

Chapter Six: The Forgotten Mill

Near the beginning of recorded Smith history there once stood a mill with a very chequered history. Originally built by the Shackleton family in 1795, it was sited adjacent to a fast flowing stream, hemmed in by steep valley sides. It was constructed out of pale sandstone cut from a nearby quarry further upstream. The beautiful pale colour would later turn to a black sooty hue due to industrial pollution and the passage of years. However, when first built it had blended in well in with the protective canopy of surrounding woodland. The mill buildings had once formed a three-sided courtyard at the apex of, which stood a long weaving shed housing the looms. The installation of power looms in 1838 would have turned this building into a noisy chapel of nineteenth century industry – serving the god ‘mammon.’ This god would be merciless in demanding a never-ending sacrifice of human labour. As in any chapel the people would be organised into neatly regimented rows, with the deafening clatter of machines forming the only hymn in that place. By the mid-1830s the usurping ‘prince wool’ would have displaced ‘old king cotton’ as the main item of production. Crowning this weaving shed was a roof consisting of four long parallel, upturned ‘v’ shaped ridges. The eastward slope of each ridge held a shimmering array of co-joined panelled skylights through which whatever sun there was would shine. Inside the shed whitewashed walls would lend a sepulchre effect amongst the machinery, which itself was firmly anchored to the granite-like stone floor. The workaday noise would have been all the more deafening within this enclosed space. In the early days a man-made waterfall would have set a water wheel in endless motion. Only in later decades would an attempt be made to use steam power to replace the waterpower freely given by the natural surroundings. Sticking like two square carbuncles out from the right side of the weaving shed were two brick cabins where the workers would have found relief for their natural wants.

Aloof on the top floor and separated from the workplace were the offices where endless paper work was once completed on slab-like wooden tables with ornately carved legs. These legs possessed a swollen appearance as if they were afflicted with some form of dropsy. Receipts, orders, invoices, and bills would have been impaled upon metal spikes (separating each type of documentation.) Large account books will have had pride of place at a head table presided over by the Mill Owner or whoever was deputising for him. Most clerks would have been expected to work a minimum of twelve hours per day. At night they would have to crouch over poorly written documents by candlelight. Oil lamps would only have been introduced at a later stage in the Mill’s history. Just how many clerks it took to order all of the paperwork could only be guessed at.

Stretching away from the weaving shed were two outstretched arms of outbuildings. These would have contained bales of wool and spare pieces of equipment. From the outbuilding to the right a metal hoist jutted out into the air at a forty-five degree angle. The attached rope and hook would have dropped bales onto a wagon, which would then be pulled by horses or mules up the precipitous valley side. To the right of this warehouse stood a fortress-like caretaker’s house and from its vicinity the baying of guard dogs would have echoed out into the night, deterring all but the boldest of intruders. However, it would have fallen to the left row of

buildings to effectively block out any remaining sunlight shimmering through the surrounding trees and so most of the inner courtyard would have been condemned to dwell in perpetual shadow.

Standing to the right of the courtyard was the finishing warehouse where the dying took place. It was here that the mysteries of textile processing reached their gaudy consummation. Woollen cloth goods were then made ready for dispatch to an army of downtrodden seamstresses who would sew them into the attire that the public required.

Escape from the mill came only through a rutted and well-worn path that writhed up the valley side like a grey snake slithering out of its hole. Unlike the densely wooded valley bottom, the valley side was clad only in a thin mantle of struggling green grass. Here and there a forlorn tree gave its bleak protest to the hostile elements. In spring and autumn pack animals would have had to struggle through slippery mud and in winter through ice and snow. Once at the top they would deposit their loads into a huge towering square warehouse at Laycock. Another creaking system of hoists and pulleys would have pulled each bale up to the top floor through an oblong entrance lying to the right of the building. Once safely stored, the cloth would later be distributed to markets in Keighley, Bradford, Halifax or possibly more distant Lancashire.

In these workplaces were crowded a menagerie of destinies. There would have been the mute despair of orphans having been transported from the South of England to work as near-slaves on the new machines. They would have mingled with the adult workers some of who would long to spend a penny or two at the nearest drinking shop. Ruling over them with a rough authority would be the overseers, but even the most sharp-tongued of these men would have had to respect a skilled engineer whose presence was necessary to keep the machines running. The factory floor would have had its own pecking order, as would the office where junior clerks would have shown deference to more senior clerks, who in turn would have at least made pretence of showing absolute deference to the owner of the Mill. From 1837 until 1853, the owner of that mill was a John Smith of Laycock, (not the John Smith of Sutton, who was Edmund's father).

