

HILLIER'S BACON CURING FACTORY, NEWMARKET, NAILSWORTH.

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Introduction.

Hillier's Bacon Factory was established in 1819 and evolved gradually over many years in the small hamlet of Newmarket situated right at the end of the Newmarket valley about a mile away to the west of Nailsworth. In an 1885 directory (1) only a dozen dwellings are mentioned. Newmarket stood in Horsley parish until 1892 when it was included in the newly created parish of Nailsworth. Newmarket was reached via a narrow track which wended its way from Nailsworth in zig-zag fashion along the northern edge of the hillside.

William Cobbett, on a "Rural Ride" down the Avening and Nailsworth valleys in September, 1826, had this to say: "Here are a series of spots every one of which a lover of landscape would like to have painted. Even the buildings of the factories are not ugly. The people seem to have been constantly well off. A pig in almost every cottage sty; that is the infallible mark of a happy people. At present this valley suffers and though cloth will always be wanted there will yet be much suffering, even here while at Uley and other places they say the suffering is great indeed" (2).

It had always been popular for a family to fatten up two pigs per year by letting them out to forage in the beech woods and feeding them on the household scraps. At first people killed their own pigs using meat from one for themselves and the other one was sold which provided a small income. Pig killing was a very laborious and messy job and time could be saved by having someone to do the job for you.

Small Beginnings (1819). It all began at Wood Farm situated between the Nymphsfield Road and Woodchester Park at the top of Forest Green. Pigs on the farm were mainly the Large White breed and they were supplied at times to Isaac Hillier, who rented land and buildings in the Wood Farm fields for his first small factory, before transferring it to Newmarket (3). The Evans family who owned and ran the farm from about 1809 used bullocks for ploughing and hauling. The Hillier connection with bacon goes far back in time, for in the 18th century a Thomas Hillier was a pig killer on Bunting Hill (4). His son Isaac was born in 1797 and helped his father. By the age of 17 he had acquired a "hook up" stall in Market Street, the centre of commerce in Upper Nailsworth where there was a market on Fridays and Saturdays, where he displayed his bacon. He was soon selling twenty pounds worth of bacon a month to the truck shop run by the Playne's of Longford's Mill. They paid a portion of their employee's wages in tokens which had to be redeemed at the shop. It is likely that as a result of this activity, Isaac met and subsequently married Maria Playne. By 1816 Isaac's trade had extended as far as London (5).

The Move to Larger Premises.

In 1830 Isaac transferred his business down to Newmarket (Fig.1), and at about this time he entered into partnership with a Mr Blackwell, occupying the Nodes old stables and wagon house (ST 83929968). Pigs were bought from local farmers and driven on foot to the premises situated on the north side of the Newmarket Valley. In 1843 Isaac undertook to build a new road from Nailsworth to Newmarket, being 15 feet wide in order to allow two pig carts to pass one another. In 1846 responsibility for the road was transferred to the Parish. At about the same time Isaac built a large house for himself called Newmarket Court, which the local

people called “The Mansion” which was demolished in about 1960 (6). In 1865 pigs were being purchased from Bristol Market and transported by large four horsed wagons to Newmarket. These were mainly Irish pigs, with about 150 pigs a week still being bought from local farmers. About 450 pigs were slaughtered each week providing employment for some 70 people. Workers reckoned that every part of the pig was used except the squeak!

Family Life.

By 1845 Isaac and Maria had had six children: four girls, Sarah who died young, Ann, Mary and Ellen, and two boys Thomas, who became a London surgeon and Peter, who was destined to follow his father. In 1864 Maria Hillier died aged 70. Soon afterwards Isaac married Susannah King widow of Peter King, a corn miller from Kings Stanley.

In 1868 both Isaac’s sons died in the same week. Peter had gone to see his dying brother in London and was killed in a pony and trap accident, reputedly in Pall Mall. With no son to succeed him, Isaac appeared to have lost heart after this sudden double tragedy. He put a manager in charge of the factory and took only a supervisory roll in running the business until his death in 1886 at the age of 88 (7).

