

## Twine, Rope and Sail in South Somerset – but no sea in sight

Dawe's Twineworks is a model working Victorian factory in the village of West Coker – the last surviving rural twine works which still has its original machinery. It is one of a very few surviving relics of what was an important industry in west Dorset and south Somerset. Dawe's closed in 1968 and was derelict and in danger of collapse when bought by South Somerset District Council in 2005. Now, a local volunteer team has applied effort and raised money to make this important piece of our history live again. SSARG visited West Coker recently and had a good look round. There used to be a number of such small scale factories in West Coker, itself a good 23 miles away from the sea. It seems the underlying geology is the key: I do recommend this link to view <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html>



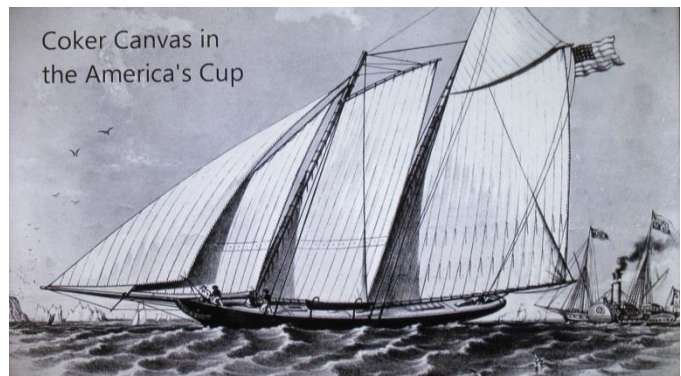
*Retting terraces to the east of the village. Photo: Neil Tinkley*

The Jurassic limestone supported soils which proved to be ideal for the cultivation of flax – the source of fibres used to make twine, rope and sailcloth. When the flax is ready for harvesting, it is retted - a process of steeping the stalks in water to dissolve or rot away much of the cellular tissues surrounding bast fibres, facilitating separation of the fibre from the stem. In dew retting, the flax is spread on the field and exposed to the action of the weather for several weeks without any previous steeping. The combined action of bacteria, sun, air, and dew produces fermentation, dissolving much of the stem material surrounding the fibre bundles. At West Coker, terraces (now much degraded) used for the dew retting process can still be seen in the photo above taken by Neil from the busy A30.



The soils for growing flax and hemp would periodically fail and a fallow spell was needed. As a result, large quantities of semi-processed flax bundles were imported from Russia. For many decades in the late 18th early 19th centuries, Russia was by far the world's greatest exporter of flax stems via Archangel, Konigsberg, Riga and other Baltic ports. Britain was Russia's major customer and many thousands of tons of raw flax was shipped in bales as shown in this picture of merchants at Riga Harbour (<http://www.peacehavens.co.uk/BSFLAX.htm>). The flax bales were shipped to the UK in trading ships called Galliot and Galeas during the autumn months, to avoid the stormy winter weather.

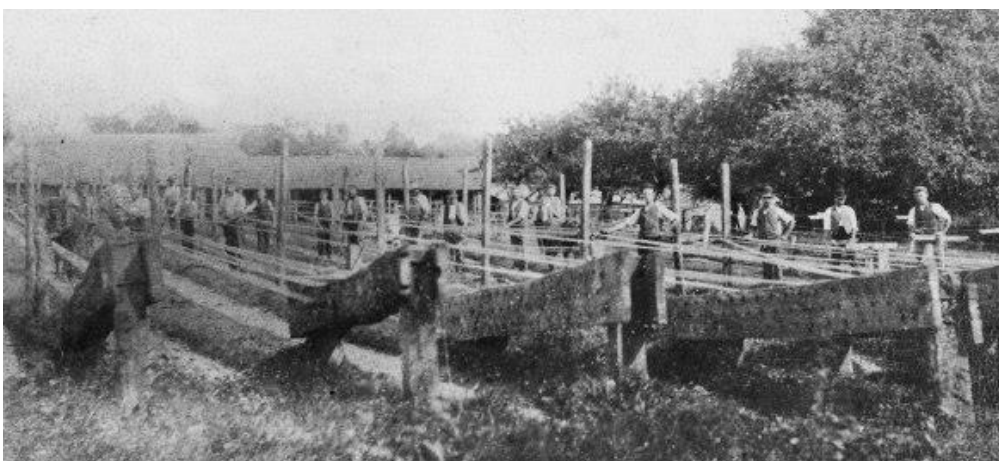
Flax is one of the oldest textile fibres. Evidence of its use has been found in the prehistoric lake dwellings of Switzerland. Fine linen fabrics, indicating a high degree of skill, have been discovered in ancient Egyptian tombs. Phoenician traders apparently brought linen from the Mediterranean area to Gaul and Britain, and the Romans introduced linen manufacture throughout their empire. Fine grades of flax fibres are made into woven fabrics and laces for apparel and household furnishings. Lower grades are used for products requiring strength and the ability to withstand moisture—such as canvas, twine, fire hose, bagging, industrial sewing thread and buckram.



Coker became particularly well known for canvas, although the nearest sail lofts were in Crewkerne where the sails were made up and taken to Bridport. Coker Canvas was a generic type of sail made in many locations and was valued as it lasted up to twice as long as other sailcloths. This was because the yarn was bucked (bleached) before being made into a sail rather than being bleached as a complete sail. This process slowed the mildewing and rotting of the sail, allowing it to be used for much longer. It became the sailcloth of choice by both pirates and the Royal Navy and was used in many of Nelson’s ships and well into the nineteenth century as well as for America’s Cup races. HMS Victory’s foretopsail, 25m wide and 17m high was sewn from strips of cloth 60cm wide – and this was just one of the ship’s 60 sails.

Ships carried large quantities of sailcloth in their sail lockers where spare suits of sails were carried. The sailmaker was required to keep the sails in good repair, putting in new patches or new roping. HMS Beagle would have carried vast quantities of spare suits in her holds. The industry grew with the age of sail and then declined as steamships and finally man-made materials took over. However, flax and the cloth it produced was still in great demand in the First World War notably for planes and tents and haulage.

Dawe’s Twine Works is a great example of industrial archaeology as much of it has been reconstructed and visitors to the works can see the rope walk in operation.



*The rope walk at the first Dawe’s twine works*





*The restored rope walk now – it is over 100 yards long*



*Inside the rope walk*



*The twine!*

MC



