



Ropemaking in Ipswich

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Des Pawson MBE

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The Rope Maker

Rope is an essential requirement, both on land and water. Cordage in all its forms has been made for thousands of years, indeed it can be considered to be one of the building blocks of civilization. There is no doubt that even the earliest inhabitants of Ipswich would have had the need for, and the ability to make, some form of cordage.

Perhaps the earliest hard evidence that indicates possible ropemaking came to light with the excavations at Bridge Street and the 1981/82 detailed examination of micro fossils preserved in the water-logged deposits in the 12th and 13th century levels. These revealed an abundance of hemp fruits, showing evidence of the process of retting at this time. This may have been for fabric

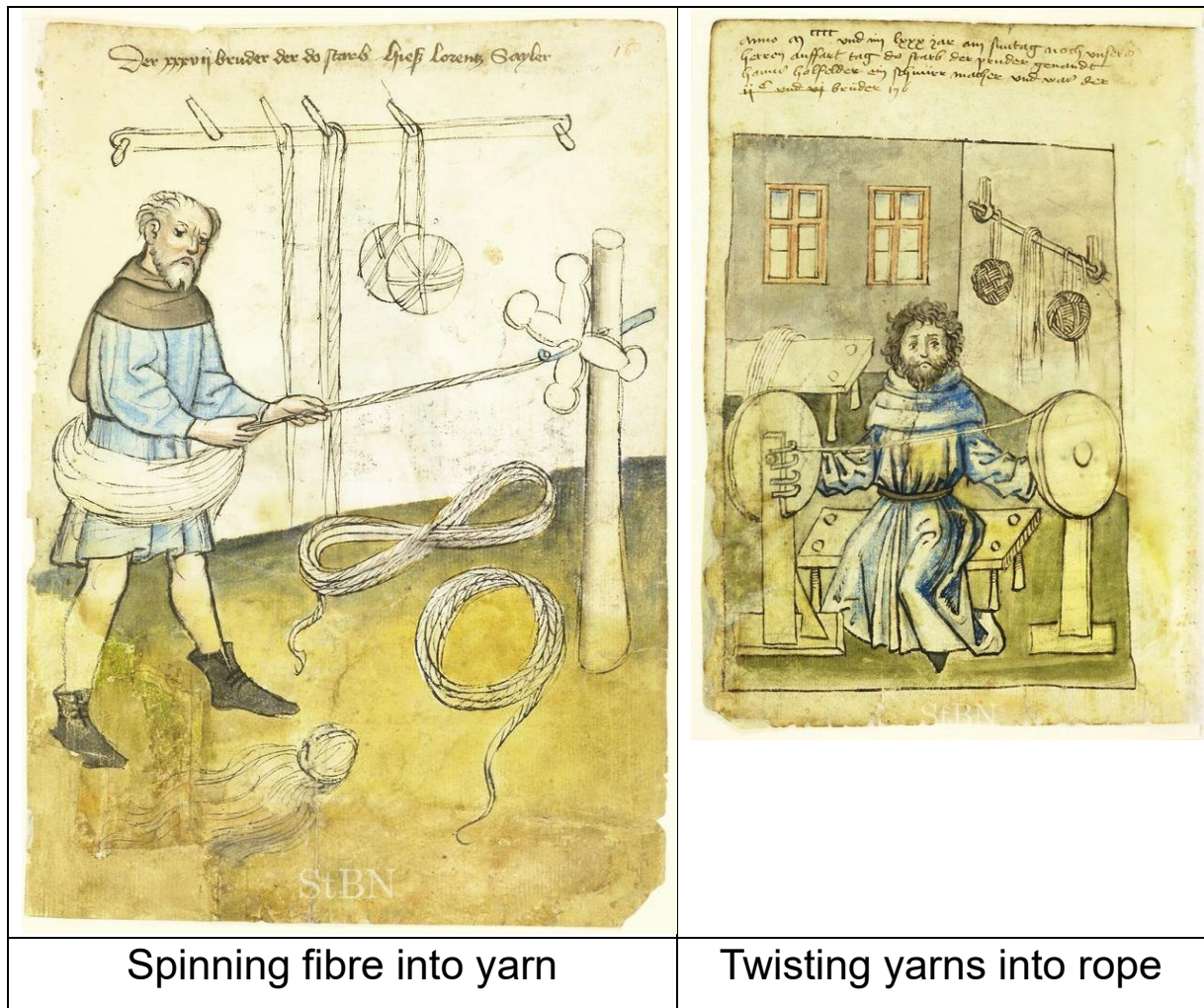
production, but could certainly have been for rope-making. Whilst hemp was by then just becoming the main source of fibre for rope-making, the inner part of the bark of the Small Leaf Lime Tree (*Tilia Cordata*) is also likely to have been used. There is a very ancient coppiced small leaf lime tree in Spring Wood, which could be evidence of use of lime bast for cordage. Hemp was grown in East Anglia and processed right up until the early 19th century².

For hundreds of years Ipswich ropemakers would have supplied the needs of ships, industry and agriculture. Ropemakers were frequently associated with sail-making and sack-making, sometimes carrying out both of these trades.

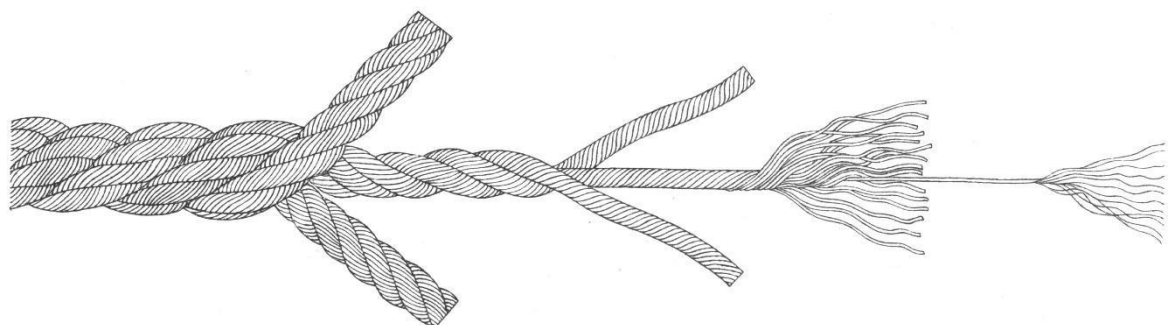
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|---|---|
| <p>Ich bin ain schalk ond och ain ludez- vnd wirt zemen flachs ond kuder- vnd han es mit hanf über zogen. Da mit han ich die lüt betrogen</p> | <p>An early representation of a German ropemaker 1460-1480 making cordage from either lime bast or hemp fibre. An Ipswich ropemaker would look much the same.</p> |
| | <p>Twine from a medieval wattle & daub wall in an Essex house.</p> |

The very first actual ropemaker that we can identify lived in Ipswich circa 1464. He was **Piers or Peter the ropemaker** who provided ropes for outfitting the ship *BARBARA* in Ipswich prior to a trip to Bordeaux. The household books of Sir John Howard [of Tendering Hall, Stoke by Nayland] quote rope being supplied by **Piers Roper** of Ipswich and **Peter Roper** of Ipswich, probably the same person, but certainly Ipswich ropemakers.