A Limited Company is Formed.

In 1865 Hillier’s was formed into a public company with the sale of 12,000 shares at £5 each and it was then known as Hillier’s Bacon Curing Co. Ltd (8). With the opening of Nailsworth Railway Station in 1867, pigs could be delivered by rail from Bristol via Stonehouse. Development was rapid and adjoining land was acquired with more buildings being adapted and erected as expansion took place.

Pig Killing and Processing.

A detailed account of operations at the factory in 1865 was published in *The Grocer* (Fig.2) (9). Pigs were unloaded at the factory and kept overnight in pens strewn with dry sawdust. At 5 a.m. they were driven down into an enclosure, then along into a narrow room with a sloping floor for easy drainage, and a long iron bar overhead ran the length of the room. Here they were slaughtered, hauled up by a windlass and hung on the iron bar by a hind leg. The bar was well greased enabling the pigs to glide easily along into the cooling, weighing and cutting up rooms. The pigs bristles were singed off by a burner shaped something like a saddle attached to two flexible pipes supplied with gas and air. Jets of flame blazed out from numerous small holes in the saddle, taking off all the hair and bristles as it passed over the carcass. This process was not injurious to the rind or crackling under the skin.

Next the carcasses were passed along into the cooling room, accommodating 200 at a time on several long parallel bars. When cool, each pig was cut open and the innards removed, thoroughly cleaned and sorted into groups for making sausages and chitterlings etc. The chitterlings were cooked and sold and the sausage meat passed into the curing room. The carcasses progressed into the weighing room, where a beam scale formed part of the overhead bar, each weight was marked on the pigs’ back and also on a board. The farmers were paid for the meat on the carcass only! Next came the cutting up room, where one man could cut up to 100 an hour, then the sides were sent on to the curing room. Blade bones were scraped off and sold at a 1d. a piece, similarly the backbones, but fetching a slightly higher price, with all the scraps of meat going on for sausage making. The feet were immersed in large stone cisterns of brine; the chaps were salted in large boxes, then dried and smoked to rich brown. The tongues were pickled in a separate cistern. Some of the meat went for making pork pies. It is not clear when pork pie making started, but they appear on the 1898 price list.

The curing room was 2-300 feet long; the floor was damp with brine and the atmosphere moist and chilly. Here 800 tons of ice stood in receptacles to keep the room cool. At first ice was gathered from the local Mill-ponds, later on it was imported from Norway and stored in the ice house. In about 1889 refrigeration was introduced. The old method of salting involved cramming salt into the carcasses by hand, then the sides were left in piles between planks of wood for 10 days. A kind of hoarfrost collected on the surface, which was then swept off leaving the salted pork. Later methods involved injecting brine into the carcasses through hollow needles via a forcing pump and flexible tubing. Nothing was wasted, the blood was sold to the cloth scourers and the brushed off salt was used for manure. Other bi-products included dried blood and bone meal, which were used as fertilisers. In 1865 Morson and Sons, a London firm of operative chemists established a small chemical factory near Hillier's, turning the waste animal products into animal foods and fertilisers.

From the curing room the sides passed into the smoking chamber, which had an iron lattice floor. On the lower floor a fire of oaken billets and sawdust was kindled, and the smoke rose through the lattice floor to where the sides of bacon hung above. Smoking took 3-4 days and the sides took on a bloom typical of smoked bacon. The hocks, backs and bits were similarly cured and smoked. The chaps were linked together in a chain for smoking. The hams were cured using a sugar process. When curing was completed, the weighing, wrapping, and packing ready for sale began.

The scraps of pig meat descended from the cutting room via a chute into the sausage-making department. Loaves of bread were baked, the crusts cut off and the crumb was thrown into the cutting machine along with the meat, pepper and spices. The chopper worked away on 80 lbs. of ingredients for about 10 minutes, and then it was ready to be fed into the sausage skins. 20 lbs. of mixture was fed in by hand, it was forced down through a funnel into the skin, making a sausage yards long. After removal, it was weighed and cut into lengths, twisted and packed into 1 lbs. of sausages, then on into 20 lb. hampers. Several hundred hampers were produced each week. Similarly, saveloy sausages were made using the bread crusts, but were cooked and smoked before sale.

The surplus fat was processed in the lard factory using boilers and cooling pans. Lard, dripping and suet were packed here. All the sediment from this was used for making porky cakes called "greaves" and sold as animal food. A prolific source of water was obtained from down in the valley near the Nodes Mill. This was pumped up via a hydraulic ram into huge storage tanks situated above the factory.

In 1887 Hillier's entered The All England Competition in London and won their first prize medal for their bacon. They went on to win 23 bronze, silver and gold medals over the years at shows in London and Birmingham for various products.

Hillier's Products.

An ornate 1898 price list survives and makes impressive reading as it shows the wide range of goods produced at this time. Bacon was sold in sides, middles, gammons and fore-ends, ranging in price from 42s-90s a piece. The various sizes of "green bacon" cost between 56s and 66s, and smoked sides were 65s for lean, 62s for medium per cwt. Finest Smoked Hams, own cure, 8-12lbs were 98s and Bath Chaps (half with and half without tongues) were 44s. Other products were Sausages 7 1/2d per lb, Anglo German 7d, Saveloys 6d, Black Puddings 3d, Superior Collared Head 7d, Brawn 6d, and Pork Pies in four sizes, Ham and Tongue

Sausages, and red Polonies. Lard came in bladders at 61s per cwt. Greaves made from offal, dregs and biscuit for dogs, pheasants and poultry were 12s per cwt. All goods were packed and sent in 20lbs units and upwards by passenger train, carriage paid from, Nailsworth Station. Mr Abbott was the manager of the factory at this time (10).

[Note 1s=5p, 1d = 0.4p (approx), 1cwt= 50.848kg and 1lb=0.454kg].

Transport.

Originally Hillier's made deliveries using horses and carts. With the opening of the Nailsworth Railway in 1867, pigs could be delivered by rail from Bristol via Stonehouse. By 1920 the company had several lorries, and in the 1950's they had built up quite an impressive fleet of vans and lorries, all painted up with their company name (Fig.3). These supplied local shops and wholesalers from South Wales to London and Birmingham. Hillier's also had shops of their own in Nailsworth, Minchinhampton, Stroud, Gloucester and Cheltenham (Fig.4) (11).

Expansion and Change in the Late 20th Century.

In the 1960's a new purpose built factory was erected on the site of Isaac Hillier's first house, Newmarket Court, situated a little further down the valley towards Nailsworth (Fig.5) (ST 84209960). This included the modern facility of a laboratory where their products could be tested. Rank Hovis & McDougall then bought the company. By the 1970's about 200 people were employed, and a variety of pies and cooked meats were produced, as well as some 60 tons of cured bacon and 25 tons of sausages weekly. By now they were wearing white overalls and wellington boots as the Health and Safety at Work legislation had been introduced.

In 1982, Barrett and Baird from West Bromwich (Sovereign Foods), a meat processing company, were needed to rescue Hillier's from the receiver. They did so on the basis that (apart from being bought for a nominal sum) Hillier's two factories and experienced employees could use the large quantities of quality pork and beef trimmings from their factories to produce pork and beef pies, pastries, sausages and sausage rolls. With an award of £700,000 from a Common Market aid programme, the buildings were brought up to EEC standards. At this time Hillier's expanded into the retail market. Hillier's were then taken over by E.T. Sutherland Ltd. of Sheffield. The company continued on until 1991 when Hazelwood products acquired Sutherland/Hillier to join their group of companies. Their head office was in Derby, and there were about 60 companies in the group which had a multi-million pound turnover. The original Hillier's factory was closed and all production now took place in the lower factory which was transferred to a Hazlewood operation. Hazlewood's were committed to the development of Hillier's savoury bakery factory on the new site and continued to expand the business. They increased and diversified the product range and introduced new customers, achieving much needed stability for the site. Hillier's were producing around 54 different products including vegetarian ones. Such was the success that the factory reached full capacity and it was decided to transfer to a larger Hazlewood factory in Plymouth.