Family tradition threw extra light upon the social status of the early Smiths. One branch of the family was reputed to have owned a textile mill near Keighley, possibly known at one point as 'Smith and Redman Mill' and located near to a stream. Research conducted in July 2000 did appear to confirm the family legend of a mill. As an incidental detail, it was worth noting that Hodgson p.184 recorded a Joseph Redman operating in the capacity of "worsted inspector for Keighley." Whilst holding this responsible position, he was much feared by those engaged in 'sharp practices.' His office suggested that he had held a previous position of responsibility in the woollen trade. At the very least here was a Redman having strong links with the textile trade. In addition, the monumental inscriptions for Kildwick Parish Church confirmed the presence of a Smith Redman of Farnhill who had died on January 5th 1916 aged 74. (These inscriptions also showed that the Redmans were associated with Crosshills where many Smiths were present.) This combination of names powerfully suggested that in 1843 the two families had been already united

in marriage. This fact lent further credibility to the story of a mill in the Smith family, once known as 'Smith and Redman Mill.' During the nineteenth century, marital alliances often cemented business associations between families. During that era, money and love often went together.

The discovery of the old Smith Mill ranks as one of the most important 'finds' made in this Family History. It confirmed the above-mentioned oral tradition that there had once been 'a Textile Mill' in the family. This particular tradition held a few clues namely that: -

1. The mill was sited near Keighley
2. It was a textile mill that possibly specialised in worsted goods
3. It was located beside a stream
4. An uncle of Edmund had lost an arm in the mill machinery
5. There was possibly some connection with Colne in Lancashire.
6. It might have been known as 'Smith and Redman Mill.'

As I began looking up Trade Directories in early July 2000 the main challenge was to find a Mill that fitted most closely to the above clues. With 'Smith' being a common name, I was all too aware that it would be fatally easy to find the wrong Mill. Trade Directories for the period 1830–1855 brought to light the following information: -

In 1830 there was a William Smith of Bank Place, 'wool and stuff manufacturer' and Robert Smith, Exley Head who was engaged in the same trade.

In 1837 through until 1853 there was a Robert Smith, Exley Head and John Smith of Laycock, 'worsted spinner and manufacturer.' (From 1841, he was registered as John Smith, Woodmill, 'worsted spinner and manufacturer.')

By 1855, Woodmill had passed into the ownership of Henry Waddington.

Old Ordnance Survey maps confirmed that Bank Place was near the centre of Keighley and not sited near any valley. The same applied to Robert Smith's business in Exley Head, which was subsequently found to be on a small promontory of land as far from any stream as it was possible to be in Keighley. Woodmill seemed to be the better alternative, being separated from Sutton by a ridge at a distance of only about two and a half miles. It would have been possible for any relative to get to work – especially if they lived at Ellers, which was on the Keighley Road that passed through Laycock. However, they would have faced a very steep climb up from Ellers before the ridge gently undulated to Laycock. (Whether Edmund himself enjoyed a

connection with the site could not be substantiated.) Hodgson provided another telling clue by confirming that new power looms had been installed at Woodmill in 1838. The labour force would have been unused to the new equipment, the installation of which would have made any accidents all the more likely. Edmund's Uncle may have lost his arm around that period or shortly after it, leaving an especially vivid memory in the mind of a child (aged 6 to 9) and a striking talking point in his family.

Since its construction for cotton production in 1795 by the "gentleman farmer" John Shackleton, Woodmill had passed through various owners until its purchase by John Smith in 1837 – the year of Queen Victoria's accession.

The previous owners had been: -

1. Richard Robinson (at the Mill spinning worsted yarn and manufacturing stuff pieces from around 1810 until 1826) and John Rishworth (at the Mill also spinning worsted yarn from 1814-1832.) Both men will have shared the premises from 1814 until 1826.
2. Thomas Waterhouse (at the Mill spinning worsted yarn from 1832-1835) and his son-in-law John Midgley who was the chief mechanic and general manager.

A possible stain on the Mill's history was the employment of orphans who were sent up from the South of England in 1802. These hapless children were a very cheap source of labour from parishes that would have been glad to get rid of them in order to reduce costs. As a business, Woodmill followed a very typical local pattern of moving from cotton to woollen manufacture during the early part of the nineteenth century.