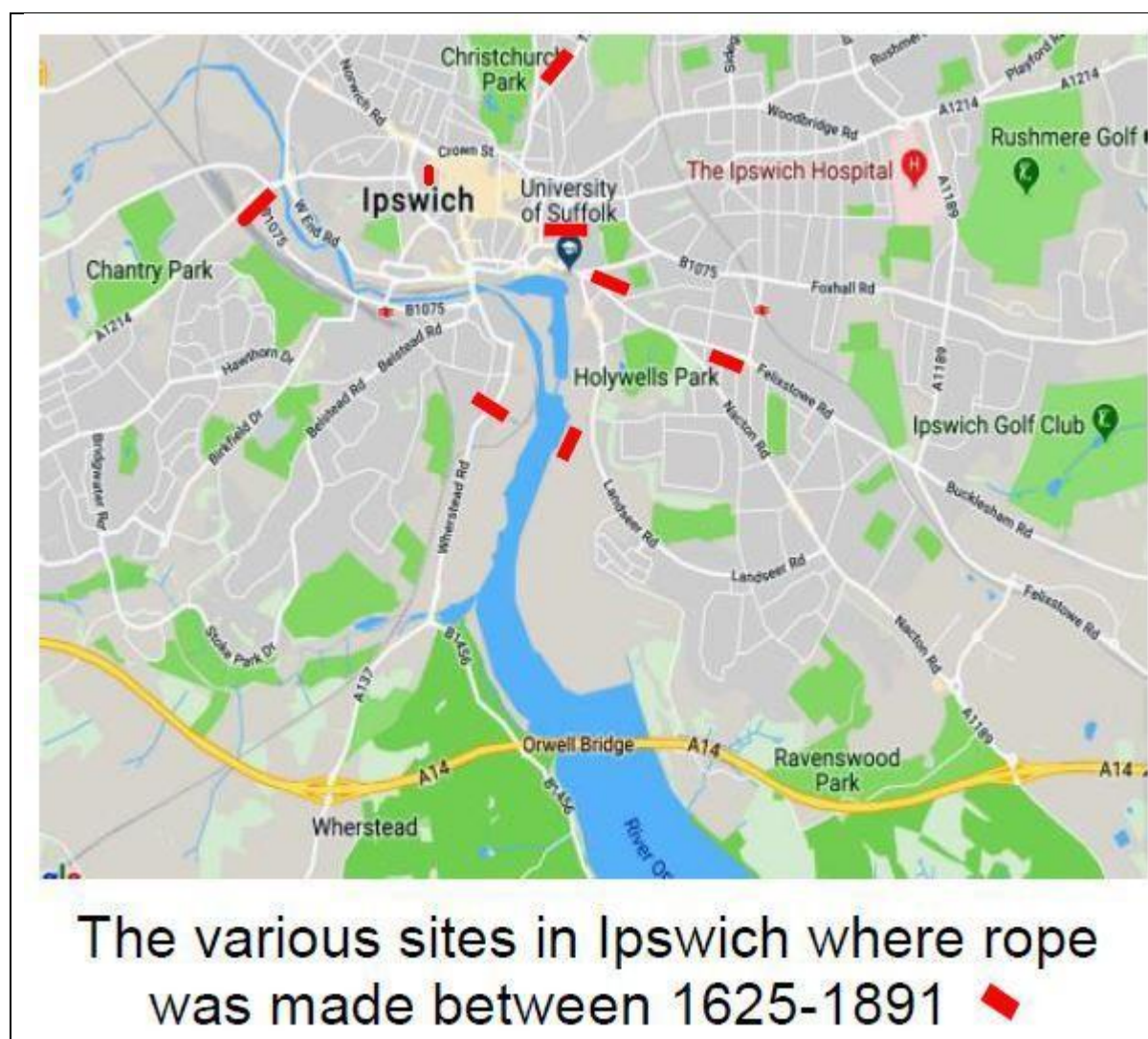
The Suffolk Record Office has the will dated 1594, made out by **Christopher Whatwhett**, ropemaker, of Ipswich³, another early Ipswich ropemaker.



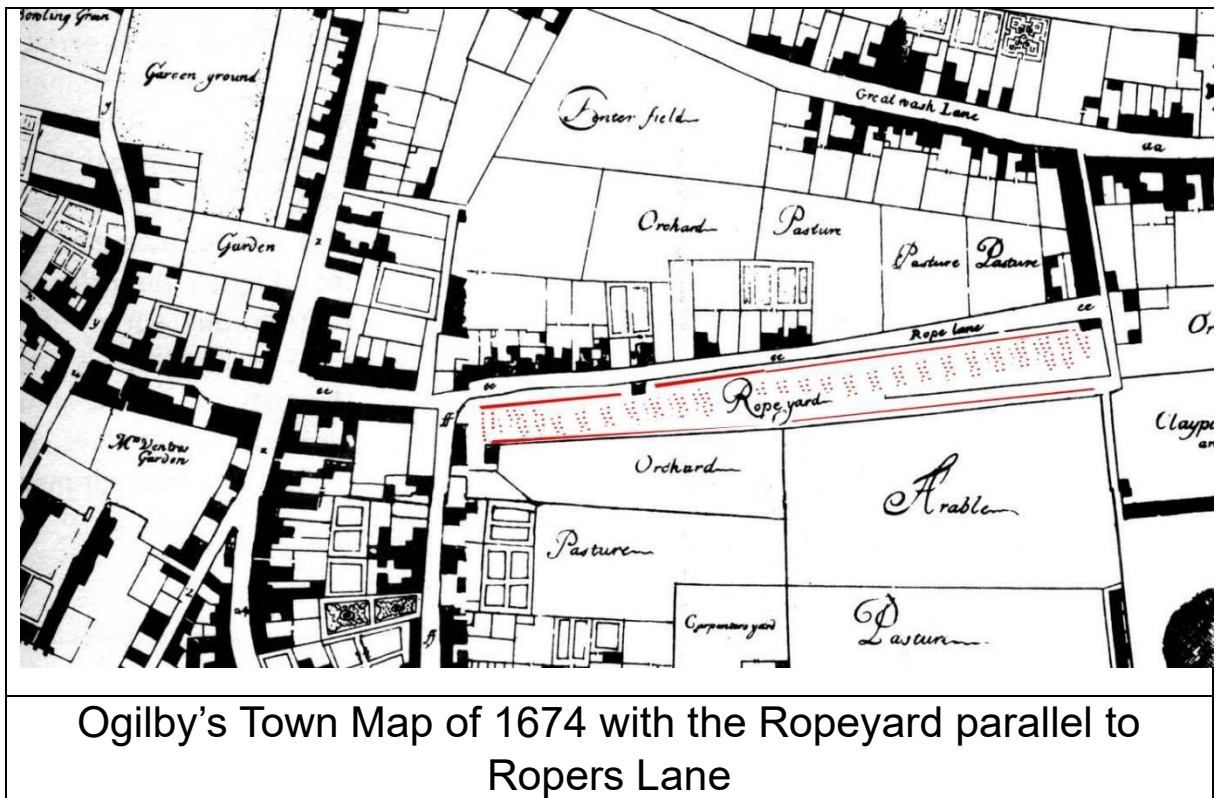
A ropewalk is the long narrow place where the ropemaker spins fibre into yarns and makes his ropes by walking back and forth twisting the yarns into strands and then strands into rope and ropes into cable.



Over the centuries there have been at least 8 ropewalks, or places that rope was made, in various parts of Ipswich.



Everyone in Ipswich is aware of there once being a ropewalk where the road bearing that name is today. In actual fact today's "Ropewalk" follows the path of what was originally "Ropers Lane", The walk was actually parallel, but to the river side, of Ropers Lane, as is clearly seen in Ogilby's Town Map of 1674. It was the biggest and oldest ropewalk in Ipswich and was operating from 1625 – 1798, with a small part still being used until 1818. At its peak it was about 300 yards long.

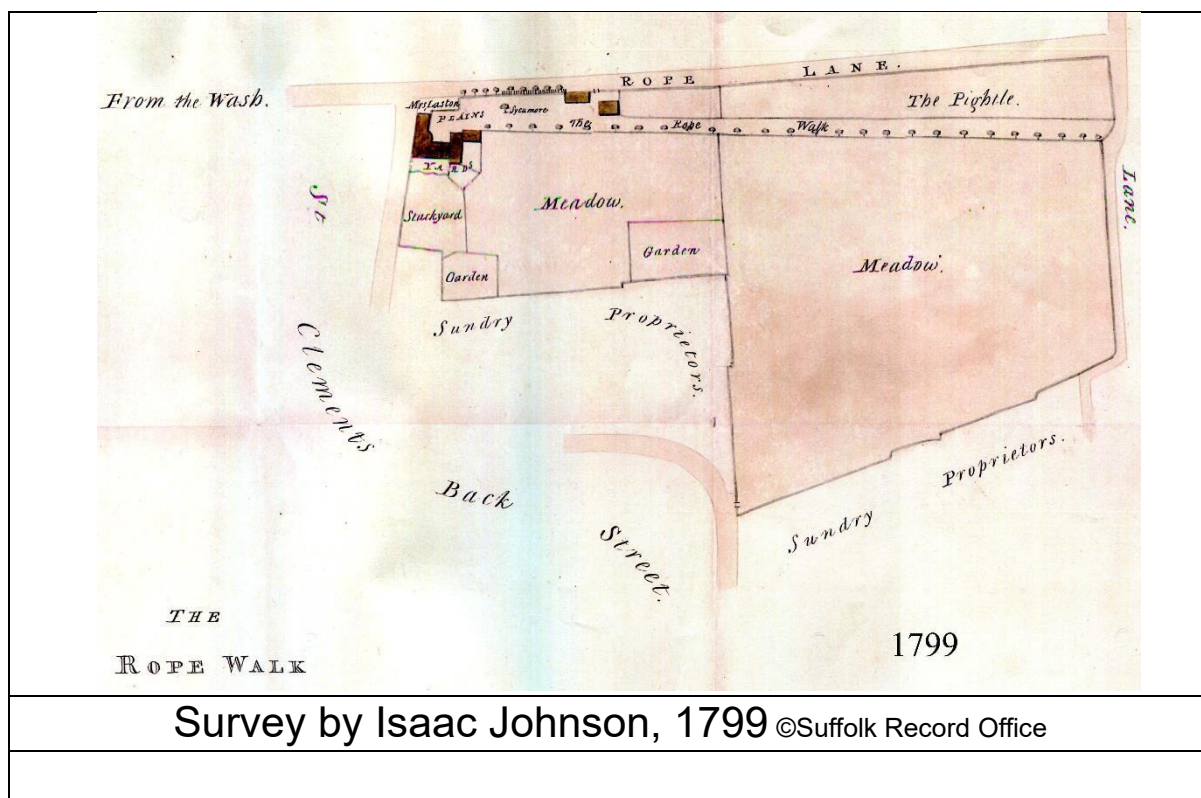


In 1625 **Thomas Gallant** was given the use of “Ropers Lane” for rope-making at an annual rent of 10 shillings⁴. It is possible that the land was already being used for rope-making. Over the years a number of men can be associated with this ropewalk.

The last ropemaker to occupy the whole of the site was **Robert Turner**, who was there in the decade 1788-1798.⁵ It was Turner’s death that seems to have prompted the owners of the site, **John Forsett**, a plumber and ropemaker, who had his premises on Fore Street, and **William Smart**, ropemaker, of Key Street, to sell off parts of the site. In July 1799 Forsett and Smart had a survey drawn up by the famous Suffolk Surveyor Isaac Johnson, which shows the walk itself between a long avenue of sycamore trees, with workshops, yarn house, stackyard and tar shed depicted; a site of over seven acres, which included meadows and gardens.⁶

Shortly after that, in March 1800, there was a fire that destroyed the Thread House, probably where the yarn was tarred, as the belief was that the fire started when a lighted stick fell into a copper of boiling tar⁷.

When **John Forsett** died in 1818, his will suggests that the western end, where the sheds and stackyard were, was still being used for rope-making, probably by **Jonathan Cook**, who occupied the “Cow and Pail” inn opposite, on the north side of “Rope Lane” and who, with **Samuel Cook** his son?, born about 1796, took **Henry Clemence**, a poor child of St. Mary Key, Ipswich, to be an apprentice in May 1826⁸. He appears in the 1841 census as *Rope Spinner*, but in 1851 he was a *Coal Porter* living with his sister. On the 11th of September 1830, **Samuel Cook** took **Eliza Clark**, aged at least 13, maintained in the Poor House at Tattingstone and settled in Burstall, to be bound apprentice⁹. **Samuel Cook** was listed as a *Ropemaker* in 1841 and 1851, but by the 1861 census **Samuel Cook** was a pauper living in Ipswich District Union Workhouse.



