

The Origins of Helpston Paper Mill

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“On our way home from school we use to have bets as to the colour of Ram Dyke”

“My arm got caught in the belt and I was dragged along by it. The journey to hospital took 45 minutes because the ambulance crew was afraid the slightest jolt would sever my spinal cord.”

“Wagons loaded with old rope from the Liverpool docks were delivered.”

These and other conversations made me curious as to how such a rural setting as Helpston should come to have a paper mill producing paper up to the late nineteen seventies? Even today its site is still occupied by two companies producing paper products.

It seems it all began with a scarcity of the usual materials necessary for paper making in the 1850s. The promoters of the Lincolnshire Twitch Paper Company said in their prospectus that they had the answer – it was going to make paper from the farmers’ old enemy, twitch or couch grass.

The Company seemed to have raised its capital quite readily. It was decided to build its factory by the Welland in Stamford. A river site being the traditional place for a mill which used water both for power and the production of paper.

Indeed the Company was soon stockpiling twitch by the Welland near Stamford. The farmers from whom the Company had bought the twitch must have thought Christmas had come early. Though these deliveries were not without incident. On one occasion a horse drawn cart of twitch overturned on the Helpston railway crossing.

It seems that the directors changed their minds and built the Mill at Helpston. Presumably there was a readily available spring for water and they decided to use steam for power.

The Company spent some £12,000 on machinery, though it had to raise more capital to do this. Unfortunately, though twitch could be turned into brown paper and millboard, they were subject to mildew. By 1858 the Company had to increasingly use the traditional paper-making materials and sold off its stockpiled twitch to farmers for manure.

In 1861 the Company was wound up. It never made enough profit to pay the interest on its borrowings. One investor had sold his £1,000 share for a shilling (5p) in 1858, so the Company must have had its difficulties almost from the start.

The Mill and its contents were auctioned on the 4th June 1861 after the potential bidders had been wined and dined as was the custom. It made no difference. The Mill did not reach its reserve price and was withdrawn. The stores and machinery were sold off in lots and the total received was well below the original cost.

The Mill was bought by Mr. Towgood, of a family of millers at St Neots. Mr. Towgood had been a manager of a paper mill in Arborfield which had recently burned down (fire being a particular hazard of paper mills).

In the second half of the 19th century the Mill must have had a considerable impact on Helpston. There was the mill itself, the newcomers brought in and the houses built for its workers. It is the number of women workers which might at first seem surprising. Their ages, in the 1891 census, ranged from 15 to 67, and they included single and married women (there were one or two married couples) and widows.

Numbers of Helpston villagers working at the Mill

	Female	Male	Total
1861	2	11	13
1871	6	14	20
1881	19	28	47
1891	17	29	46

However, it seems that right from the start of paper making in this country, there had been work for women in the mills.

By the 1890s Helpston's population was just over 600. Of these, over 60 worked on the land and nearly 40 on the railway. Helpston might have claim to a rural setting, but many of its adults were not in agriculture.

The Peterborough Advertiser wrote in 1908 that the Mill was prospering as Towgood and Beckwith Ltd. Its products included browns for government envelopes, coloured cartridge papers for ammunition firms and backings for sandpapers.

It seems that the railway was the main reason for the Mill's existence here, rather than twitch.

Eric West thanks George Boyden for the material for this article, but the conclusions and errors are his own.