

FROM WILLOW TO WICKET: A LOST CRICKET BAT WILLOW PLANTATION IN LEONARD STANLEY

by Stephen Mills

Introduction

Gloucestershire is no stranger to commerce and manufacture, having, over the centuries, hosted a vast range of trades and industries. Many of the local population earned their daily bread working in one of the innumerable activities that thrived throughout the county at different points in its history.

Many trades and industries, such as textiles and engineering, were large and well known. Some employed thousands. At the other extreme were small scale, out-of-the-way enterprises that supported, perhaps, no more than a few families. Many of these left little record of their very existence and have been largely forgotten. Such was the business that is the subject of this article. This rather unusual niche occupation, which was in essence, an offshoot from local agriculture, employed only a few men and seems to have left little in the way of records to throw more light on to how it was run on a day-to-day basis. The business in question? - the growing of willow trees, specifically for the manufacture of that epitome of English sporting prowess, the cricket bat.

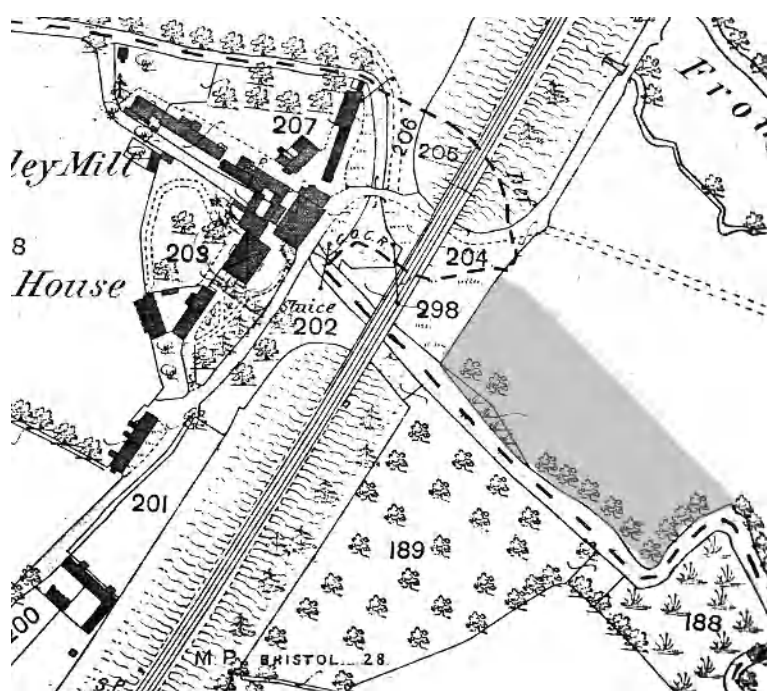


Figure 1

The Ordnance Survey map of the area in 1884. Sheet XLIX.I – Leonard Stanley, Eastington, Stonehouse and Frocester Parishes. The plantation was created on the strip of land adjacent to the arm of the Frome that runs to Leonard Stanley (Beards) Mill, between the railway viaduct and the bend in the river between areas 188 and 299 (shown by grey shading).

The cricket bat is produced from a specific type of willow tree (English Willow - *Salix alba* var. *caerulea*), one that was originally introduced from Asia. Ironically, it actually produces wood more suited to bat manufacture when grown under UK conditions. There are many species of willow but, over the years, because of its light weight, toughness and resilience, this proved to be the most suitable type for crafting cricket bats. The tree appears to have been introduced at some point during the first half of the 18th century, a time when the game was evolving into a more 'organised' form. The first written rules reputedly appeared in 1744. However, other sources suggest that the cricket bat was, in fact, around by the 1620s. Whatever the truth, it has been with us for many for a many years, and during this time, there have been specialists who have