In the 1830 Directory, although there are five ropemakers listed in the parish in Pigot’s Directory, none of them had addresses on “Rope Lane”. John Schülen the potter had taken over the “Cow and Pail” inn from **Jonathan Cook**. Ropemaking had probably ceased on the site¹⁰.

Ogilby’s 1674 map also shows a further 2 ropeyards [another name for a ropewalk], one at the bottom of Bishops Hill and

another down-river, near to where the Brewery was. This walk was still in use in 1805 and perhaps even later. It is not possible to say who worked these “Walks”, but it could have been a **Robert Harrison**, ropemaker, who became the owner or tenant of lands etc. in St Clement's parish in 1698¹¹, or **John Weyman**, ropemaker, of St Clements, who in 1751 paid a bond to support a child born out of wedlock¹².

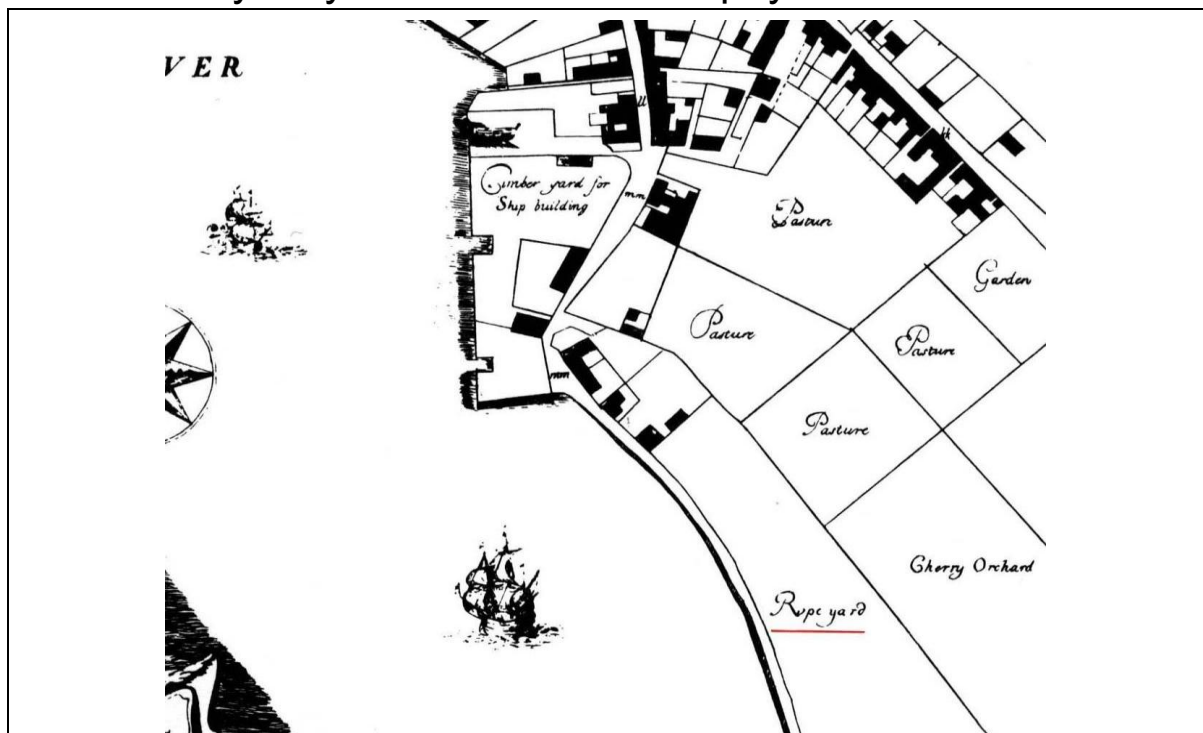


Ogilby's 1674 shows a ropeyard at the bottom of Bishops Hill



A watercolour in the Ipswich Museum Collection, with the title of *Ropewalk St Clements* by George Frost (1744-1821), sadly shows no sign of the walk or equipment, but the ship being built in the background suggests that it is the site of the ropewalk at the bottom of Bishops Hill. ©Colchester & Ipswich Museum Service

There were three generations, all named **Robert Small**, whose marriage bonds, dated 1664¹³, 1736¹⁴, &1760¹⁵, associate them with St Clements. All describe themselves as *ropemaker*. A 1790 Suffolk Poll book has a Robert Small, Wicks Bishop [Wix Bishop being the description of the area down river towards the Brewery], so this family may have worked the roperyard there.

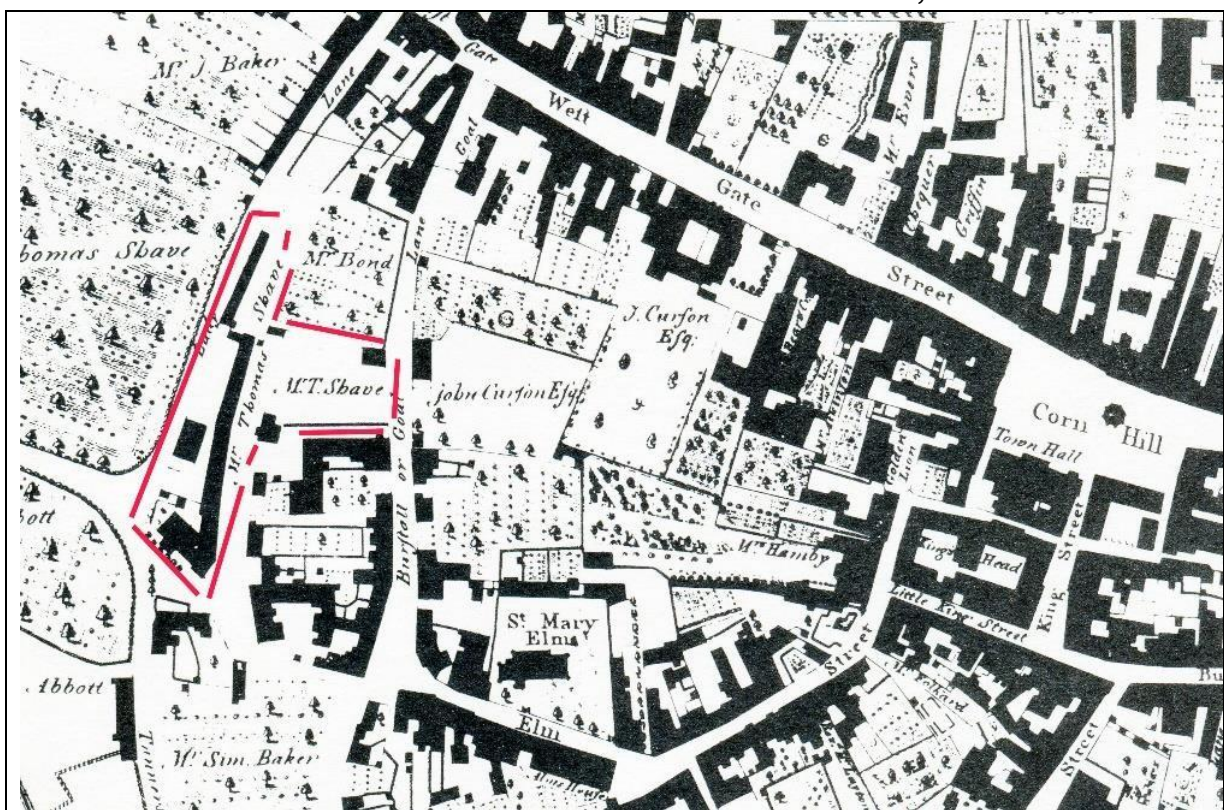


Ogilby's 1674 map, showing a roperyard further down-river, near to the site of the Brewery.