Sometimes Hodgson gave a glimpse into the working practices of these mill owners. On p.144 he recorded how Benjamin Rishworth (the son of John Rishworth) "was in the habit when only ten years old, of carrying the cash for wages from Fell Lane, through Holme House Wood to the Woodmill, sometimes at ten o'clock at night." These wages were for the large number of weavers employed by John Rishworth. Anyone seeing the difficult terrain surrounding the mill would soon realise that it was not one to send a child over - least of all at the dead of night with a bag full of wages!

The detailed description of John Smith himself on pp. 99-100 caused Hodgson to be a particularly informative source. The following is a direct quote. "He was very kind and social in his disposition, and withal, one of the greatest wits it has ever been our privilege to meet with. We have frequently heard merchants and other businessmen in Bradford try their hand with him in a good humoured way, when they always meet with a smart reply, and many times we have heard Jacob Berhens try to floor him but he invariably came off second best. He was a member of the Methodist Society at Laycock, and was very useful in promoting the interests of religion and education in his own immediate neighbourhood, and, although he left the bulk of his property at his decease, (which took place in 1861) to his only surviving child Mr John William Smith, now of Colne. Yet he did not forget the necessities of his own native village, but by a will left a large sum of money to Laycock Day School, which has been laid out in building a dwelling house for the

schoolmaster.”

The opening sentence of this quotation was especially amazing because it could have been a word for word description of my own father. Written here were my father’s attributes of sociability, sharp business sense, self-sufficient industry, and passion for education – not to say his keen interest in religious matters. Strongly present were five major personality traits still in evidence in the Smith family to this day. Also of interest was the link with Colne through his son, John William Smith (whose name was identical to that of Edmund’s third son who did not survive infancy.) Overall, there did seem to be a distant family connection between John Smith of Laycock and my Great Grandfather – the son of John Smith of Sutton. Exactly what this link consisted of was impossible to find. It appears that the Smiths of Laycock were wealthier than the Smiths of Sutton. If this was the case then John Smith of Laycock may well have employed some of his poorer relations to be mill operatives. Such a practice was not unknown in Victorian times.

From Hodgson pp. 97-99 it was also discovered that John Smith of Laycock: -

1. Was “The son of a Jonas Smith, a small farmer residing at Brogden near Laycock.”
2. Began work as a handloom weaver in his teens
3. At the age of 21 “he commenced business as a dealer in drapery goods, travelling as far as Lancaster, Poulton, Grange, Silverdale and Milthorp.”
4. After saving £50-£60 “he commenced the business of a piece maker in a very humble way; ... and employed about three weavers beside himself.”
5. “In 1828 he began to employ hand combers, buying his wool in Bradford market.”
6. “About the year 1837 he took the Woodmill, near Laycock, where he spun his own yarns. He had his warehouse in Laycock where he stored his goods, sorted his wool and delivered out work to combers and weavers “About 1838 he introduced power looms into his mill, at the same time continuing to employ hand loom weavers.”
7. “About the year 1840 he commenced making Orleans cloth, but the class of goods he made were 6qr (quarter). Merinos [wool], which he generally sold to Jacob Berhens.”
8. “Never employed more than 200 work people at one time.”
9. Retired “in very comfortable circumstances” in 1853.

According to Hodgson p. 99, John Smith’s retirement took place in somewhat turbulent circumstances. These showed that the mill was failing to gain ‘economies of scale,’ (meaning a reduction in running costs caused by an increase in size). Larger competitors such as Bairstows in Sutton were outperforming it. By 1853, John Smith “was very much perplexed in consequence of the competition of several manufacturers who were making the same class of

goods and selling them to the same merchants, but who could take a less price for their goods, because they had introduced into their mills the two loom system, that is one weaver minding two looms instead of one. Mr Smith attempted to introduce this new system at his business at Woodmill, which was resisted on the part of the work people, in consequence of which, and in consideration of his failing years and failing health he determined to give up his business.” Perhaps by then John Smith was in his sixties.