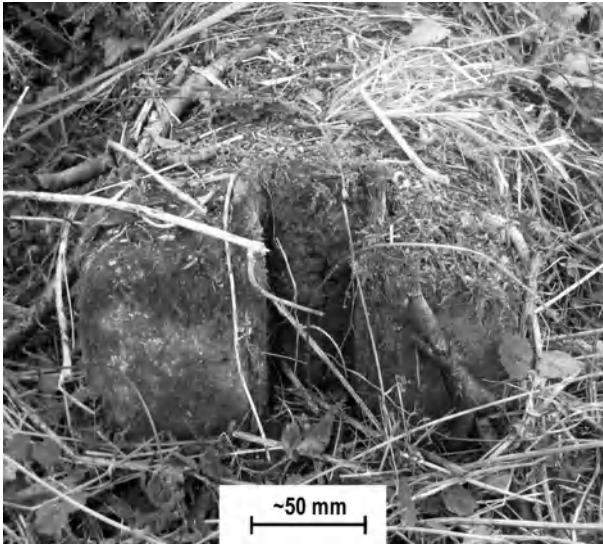


Figure 2

A close up showing the remains of one of the water channels and the slot for a control board. U-shaped iron channels were set into each slot to allow the boards to be adjusted easily. A few remain in-situ. Most were probably removed for scrap many years ago.

by Winterbotham (2). Arthur Winterbotham, born in Dursley in 1864, clearly had a love of cricket, having played (as a right-hand batsman and right-arm slow bowler) for several teams that included Gloucestershire, Gloucestershire Colts, Rugby School and Marylebone Cricket Club. He played in a number of county matches, including several at Lord's Cricket Ground. Most of these were in the 1880s (3). He was active in various spheres of business, one of which came to be the growing of willows for cricket bats. He probably viewed this as no more than an interesting sideline, but given his love of cricket, it is easy to see why. The willows were grown on a strip of land a short distance from the back of the Court, bordering one arm of the River Frome as it wended its way down the valley from Stroud towards its eventual outfall into the Severn. The land was adjacent to Beards (former woollen) Mill and the nearby massive 19th century railway viaduct that looms over both.

As far as can be ascertained, the business operated in the 1920s and 30s. It seems to have been a well organised affair, one which must have involved not inconsiderable resources in both money and labour to create. Early maps (Figure 1) show only fields in the location of what came to be the growing beds. It's not clear where the specialized knowledge needed to set up such an enterprise came from, so perhaps this was brought in from outside.

Growing willow needs a lot of regular watering and the outcome was that the land was reworked so that a network of small water channels, in the form of a grid pattern, was created. Water was admitted to these via a small sluice gate fed from the Frome. The channels were made of concrete (of roughly 15 inches thickness) and varied between 15 and 18 inches in width and over a foot in depth. Water flow through this quite sophisticated system was controlled by small secondary sluices (probably no more than simple stop boards) of 7 inches width that allowed water to flow into the required areas of the beds. Boards were simply slotted into grooves located at the beginning of each channel. It seems that U-shaped iron inserts were set into these slots, so that the boards could be moved easily and possibly sealed better (Figure 2).

grown suitable trees and subsequently turned them into bats.

To this day, cricket bat willows continue to be grown in pockets of Gloucestershire. For instance, one is located in a nature reserve at Claymeadow Farm, South Cerney, belonging to the Bathurst Estate (1). Doubtless there were many such businesses dotted throughout the country. However, this particular long-forgotten one was located in Leonard Stanley, near Stonehouse.

History

The business was carried on by a wealthy local businessman, Mr Arthur Strachan Winterbotham who lived nearby in Stonehouse Court. Built around 1601, the Court was formerly a significant country house, now long converted to a hotel. A string of titled nobles are associated with the house's long history (which greatly predates the current structure), although this part of the story really starts with its purchase in 1907



Figure 3
Part of the willow plantation during the 1920s or 30s, showing rows of young sets. The figure is Percy Lea, the plantation's long term guardian. Several of the irrigation channels are clearly visible.

Clearly, Arthur Winterbotham did not look after the crop himself, and there were two men who seem likely to have been the mainstay of the operation. The first was Percy William Lea, born in 1885. He lived and worked at Stonehouse Court for more than half a century (4). Percy eventually became head gardener, maintaining 6 acres of gardens and greenhouses, as well as the willow beds. It was reported that bats made from his trees were exported all over the world. He died in 1969. The second individual was the man who became the foreman, Edgar Watts. It is not known how he first came to be involved with the business, but it was eventually to take over his life. In June 1936, Arthur Winterbotham died (2) and this probably signalled the end of the willow business. It seems likely that the Leonard Stanley willow plantation was abandoned at this time. Edgar Watts subsequently moved to Bungay in Suffolk and carried on in the same line. Remarkably, the business created by Watts in Bungay is still thriving today. The family-run company now operates a number of garden centres but also still produces cricket bat willows. The company advertises as 'Edgar Watts Ltd – The Willow and Poplar People' (5). The current managing director is Peter Watts.