This photo of a Dutch ropewalk from 1937 could perhaps be the sort of thing to have been seen there¹⁶.

A further site that rope, or at least twine or cord, was made appears in *The Ipswich Journal*, 1820; which offered *The Sack and Cord Manufactory, in the Parish of St Mary Elms*, for let on lease, with the statement that it was *one of the oldest established concerns in the kingdom having being established for over one hundred years*.¹⁷ This would take it back to the 1720's or 30's, but there is no knowing whether this was as a sack manufactory or cord manufactory, nor can it be certain if the premises were just a building or partly an outdoor "Walk". The Pennington map of 1798 labels areas around St Mary Elms church as being owned or used by Thomas Shave. Holden's Triennial Directory of 1811 listed **Thomas Shave** as *Sack and Cord Manufacturer, Elms*¹⁸.



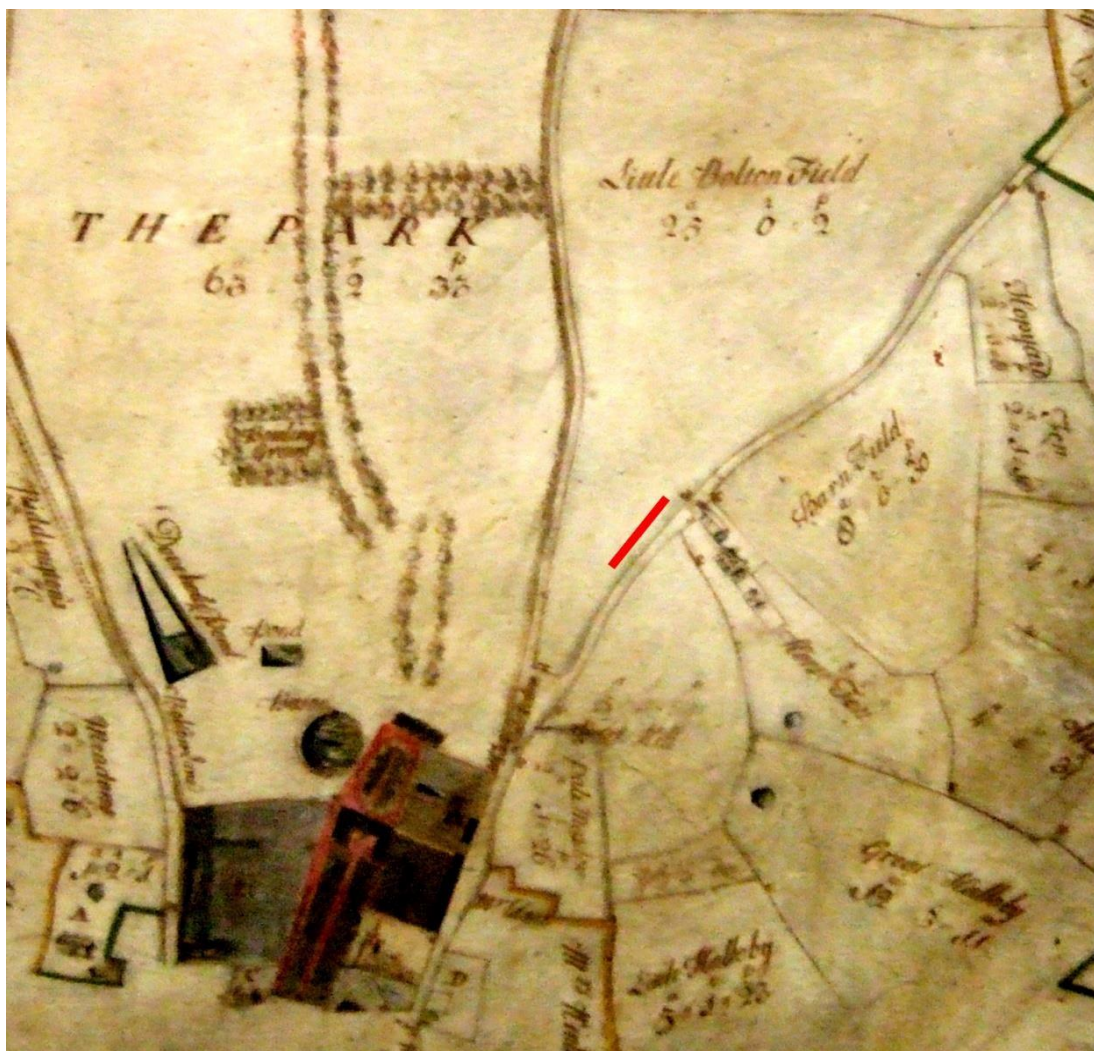
The area and buildings which are assigned to Thomas Shave on the Pennington map of 1778

It is likely that **George Brown** may well have been the person who took over the manufactory, or certainly worked at these premises, as in Pigots Directory of 1823 he is given as a *ropemaker*, St Mary Elms. This appears to be the last evidence of ropemaking in the parish of St Mary Elms.