One characteristic of the man was his capacity for hard work. Another was his ability to set up business in an area where there was a growing demand. In the 1820s, John Smith “sent his pieces to Bradford with a neighbouring manufacturer who kept a horse and a cart. As he was an early riser he would be in his loom, even on a market day, by four o’clock in the morning, and weave till eight. He would then eat a frugal breakfast and afterwards walk to Bradford, sell his goods, buy his warps and wefts and occasionally a small bale of sizing. He would then eat parkin or a little bread or butter, to which he would add a glass of beer and walk home again, both journeys being a distance of 24 miles. After partaking of some refreshment, he would go to his loom and weave three or four hours.” My own calculation was that these activities would have required a sixteen to eighteen hour working day! A review of a road map confirmed that the distance to the centre of Bradford was in the order of 12 miles – hence the distance quoted by Hodgson was a total distance travelled. Other days may have been quieter but not by much. Clearly, John Smith of Laycock was a man who was motivated to work well beyond the point of covering his own basic needs. Behind the somewhat idealistic account of Hodgson p. 98 was the picture of a man doggedly determined to succeed in his business. He displayed the typical Smith characteristic of unrelenting determination.

A monumental inscription on a grave outside Laycock Methodist Chapel suggested that before his death in 1861, John Smith might have married twice – the second time to a considerably younger woman. The inscription was for a Sarah Smith, widow of John Smith. She had died on the 23rd November 1881 at the age of 60 – twenty years after her husband.

Two visits were made to the old Smiths Mill, (Woodmill) the first on Friday, July 21st, and the second on Saturday, July 29th 2000 (this time accompanied by my wife.) The present owner of the premises had a keen interest in local history and was most helpful in providing further information ~ which included old photographs of the mill dating back to the late 1960s before any modern alterations had been made. Without those photographs a reconstruction of the original design of the mill would have been impossible. Perhaps the most striking feature was the remoteness of the location. Lying at the bottom of a very steep-sided valley, beside a small and frequently dammed stream, the only way down to it was along a stony rutted path, which twisted back on itself. Still in evidence were the remains of the site of a very old water wheel. Again, thanks to the kind permission of the owner photographs were taken of the general site and surroundings – but it was agreed that these should not be distributed on a public basis.

Compared to other mills in the area, this mill would have been of a modest size. This meant that it would not have been able to enjoy the reduction in costs, which were to benefit

its larger competitors. This probably explained why it changed hands so frequently in the nineteenth century. Like many mills in the Keighley area it had moved through the stages of agricultural, cotton and worsted production before finally being left in a redundant condition.

Further insight was obtained about the ordeal about the ordeal of any worker loosing a limb in a machine accident whilst working at the mill. Following this horrific accident a tourniquet will have been tightened around what had remained of his arm to stop the bleeding. He would then have faced a dreadful journey in a rickety wagon up the valley side. It was to be hoped that he was either unconscious or numbed by the shock to take much notice. Having eventually reached the main highway it would then have been downhill to the nearby Royal Victoria Hospital. All of the travelling will have taken anything from an hour to two hours depending upon the weather conditions at the time. Surgeons in bloodstained frock coats would have either sawn off what was left off the arm or sewn up the stump – all without the aid of an anaesthetic. By then any numbness may have begun to wear off. If Edmund's uncle did survive such an ordeal then he must have been an extraordinarily strong man. Unfortunately, written records of the now closed Royal Victoria only dated back to 1894. Nevertheless, there remained the possibility that his ordeal may have been preserved in privately written records kept by the surgeon himself. However, enquiries made at Keighley Library indicated that these records too had long since been lost.

Before closing this examination into the Woodmill it is worth recalling that its discovery and subsequent research involved both a process of elimination and identification. In the former process, mills which did not have the characteristics identified by family tradition were eliminated from enquiries, whilst in the latter a reasonably certain identification could be made because the mill concerned did possess four of the six characteristics pinpointed by family tradition. (The remaining two characteristics were neither proved nor disproved.) Nevertheless, one could still only talk about a strong balance of probability rather than absolute certainty. All of the combined evidence of Trade Directories, Hodgson and family tradition has shown that a particular mill near Keighley was owned by a John Smith and that strong circumstantial evidence pointed to him having some business or distant blood connection with Edmund's own family. The close proximity of this mill to Sutton and the very typical 'Smithian' characteristics of its early Victorian owner, John Smith, reinforced the likelihood of there being some sort of connection. However, to go further by asserting that there definitely was a connection would risk making an over-dogmatic assertion. The only thing to be dogmatic about was that the mill itself was a product of the industrial world into which my Great Grandfather had been born. It also showed that this world differed in so many ways from the more rural background, which was to shape the character of Edmund Smith's first two wives - Helen Hastings and Rosamond Stamford (my Great Grandmother).