

# HAMPEN FLAX MILL

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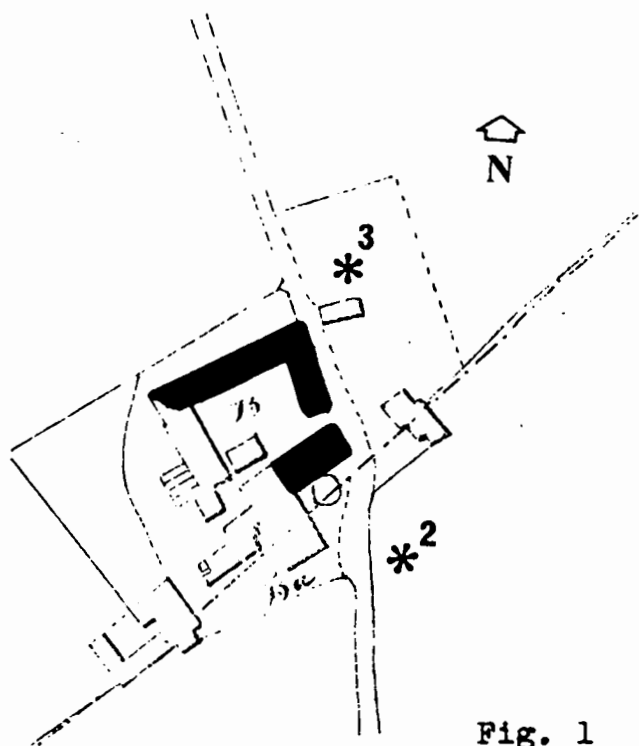


Fig. 1 Hampen Mill  
c. 1850 showing in  
black the buildings  
drawn in Figs. 2 & 3  
and the viewing stand-  
points.

Fig. 1

It must be more than twenty years ago that the great barnlike building at Hampen, south of the road from Stow to Andoversford, was pointed out to me with the words ... "they say it used to be a cotton mill". By this time the building had ceased to function as a textile mill for almost a hundred years, but as with most "folk memories", the statement contained a certain amount of truth. More recently, reading through the catalogue to the Great Exhibition of 1851, the Machine Section (Part II), noting the entries from Gloucestershire, I came across the name of Hampen allied to that of Thomas Beale Browne. Thereafter it was not difficult to find out something of the family and the history of the building.

The families of Beale of Temple Guiting and Brown (or Browne) of Salperton were united in 1771 by the marriage of John Brown and Mary Beale. Their son John died in 1850, and the estate passed to Thomas Beale Brown (1810 to 1888), his second son, as the eldest, John, had already died in 1823. Thomas Beale Brown, who was educated at Oriel College, Oxford, seems to have had a strong social sense; he founded the Stow-on-the-Wold infant school in 1837, and supported a school in Salperton. Later in life he became a J.P. and Sheriff of Gloucestershire in 1858, while many of his enterprises seem to have arisen from a desire to provide work for country people.

In 1840 he married Mary Eliza Sullivan of Alverstoke, Hants. They had one daughter and three sons, of whom George married Ellen Coxwell-Rogers in 1877, so linking the Beale-Browns with another well known Cotswold family.

Thomas Beale Brown built a Flax mill at Hampen and patented inventions connected with manufacturing goods made of Hemp and Flax. He was probably running the Hampen estate from the time of his marriage, as it figured in the settlement providing an income for his wife. Situated south east of the turnpike road from Cheltenham to Stow, about two miles from Andoversford, it adjoined the Browns Salperton Park property and lay within and completed the ring fence of that estate.

The Flax mill or factory was built on the road to Winchcombe, which was part of the old Salt Way from Droitwich to Lechlade, and which crossed the Cheltenham-Stow road at rightangles. There were various sheds, yards, and stables around the stone built manufactory, and these spilled over to the opposite or eastern side of the road, as may be seen on the plan in Fig.1

A valuation deed of 1850 (1) describes the building as "a Factory for the Manufacture of sacking &c with stables and other necessary buildings now in the course of erection". As well as the nearby farmhouse, two cottages "at the factory" are also mentioned, and at some point Thomas Beale Brown built six cottages for his workers on the main turnpike road, which are still in use.