After the “Ropers Lane” walk closed down and was built on, there was still the need for rope in the town. Whites Directory for Suffolk 1844¹⁹ lists 5 ropemakers:-

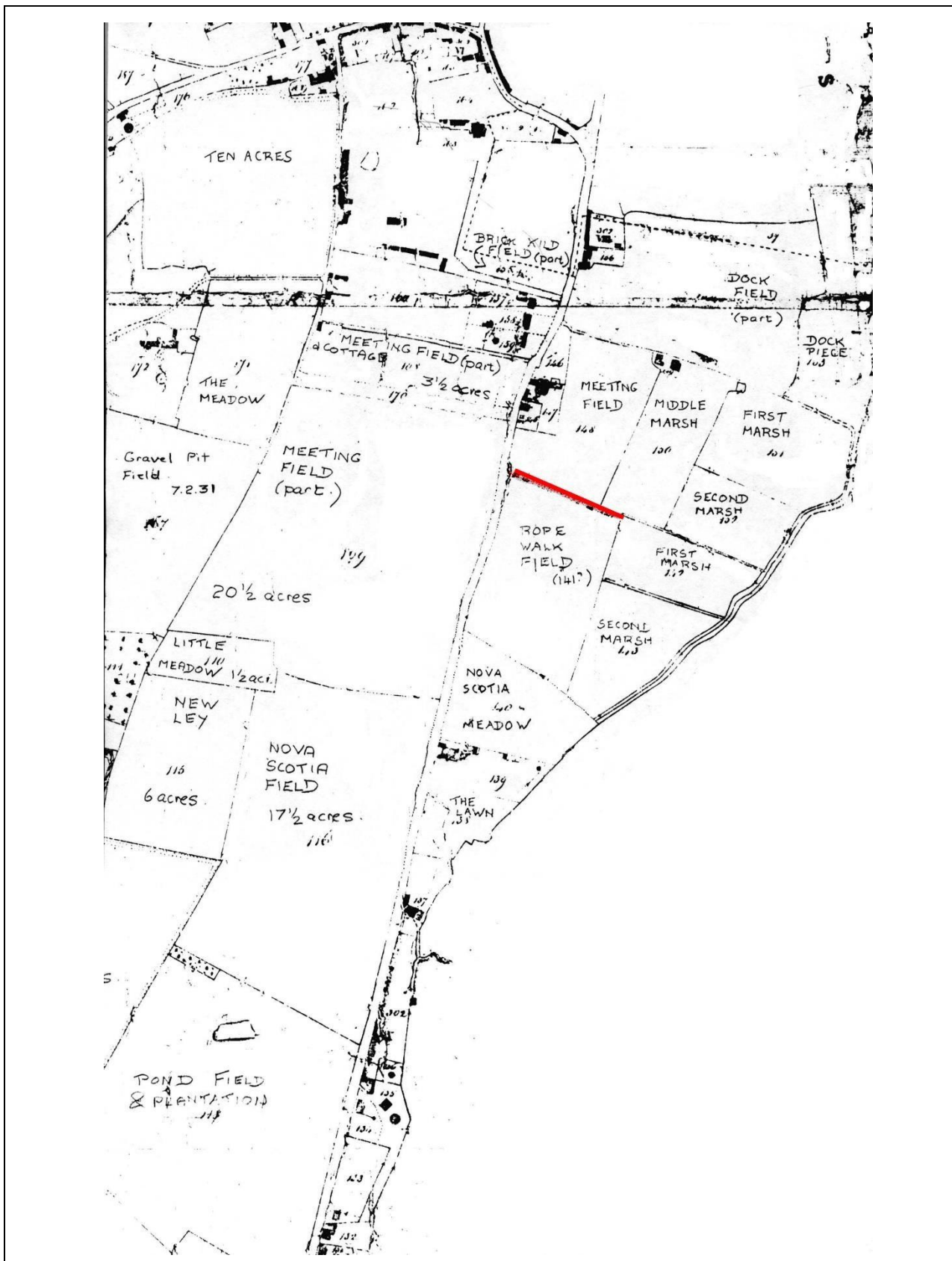
Rands Edmund, Bridge Street, Rands Emanuel, Fore Street, Rands Nathaniel , Quay Street, Runting James , Buttermarket [also sack-maker], Woods, James , Norwich Road.

Where they made their rope may not have been where their places of business are recorded in the directories. This is clearly demonstrated by Emanuel Rands, whose directory listing has him at Fore Street, yet in October 1847 he had a watch taken from his “Rope Manufactory in Little Bolton”, probably located somewhere near “Little Bolton Field” in the vicinity of the presentday junction of “Bolton Lane” with “Tuddenham Road” and “Constable Road”.²⁰



Probable site of Nathaniel Rands Rope Manufactory, Little Bolton.

The Tithe Map of St Mary Stoke from 1839 shows that Nathaniel Rand had a ropewalk at right angles to the Wherstead Road, although his place of business in the Directories is given as Quay Street.



Nathaniel Rand's Ropewalk off Wherstead Road ©Over Stoke History Group

The Rands Family was a multi-stranded family of ropemakers, many of the family having the Christian name **Emanuel**²¹. The first Ropemaker surfaces in 1769, the son of an Emanuel, a bricklayer. As the years go by, there are many more Emanuels, sometimes with two in the same generation and almost the same age, but from differing branches of the family. This makes it very hard to work out exactly who is who and may explain, for example, an 1844 Trade Directory entry, giving as *Ropemakers Emanuel Rands and Edmund Rands*, when there is no trace of an Edmund in the census, just lots of Emanuels. Later generations made sack and cloth manufacturing their trade. There appear to be inter-family disputes after the death of Emanuel Snr. in November 1863, as can be seen by court cases and various adverts in the Ipswich Journal in 1864, with various branches of the family setting up in competition with one another. These businesses do not last that long and we find that **Josiah Rands**, son of the late Emanuel, appears to manage to run a business for a while before joining up with **George Jeckell** in 1869, to form **J Rands & Jeckell**. There continued to be **Rands** involved in the sacks, covers, rickcloth and later tents businesses, and **J Rands & Jeckell** traded right up until the 1980s.

The Ipswich Journal Saturday, February 6, 1864

NOTICE.

Ipswich, February 5, 1864.

E. RANDS

HAVING purchased the whole of the *EXTENSIVE STOCK IN TRADE and GOODWILL* of the Business, for so many years carried on by his Father, the late *Mr. EMANUEL RANDS*, respectfully solicits a continuance of the patronage so long accorded to him; and begs to assure his Friends and the Public that every attention shall be given, with reference to *Quality, Price, and Promptitude*, to all orders with which he may be favoured.

ADDRESS:

**26, GREAT COLMAN STREET,
IPSWICH.**

**SACK & CLOTH MANUFACTORY,
48, Upper Brook Street, Ipswich.**

W. & G. RANDS

TAKE the earliest opportunity of returning their sincere thanks for the large amount of patronage bestowed upon their late Father, and in succeeding to the BUSINESS, beg respectfully to state that having been connected with the same for many years, they are enabled to execute all orders with which they may be favoured, with the greatest despatch, and at the lowest possible prices.

This BUSINESS being carried on for the equal benefit of the family, please to note the above address, as they have no connection with E. Rands, of Great Colman Street.

Ipswich, February 5, 1864.

The Ipswich Journal Saturday, May 1, 1869

**SACK AND CLOTH FACTORY,
7, St. HELEN'S, IPSWICH.**

May 1st, 1869.