The factory was then closed and completely refurbished to make a new and untried range of products, quality chilled fruit pies, initially for sale in Sainsbury supermarkets. The business grew and soon the factory was at full capacity again. It was decided to open a sister factory in Bedford which was run and managed by the Nailsworth management. The fruit pies were so successful they outgrew the two factories. By this time the Nailsworth site was showing its age, and a decision was made to close the business and transfer to a purpose built factory in Hull. Hazlewood's was then bought by Greencore in June 2001 (12).

The Redevelopment of the Site

Demolition of the old site (ST 83929968) began in 1993 and continued over several years. It was not until 2001 that work on the new houses began with the construction of seven new houses flanked by two old listed buildings which were partially re-built. These lie to the north of the road through the site. The second phase, to the south of the road, began with the building of a further twenty five new houses and the refurbishment of a small listed cottage, giving a total of thirty five new dwellings for sale by 2004 on the old Hillier's Bacon Curing Factory site. The only evidence remaining from the old factory are four of the original Cotswold stone buildings: the little hydraulic ram house (ST 83669973) down in the valley, a small cottage (No 7 on the plan of 1865 - Fig. 2), the building which contained the large water tanks (now called The Arches), and the old Ice House (called Vine Court). New roads were laid down within the estate which was re-named and is now known as Lower Newmarket. The large 1960's building which stood on the lower site (ST 84209960) was demolished in 2001, and planning permission was granted for a block of twenty eight flats and five houses to be built starting in around 2007.

Concluding Remarks

The whole area of Newmarket has grown considerably from its dozen little cottages in 1885 into quite a large settlement. The new houses are definitely a great improvement on the old Hillier's factory which had evolved over the years into a fairly ugly sprawl of buildings spread along the hillside. It was once a hive of activity but unfortunately it was spoilt by its own success. The road was wide enough for horses and carts and even small lorries to pass one another. However in the latter years the articulated lorries which came to the site had great difficulty in manoeuvring and turning in order to proceed back down the valley. So Newmarket has returned to be the peaceful place it once was before hundreds of workers, the noise of machinery, endless lorries and squealing pigs descended upon it!

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References.

- (1) Griffins 1885 *Nailsworth Directory*, Nailsworth Archives (NA).
- (2) William Cobbett's Rural Rides, quoted from 'Nailsworth from 1500-1900' by A.B.Pavey-Smith's booklet (NA).
- (3) *Our Village in Living History*' compiled by the Nailsworth W.I. in 1959. Page 11 Wood Farm (NA).
- (4) Ibid Bacon Curing page 16.
- (5) *A Portrait of Nailsworth* by Betty Mills (1985) pages 18 and 19.
- (6) Ibid pages 19 and 20.
- (7) King Family Tree by Robin Newman (NA)
- (8) Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Company, (NA).
- (9) *The Grocer*, 1865 (NA).
- (10) Price List in Pat Evans's Collection (NA).
- (11) Pat Evans's Collection (NA).
- (12) Memories of Ronnie Chambers, Hazel Webb and Lindsay Aldridge (ex-employees).