It would seem, therefore, that his flax interests were already established when he came into his inheritance on the death of his father in 1850. According to the Cheltenham Examiner (2) when he came into possession of the estate "he did so with large ideas as to its possibilities". He took up breeding Cotswold sheep and "threw himself with ardour into the ruinous competition among the hill breeders". He had an apiary for bees "on a vast scale" and "a large factory for the manufacture of beet-sugar".

He had already, in 1849, taken out a patent, No 12,680, for improvements in looms and the manufacture of woven and twisted fabrics. Although divided into five parts the patent basically consisted of two inventions. The use of "a sort of organ barrel " stuck with pegs to operate the healds of the loom, and control the shuttle and beating bars; secondly a method of coating fibres with gutta percha, the gum or juice of Isonandra Gutta, a tree growing mainly in Malaya, and only brought to european notice in 1845.

The first part of the invention enabled very firm canvas or sail cloth to be produced by beating up the weft, with a wedge shaped bar, several times between the passage of the shuttle. It could also be applied to making extra firm tubular fabrics for hose or water pipes, or to making sacks in a tubular form, with reinforced bases, so that when cut from

the loom, they could be immediately filled and used, without any further sewing together.

Coating fibres with gutta percha was achieved by passing yarn, from a number of bobbins, through a steam heated tank containing gutta percha. The threads were then passed through rollers to remove excess, and drawn through cold water to cool and set the gum, before being wound on bobbins for use. These threads could be used to weave tubular hose or pipes, or if woven with alternate strands of other materials into fabric, could then by the application of heat, be made impervious to water.

Strands of hemp, flax, or cotton, coated in this way were also suitable for making belts to drive machinery. Woven into bands or sheets, heated to 200 degrees Fahrenheit and passed between rollers to bring the substance to a single mass; they could then be cut into widths of any required breadth.

The system was also applicable to making ropes. After passing a number of threads through heated gutta percha, a winding machine drew them through a series of progressively smaller tubes into a single rope. Gas jets beneath each tube kept the gutta percha sufficiently liquid during the operation. Twisted ropes could be made in the normal way and similarly heated and compacted with the gum.

In 1850 Thomas Beale Brown took out another patent, No 13,294, for "a novel system of weaving, whereby I am enabled to weave double or treble widths of fabric in looms, of less width than the fabric woven". It also comprised an improved beat-up motion for the batten of the loom, enabling a double beat-up to be effected without suspending the action of the loom. There was also an arrangement of flax-dressing machinery in which several operations, breaking, scutching, and heckling, i.e. ridding the flax of useless material and arranging it in parallel order, could be performed in the same machine. The patent also included a method of printing fabrics.

At the Great Exhibition of 1851 Thomas Beale Brown appears in the catalogue to Class 6, Manufacturing machines and tools, listed, not as a manufacturer, but as an inventor. It seems, however, unlikely that the machines mentioned in the patents were his own inventions, as both patents speak of being a communication from abroad, and in the second, "as communicated to me by my correspondent". He exhibited a loom for making sail-cloth; tarpauling without seam; flax tube sacks of mixed flax and hemp, woven without seam; flax coats, perfectly waterproof and flax damasks, cambrics, velvets and cords.

On Saturday June 14th the Gloucester Journal reported that -

The Queen visited, on Wednesday, the Crystal Palace, to view the machinery in motion. She arrived with Prince Albert and several of the foreign princes and princesses, about half-past nine o'clock. Her Majesty honoured



Fig.2

Thomas Beale Brown, Esq. of Salperton, with viewing most particularly his patent loom, as also his patent tubing and canvas, made by power, which elicited considerable admiration. The railroad sheet or tarpaulin made in one piece, and strengthened by a double cloth being wove at all points where strength is required, as well as the seamless sacks made by his patent loom which sews up the bottoms in weaving, caused no little surprise. We must say that the Cheltenham district, although not a manufacturing one, has not been wanting to send her share of novelties. The Duke of Wellington is riding about London in one of the flax coats, which is waterproof, yet admits of perfect ventilation.