JOSIAH RANDS,

IN returning thanks to Merchants, Millers, Farmers, and others for the liberal support he has received since his commencement in business, begs to inform them he has taken *Mr. GEORGE JECKELL*, Corn and Seed Merchant, of Ipswich, as Partner, and the business in future will be carried on, conjointly with the Corn and Seed Trade, under the firm and style of

J. RANDS & JECKELL,

who trust, by united effort, unremitting attention, and amalgamation of the two businesses, to ensure an increased measure of support.

NOTE.—Offices, and Sack and Cloth Factory, 7, St. Helen's. Granaries, New Street, St. Clement's.

Ipswich, May 1st, 1869.

GEORGE JECKELL

BECS to express his thanks to Merchants, Millers, Farmers, and others for the confidence he has enjoyed at their hands since he has been in the Corn and Seed Trade, and to inform them he has this day entered into Partnership with *Mr. JOSIAH RANDS*, Sack and Cloth Manufacturer, of 7, St. Helen's, Ipswich, and that the Business in future will be carried on under the firm and style of

J. RANDS & JECKELL,

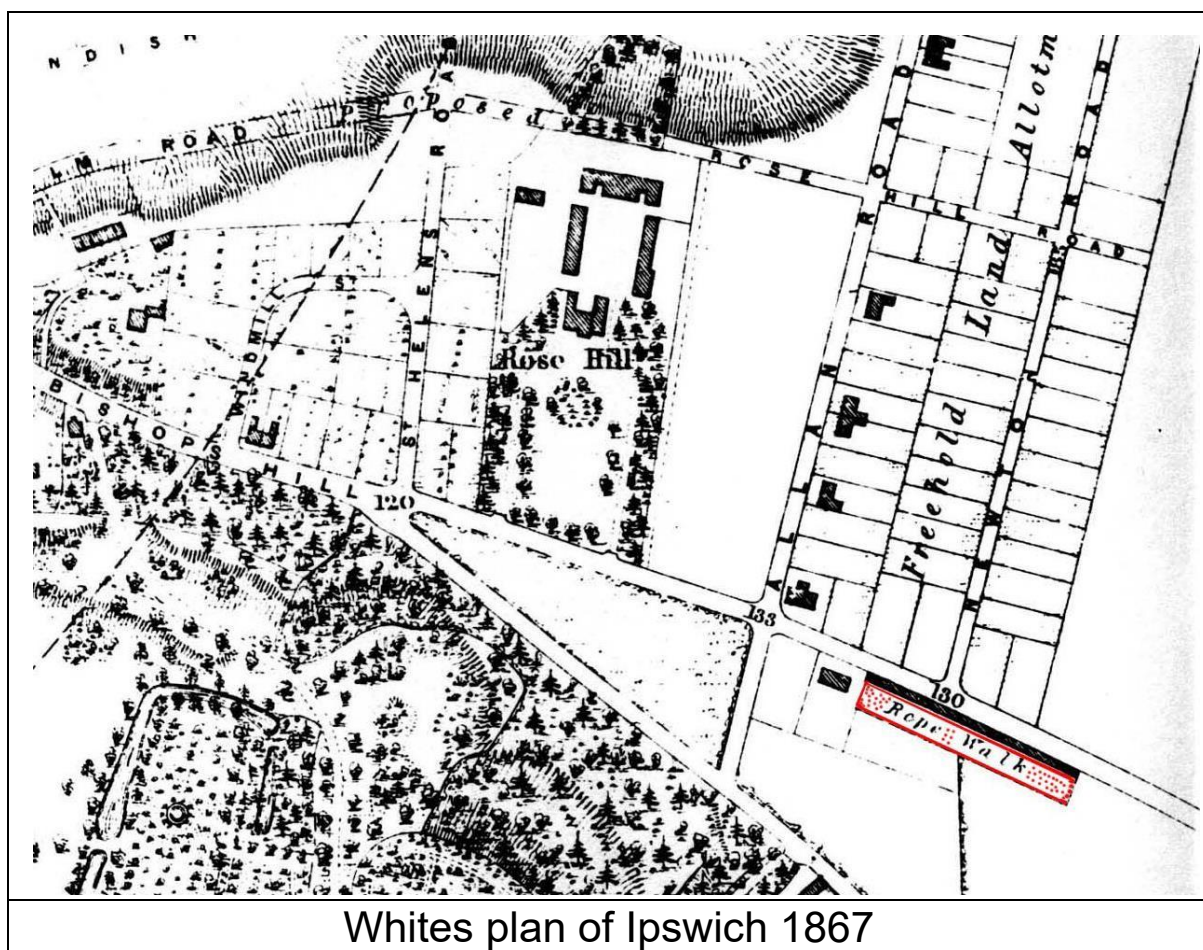
Corn Merchants and Sack and Cloth Manufacturers, who trust, by strict personal attention, to merit their continued support.

NOTE.—Granaries, New Street, St. Clement's. Offices, and Sack and Cloth Factory, 7, St. Helen's.

The pattern of Ropewalks moving out to the edge of a town as the town expands is repeated countrywide.

Where the other 1844 ropemakers made their rope, or perhaps bought in rope for sale, cannot be confirmed. However, operating from at least 1867, maybe earlier, until 1890, there was a ropewalk on Felixstowe Road, just past the end of Alan Road, on the right hand side going out of town. From the Ordnance Survey map of 1882, it can be seen that the Walk was about 500 feet long by 15 feet wide.

