Any article on Colwall related subjects (however tenuous!) are always welcome.
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Corrections and additions to the information in newsletters are always welcome, as are **CONTRIBUTIONS!**
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