With such a propitious beginning it is surprising that more is not heard of the products in following years. The mill appears in Kelly's Directory in 1856 as "Flax and Spinning Mills", but by 1859 (3), though still under the name of Thomas Browne, it had become "Flax and Bone Works". A delightful account of the farm and factory complex exists for 1860, of which more later, but although a chimney stack, steam engine and gas plant are itemised, no mention is made of manufactured flax products. From 1863 it was worked by John Humphris as "Flax and bone mills". Reference was made to "Mr Humphreys" in a letter of December 1862 and mention made of the Flax mill and boiling house. By 1870 John Humphris is listed only as "Bonemills and farmer". The last mention I have found of Flax at Hampden is in 1876 (5) when Henry Humphris, is described as "flax dresser and bone crusher". Three years later only the bone mills are mentioned,

and this work seems to have continued until 1885 when they were run by Henry Buckingham (6). Thomas Beale Brown was still at Salperton Park but under very different circumstances. However, in the autumn of 1860, financial problems were no more than a small cloud on the horizon, and we are fortunate that the Gloucester Chronicle has provided a vivid picture of a day at Hampen (7).

Taking advantage ..... of a coach which was put on for the convenience of persons attending Mr Beale Brown's sheep sale at Hampen, one of the great events of the Hill Country, I was soon careering out of Cheltenham behind four capital greys from the Plough .....

Gradually ascending the curling hill the eye ranges over the open country of the Cotswolds, the ground rising and falling in long majestic swells, like the sea in mid-ocean. The tall chimney of Hampen stands like a pillar on the eastern ridge.

Autumn work has already begun; in one field by the side of the road six or seven teams were at work; the creaking and clanking of the implements and harness pleasantly broke the quiet in which the hills seem to sleep .....

Hampen farm stands unrivalled perhaps in one respect, being lighted by gas, which is manufactured on the premises. It has also a very fine steam engine, which is made generally useful in doing whatever requires strength. A large number of agriculturists had already assembled when our greys spanked into the farmyard; and the variety of smart vehicles which crowded the place was quite a treat to those who take an interest in these things. As usual on such occasions open house was kept, and a capital dinner was laid in the upper floor of the large barn, which was made pleasant by a ceiling of evergreens.

.....the sheep which were the attraction of the day, about 700 in number, were penned in a meadow close to the building.

Mention is made of the, ready remarks and infectious good humour of the able auctioneer Mr James Villar.

and as the day drew to a close, .....already the sheep were being driven and carted away. In one corner of the field some of the gentry of the neighbourhood were amusing themselves and a crowd by leaping their horses over a series of hurdles.....

It was presumably Thomas Beale Brown's agricultural and flax interests that encouraged him to spread his projects to Ireland. There are in the G.R.O., among the Beale Brown family papers (8) a number of undated cuttings from Irish newspapers. From these it appears that he first "farmed largely in Tipperary" and "laid out a great deal of money at Cappagh White" before acquiring a considerable estate at Crotta in North Kerry. He

seems to have embarked on the Tipperary venture with his usual philanthropic enthusiasm, saving "hundreds from starvation" by the work he provided. Unfortunately times were troubled and the experiment ended in disillusionment.

The Limerick Chronicle recounts -

Mr Brown, a Gloucester gentleman of great wealth, who purchased a large tract of land near Cappwhite (sic), has given orders to break up his establishment there, and sell off all his farming stock, in consequence of the recent attempt to murder his agent, Mr Sponge, on the high road. This will be a sad calamity to the neighbourhood, as Mr Brown gave constant liberal employment to every man, woman and child, on his new property, never suffering a horse to be harnessed for work on his lands which manual labour could accomplish.

He then turned his attention to Kerry and took up the cause of flax growing in Ireland. The Tralee Town Commission met for the purpose of considering the best means to convene a public meeting to encourage the growth of flax, where the chairman said -

An English gentleman, a Mr Browne, who has bought some property in North Kerry, called on me a few days ago, and said he was most anxious to get up a public meeting, for the purpose of bringing permanently before the agricultural interests, and the farmers the great advantages which would accrue to all parties in the growing of flax. He said he was laying down land for 30 acres of flax, and also that he is erecting a scutching, and a number of steeping tanks. He will buy flax from the people who grow it for a fair value, and will scutch and treat the flax for them, so that they will be able to place it before the public as a marketable commodity..... he is the largest flax broker in Great Britain or Ireland, and he believes one of the largest flax growers in the world. In Ireland no man has grown 180 acres of flax. In England very few reached 150; and I heard he grew 180 acres of flax.

It was also said at this meeting that Mr Brown ...

...had brought a large number of sheep to his Kerry property and had a vessel at present loading with the whole material of a scutching mill.

There is a certain confusion in this report, the name John Beale Brown being mentioned on one occasion, though all other particulars seem to point to Thomas Beale Brown being intended. The date too is uncertain; a phrase used "Mr Brown was Sheriff of Gloucestershire", may mean that he was at the time, i.e. 1858, or that he had been in the past. which would place the report in the 1860's. Thomas could well have been accompanied in Ireland by his eldest son John (1841-1874). Another cutting in the notebook (8) specifically mentions Beale Brown being accompanied by his son, and those cuttings which are dated,

relative to other matters, fall mainly between 1857 and 1864.

Unfortunately I have not yet been able to verify "he is the largest flax broker in Great Britain". Although flax is said to need deep rich soil, it was certainly grown in various areas in Gloucestershire, not only in the vale, but also on the wold in the 17th and 18th centuries, including Mickleton, Moreton-in-Marsh, Quinton, Weston Sand and Willersey. (9). Thomas Rudge in "A General View of the Agriculture of Gloucestershire", in 1813 speaks of flax being formerly grown in the Upper Vale of Evesham, but makes no mention of it being grown on the Cotswolds. It is known to have been grown at Roel Farm, Guiting Power, as a family emigrated from there about the time of the Corn Laws (1815) taking with them a linen bed-spread made from flax grown and woven on the farm.

There is the possibility the name of Brown may have been known on the Cotswolds in connection with flax growing before Thomas Beale Brown's time. The London Encyclopaedia of 1829 quotes the opinion of a man named Brown in treating flax fibres and Tomlinson's Cyclopaedia of the 1860's mentions "An experienced flax-grower in Gloucestershire, Mr R. Browne..." The enigma remains as I can find no initial R in the family tree of the Beale Browns, either as contemporaries or sons of Thomas.

One thing is certain that the Irish venture was not a financial success. That and Thomas Beale Brown's many other interests were draining his resources and the Salperton estate was beginning to feel the effects. In August 1870, thirty of his Cotswold shearling rams were sold at auction and notice given that it was his intention to relinquish sheep breeding and that the whole of his valuable flock would be offered for sale. The days when his sheep carried off the highest prizes, in Dublin and Carlisle and the Bath and West shows, were over. It was said that "The old Squire's income would probably have borne the burden of even these costly undertakings on the Cotswolds, and of his extravagant hospitality, but for the losses involved by a burdensome property in Ireland." However, as the situation was, his lands became mortgaged and the former lord of the Manor was reduced to penury.

It seems that his effects were sold in July 1885. He had become very deaf and in his later years increasingly religious. It worried him that he could not help the people who had worked for him or provide a cottage for his old coachman. Indeed he seems to have been hard put to it to provide a roof for himself and his wife, and when they moved to Cheltenham, it was to one of the very humble artisan houses, 49 Brighton Road, off Hewlett Road.

He wrote to a correspondent in Sept. 1885 -

Your kindness is very great and we fully appreciate it. I have not tasted wine since our sale, never one drop all the time we were at Weymouth only water and now only a little beer. We shall keep the wine you so



HAMPEN FLAX MILL, HAMPEN HILL, NR. ANDOVERSFORD, GLOS

Fig. 3 kindly sent for medicinal purposes. It would take columns to say how I have been robbed, a great deal of my dear old furniture went under the price of firing - my old wine given away, Villar bought splendid sherry at 3/6, and now will not let me have a bottle of it for a pound a bottle. It does not do to look at it. My faith is as strong as ever, we shall either be delivered or else the Lord will come and take us to himself.....  
..... we rarely go out, read and pray most of the day.