Figure 4 As Figure 3. (courtesy D & M Ball)



Figure 5 A view of the plantation (presumably taken from the railway viaduct) showing rows of sets and more mature trees. The bend in the river is at the far end.



Figure 6 Willows at Stonehouse Court being cut in readiness for cricket bat production (courtesy D & M Ball)



Figure 7

A modern picture of the plantation. The density of the undergrowth and size of the surviving trees help give some indication of the length of the site's abandonment. Many of the water channels survive although largely inaccessible.

Manufacturing processes involved

It might be assumed that the making of a cricket bat is a fairly straightforward process. However, in reality, when the effort required to successfully grow and nurture the trees is factored in, it is a lengthy and quite complex process.

Cricket bat willows are normally grown from long cuttings called sets, raised in special 'stools' or 'tods' that are planted in the ground, ideally near a fresh water stream. When laid out in plantations, they are set in rows around 4 inches apart as they need plenty of air and light (Figures 3, 4 and 5). The sets are allowed to grow and are cropped every fourth year. Particularly during the first year, they require careful weeding and maintenance in order to prevent the young shoots being overrun with undergrowth. To produce knot-free timber, all shoots and



Figure 8 Aerial view of the site c.2007 from Google Maps. The individual mature trees can be clearly seen. ©2010 Google - Imagery ©2010 DigitalGlobe, Infoterra Ltd & Bluesky, Geoeye, Getmapping plc, Map data ©2010 Tele Atlas. [Note the overlay showing the road to Beards Mill has been included to comply with Google Terms and Conditions].

buds needed removing from the trunk of the set during the early summer. Once of a suitable size, the trees are then planted out and allowed to mature. Some of the crop was probably sold on although it seems that at least some were replanted and grown at the rear of the Court (Figure 6). Cricket bat willows are one of fastest growing trees in Britain and are ready for harvesting after 12-15 years. At this point, they generally stand around 30 plus feet tall.

Having attained suitable dimensions, the willows were then felled and the trunks sawn into lengths of around 28 inches. Using wooden wedges, these were then split with the grain into sections called clefts, each one being used to manufacture one bat. These were then sawn into rough bat shapes which were graded and stacked in drying yards for 9-12 months to season before being roughly shaped. This was now termed a 'blade'. Both of its ends were then waxed to prevent splitting, followed by air drying to the required moisture content. After this, blades were carefully graded into several categories prior to shipment and final manufacture. At one extreme, the less good blades may have gone for school bats, and the best, for a test match!

Remains today

As noted, the plantation was formerly watered via a network of channels. Many of these survive although largely inaccessible (Figures 7 and 8). It appears that the plantation has not been used for any productive purpose for many years, possibly even since its abandonment in the 1930s, so the remaining evidence is buried in deep undergrowth (and very tall dense stinging nettles, as I can testify!) Alongside the channels, also lost in the undergrowth, there are also several larger concrete structures that may have been water tanks or reservoirs. The inlet sluice from the Frome was still visible during the early part of the 1990s, but now cannot be traced. There is presumably also an outlet but its location currently remains inaccessible.

Because of the dense undergrowth and decades worth of rotting vegetation, it has not been possible to accurately record the precise layout of the channel system, although it is gratifying to note that much still seems to survive.

References:

Note: All references from the Internet were retrieved in July 2010.

- (1) Strickland, Alan, personal communication, 29 June 2010.
- (2) Stonehouse Court Hotel website: <http://www.stonehousecourt.co.uk/history-103.html>
- (3) The Hampshire Cricket Society web site at:
http://hcs.cricketarhive.co.uk/Archive/Players/33/33998/all_teams.html.
- (4) D&M Ball website of Duncan and Mandy Ball of Wiltshire. This contains mostly information on the area of North Wiltshire and parish churches. However, it has some family background, including some notes on Percy Lea at <http://www.oodwooc.co.uk/Lea/Chapter10.htm>.
- (5) Edgar Watts Ltd website: <http://www.edgarwatts.com/>
The company is now located at the Willow Works, Bardolph Road, Bungay, Suffolk.