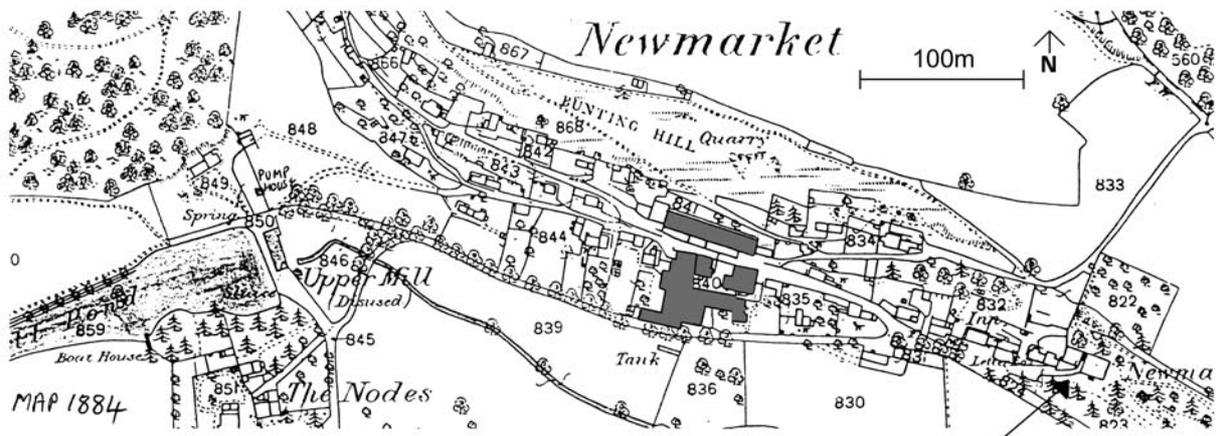


Fig. 1 1884 Map Showing the Factory Buildings Shaded. (Newmarket Court is on the right)

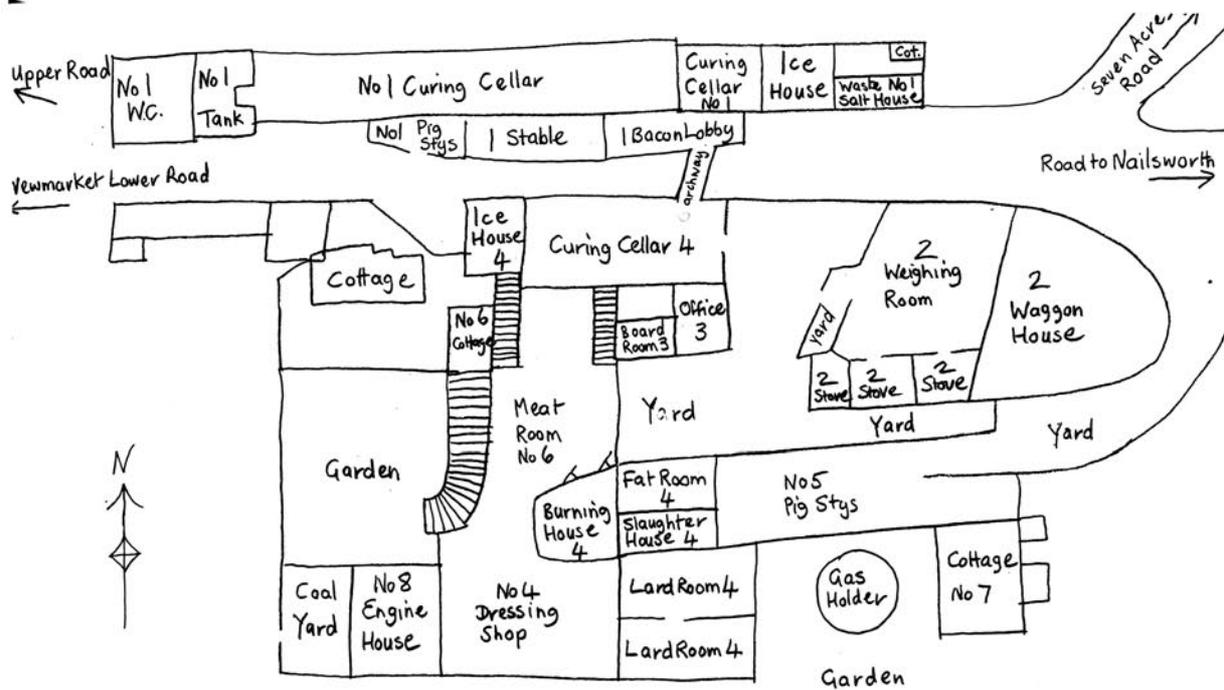


Fig. 2 William Clisso1d's 1865 Plan of the Trade Premises. (Ref. 8)



Fig. 3 1920's Delivery lorries



Fig. 4 c.1920-30's Hilliers shop in Market Street Nailsworth



Fig. 5 1963 View of the Factory (Note the delivery vans and the workers allotments in the foreground)