

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Jennie Vere, Lopham Linen

Jennie Vere gave a very interesting presentation to the November meeting of the Heritage Circle about Lopham linen. She passed to the audience examples of linen and damask produced in the villages to illustrate her talk.

Lopham linen was made from fibres taken from the stem of *cannabis sativa*, a form of hemp. The plant was so important to the economy of England in the 16th Century that Elizabeth I decreed that larger landowners would be fined if they did not grow at least a rood of it on their estate. Hemp had originated in China about 4,000 years ago and was used for rope making but the variety of hemp grown in the Lophams was of a finer quality and could be woven into cloth.

The fibrous stem of the hemp plant grows to 8 -12 feet and was common in the Waveney Valley in the 18th and 19th Centuries but was particularly abundant in the Lophams because of its damp environment. It was planted in April or May and was ready for harvest in October. Then it was soaked to separate the fibres from the rest of the stem. In North Lopham, the village pond, the Letchmere, was used. It was then processed like cotton. It was carded to ensure the fibres were parallel, before being spun into threads and woven into cloth. The men did the heavy work while the women did the spinning and weaving. It was a successful cottage industry. Families made coarse linen for their own use but the surplus or better quality cloth at markets, such as at Diss.

The brothers William and Thomas Buckenham were prominent linen producers in South and North Lopham. They set up factories in the two villages and they were well established by 1840. The weaving shed of Thomas which is now a private residence, Octavia House, made banqueting cloths 4 feet wide and up to 80 feet long. The quality of the linen woven by Thomas Buckenham was very high and he gained a Royal Warrant from Queen Victoria for the provision of linen to the royal household. He developed his factory further by purchasing jacquard looms from James Strachan, a Scot. This allowed him to make damask, a very fine linen. The tableware produced for the royal household has beautiful patterns woven into the fabric. The use of starch made from the flesh of conkers made the cloth shine.

After Thomas Buckenham died, his wife, Georgina, continued to ensure the success of the company. She had a house in Berners Street, London where she lived for part of the year. She was able to invite ladies-in-waiting to tea and show them her latest products. They visited her because it was not a shop.

Unfortunately, by the 1920s the Buckenhams and other linen making families in the Lophams had ceased production. They could not compete with the cheap cotton made in Lancashire. Their costs were too high as they had little access to the railways. Similarly, young men who left the villages for war or to seek a different way of life did not return to work in the industry. The manual work of linen production was too hard and noxious.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday 14 December at Rickinghall Village Hall when Stuart Bowell will give a talk about *The History of Advertising*. Visitors are welcome. Further information is available at www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy