

## Rural Industries at Llanymynech

by Mrs A Bailey-Williams

Mr John Jeffreys of Llanymynech, who is 83 years of age, started as a boy aged 10 to work for Joseph Powell, rope and twine manufacturer, of Roodee Ropery, Chester, who with his sons carried on business at Llanymynech. Other ropemakers in the vicinity were McGurney's of Oswestry, Simister of Welshpool (rope-walk in present Smithfield) and Pilots of Newtown (rope-walk along railway embankment). There were others at Pant. In Shrewsbury were two rope manufacturers, Porter and Eldrid. Their rope-walk was in the present Smithfield, and they also had shops in the town where they carried on extensive business.

The first rope-walk in Llanymynech was in a meadow through which the old Llanfyllin railway line was later built, the Railway Company paying Powell compensation. The rope-walk was moved to a field adjoining the railway station, now the Llanymynech Playing Field, and along the rope-walk beautiful trees have been planted and seats placed for people to rest. The place is still known locally as the Rope-Walk. When Mr Jeffreys began work at the age of 10, his duties were to turn the handle. He sat on a stool and often fell asleep at his task. He worked from 7.00am until 7.00pm with very short intervals for meals. There was so much wear and strain on the handle of the wheel which he turned, that it often had to be replaced. A new handle would be the width or span of a man's wrist and it would wear down to the width of a man's finger. His wages were 1s 6d a week for the first two years, 2s a week for the next two years and 2s 6d for the following year. His wage for several years afterwards was 8s 6d a week. He had his indentures but not a real apprenticeship.

**Materials:** All materials during Mr Jeffreys' connection with rope-making here were bought from Liverpool, from the firm known as Arthur Goodwin & Brown, hemp merchants. The hemp came in bales of 4cwt. Some of the stuff was packed by hydraulic pressure and bound in iron-hoops. Others came plaited; often some of these had knots, which made the workers use strong language. Jeffreys maintains that Indians did it as a practical joke on workers, to make the white man cross. The material used was :-

(1) Jute hemp from China, also known as Chinese hemp. This hemp was only used for cheap work. It would swell in water or rain and become very brittle and snap easily; it was frequently used for making or repairing sacks etc.

(2) Italian hemp: These were 6-8ft high and had to be cut to size. This hemp would also swell in water but it became tough instead of brittle; it was no good as a line as it shortened and expanded in weather if used outdoors.

(3) Bombay hemp was the correct length for working and was used for general purposes.

(4) Russian hemp, or green hemp, was the best hemp used. Ropes made from Russian hemp would never give way until worn out, providing they were given reasonable care. Ropes made from Russian hemp are known to have lasted from 36-40 years' hard wear.

Mr. Jeffreys contends that ropes should be cared for as any other farm implement. After use, they should be hung up on pegs to dry, then packed up and coiled carefully, fastened and hung up. Ropes should not be used other than for what they were intended, eg plough lines should not be used to fasten sticks, etc where the chaffing wears away the strands.

**Supply and Demand:** There was a steady and regular demand for all kinds of rope and twine. Workers were often engaged all night before fairs, especially the horse fairs of the district. The work was sold to shops, saddlers, and farmers in the surrounding country. Jeffreys claims that Powell's ropes were renowned for their quality. The kinds of ropes made were : -

Plough Reins or Scotch Lines

Halters

Whipcord for Gig Whips

Canal Boat Whip

Bed Cords and Bed Lacing

Tar Cord for Thatching

Pump Ropes

Bell Ropes

Clock Ropes

Windlass

Penny Cords

Hatter's Cord for Making Box Hats.

Jeffreys, among other rope workers, went to Manchester to see the Exhibition in 1883, where they saw a new composition for making box hats, which was quickly adopted for hat-making, and which ousted the hatter's cord.

**Process:** An apron was worn called a brat (this is the Welsh name for pinafore) and the hemp was wound round the waist. All hemp had to be dressed because there was wood, dust and lint in it. Lint was sometimes called dowl. It dropped to the ground, as also in weaving, and so economical were they that often this dowl was used to weave coarse stuff, but there was no strength in it and it was only used for repairs. Most of the rope work was finished indoors. Advantage was taken of fine weather to do outdoor work, so that the finishing could be done indoors if the weather should be wet. Paste was made from Irish moss and this was smeared on the ropes to get a smooth surface and to keep the fibre down. Work which was generally reserved for wet weather was the repairing and splicing of ropes. Rope-workers usually went around the farms to do this work. A trick usually tried on rope-makers was to ask them to splice one rope made by a left-handed man and another of the usual right-handed type. Unless a man was very proficient at his work, he would easily fall victim to the trick played upon him, much to the amusement of the company gathered together at the tavern.

This is a rough estimate of prices ruling about 40 years ago :-

	<b>Wholesale</b>	<b>Retail</b>
Halters	4d	6d
Better Quality Halters	8d	1/-
Halter for Wild Horses	1/-	1/3d
Plough Lines (per pair)	1/5d	2/-

Waggon ropes were 1/- each, Pump Ropes about 15/- according to size and Timber Ropes for felling trees were sometimes so enormous as to cost £2 5s od.

The length of ropes varied but there was a standard size, eg cart ropes were 24 yards, waggon ropes 36 yards, one ties 11-12 yards. Very fine twine was made for packing tea parcels in the shops and also to make nets, called snoods, for women's hair.

Long ago the Llanymynech district was an important hemp and flax growing area, as the soil and climatic conditions were favourable for these plants. The following are excerpts from a Terrier for 1686 :-

"Differences arise between Rector and parishioners concerning the Hemp garden, Herbs and Orchards."

"Every householder shall pay a penny every year, provided that they sow Hemp where corn usually was sowed and pay tithe thereof in kind."

The last record of a hemp garden in the district was at Llwyntidman Farm in the early 1800s.