When Thomas Beale Brown died aged 77 on June 11th 1888, he was living in a small house in Keynsham Terrace, Cheltenham.

The estate at Salperton (83 acres) and Hampen ( in all almost 2000 acres) passed into litigation , and without a responsible owner remained comparatively unproductive for several years. It was sold in Feb. 1891 to " a gentleman of wealth in South Wales." The estate had "advantages now which it had not in the late Squire's palmy days, the formation of the Banbury Railway through the estate giving an opportunity for development of which the new owner will doubtless be in a position to avail himself". But Hampen's manufacturing days were over. In 1897 Salperton Park was the property of Messrs. Stretton and Allen, growing wheat, roots and barley. The buildings at Hampen returned to agricultural use, and gradually the shell of that part of the "factory"which remains fell into ruin.

Some twenty years ago high winds brought down the roof, which was then lowered and replaced with corrugated iron.

It is hoped that it will be possible to survey the site and building remains in the near future.

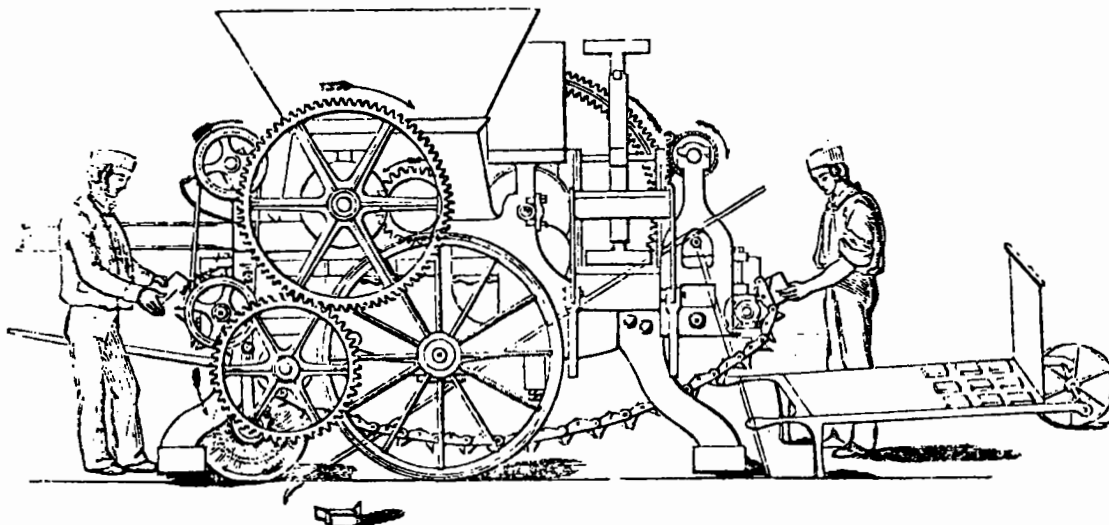


### Acknowledgements and Illustrations.

I am indebted to Mr Brian Smith of the Gloucester Record Office for permission to reproduce Fig. 1 from D 269C L1. I should also like to thank the staff of the Record Office for their always courteous help in producing documents; also Mr F.J.T.Harris for supplying copies of BealeBrown's patents, and particularly Mr Geoffrey Beddow and Mr Pat Lane for the illustrations they made especially for this article. The two by Geoffrey Beddow in the text are reproduced at the original size, and the one on the front cover by Pat Lane, has been slightly reduced. All three of the originals of these drawings are for sale ( contact the Secretary) and both artists are willing to undertake commissions.

### Notes.

1. Gloucester Records Office D 269 C L1.
2. Feb. 18th 1891.
3. Harrison, Harrod & Co's Directory.
4. Kelly's Directories 1863-1867.
5. Morris & Co's Directory.
6. Kelly's Directory.
7. G.R.O. D 269 C C3.
8. G.R.O. D 269 F15.
9. Bristol & Gloucestershire Archaeological Society Transactions, Vol XXXVIII 1915 p 217.
10. G.R.O. D 269 C3 Cheltenham Examiner Feb. 18th 1891.



Hart's Patent Tile Machine.