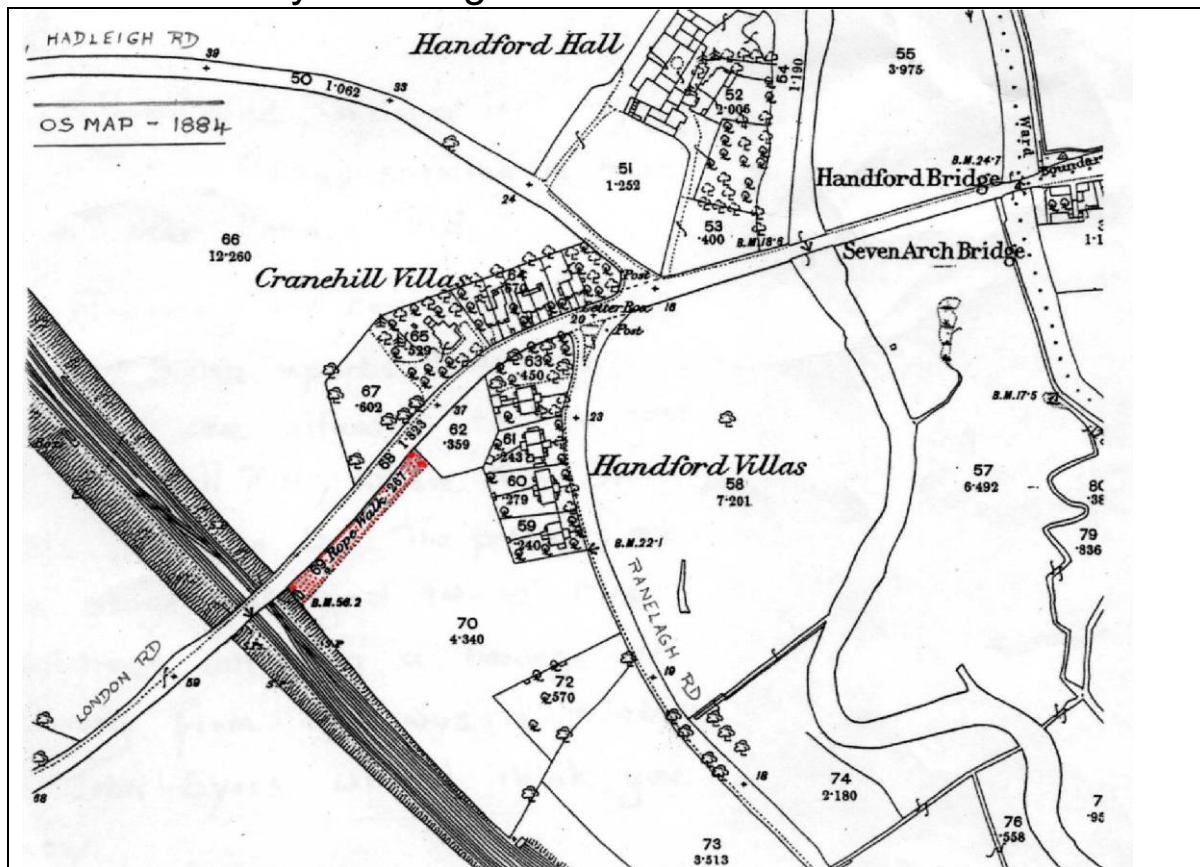
It was firstly worked by **Walter Cuckow**, part of the Cuckow sailmakers and ship-owning family. The 1871 census has **Walter Cuckow, age 38, Unmarried, Sailmaker and Ropemaker employing 6 men and 3 boys.** The Walk was later taken over by one of his men, **George Finney.**



George Finney [or Finny] was the illegitimate son of Elizabeth Finney, christened in St Lawrence, Ipswich in 1824. For the 1851 census, George was living at 90 Handford Road with his mother, a pauper, and was a *Ropemaker*, perhaps another poor boy who

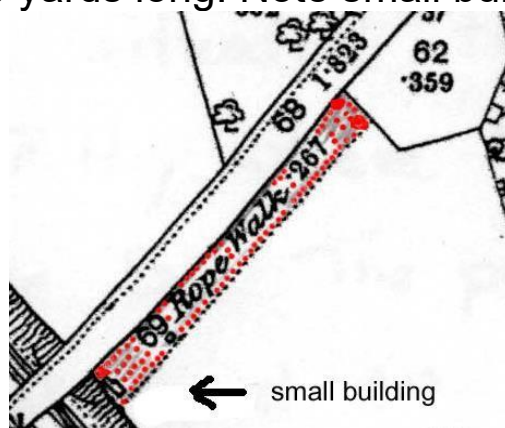
was apprenticed ropemaker in the same way as **Henry Clemence** and **Eliza Clark** were to the **Cook** Family. In 1861 he was living with his brother. In 1871 he was living at the ropewalk in Felixstowe Road, that belonged to Walter Cuckow, and by 1890 he was trading at the same place in his own name. He died there 17th of June 1894, aged 69.

About the same time from the ordnance survey map of 1884 there was another ropewalk at the bottom of Crane Hill. The Walk was about 110-120 yards long.



Ropewalk, Crane Hill, London Road.

From the Ordnance Survey map of 1884. The Walk was about 110-120 yards long. Note small building one end.



The Walk had disappeared by 1904.

Who actually worked this Walk is not certain. However, apart from Cuckow with his walk on “Felixstowe Road”, there were just two other *Rope and Twine Makers* who were listed in the Stevens Ipswich Directory of 1885:- **G.W Holmes** of “Curriers Lane” and **Charles Taylor** of “Dogs Head Street”. Probably one of them was using this walk. Perhaps their actual ropemaker was Wm Rose, who was living at the time not far away in “Handford Cut” and gave his occupation as *Ropemaker*.

William Rose was born about 1822/3, and christened on 24th January 1823 in Woodbridge. Aged 28, in 1841, he is recorded as a twine spinner living in Woodbridge, so it is likely that he served an apprenticeship with one of the Woodbridge ropemakers. He moved to Hackney in East London and in 1851 is recorded as *Ropemaker*, living in a street amongst other ropemakers, twine spinners and travelling salesmen in the rope business. By the 1861 census he had moved to 31 Handford Cut and lived there, calling himself a *Twine Spinner*, and later *Rope Spinner* or *Ropemaker* and is last listed in 1884. It is possible that he would have worked on the ropewalk on Crane Hill, either on his own account or, more likely, supplying some of the rope traders in Ipswich, as he is not listed as a ropemaker in the trade sections of the various trade directories.

Over the years there are, from the records, brief glimpses of the kind of people and the kind of life led by ropemakers. Some are more businessmen, rather than actually working on the ropewalk itself. Sadly, quite a few finished their lives in the workhouse.

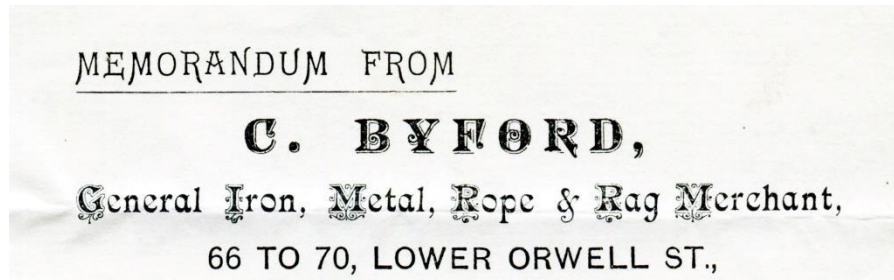
Browne (possible **William**) was a ropemaker from Nacton, who moved to Wivenhoe Cross (the outskirts of Wivenhoe) and set up a ropery there in 1770,²² which was devastated by a boiler explosion in 1855. The family business was bankrupted in 1872²³ when, interestingly enough, a **William Browne Jun.**, *Ropemaker*, had moved back to Ipswich from where he was living in Wivenhoe.

Charles Byford, born about 1832 in Bradfield, Essex, died 1929 in Ipswich. He was listed in the 1858 directory as a *Ropemaker*, yet in the 1861 census he is an *Inn Keeper and Rag Merchant*, and for the 1871 census he was a *Rag Merchant*. The 1874 directory listed him as a *Rope and Oakum*

Dealer, and a memo from him in 1894

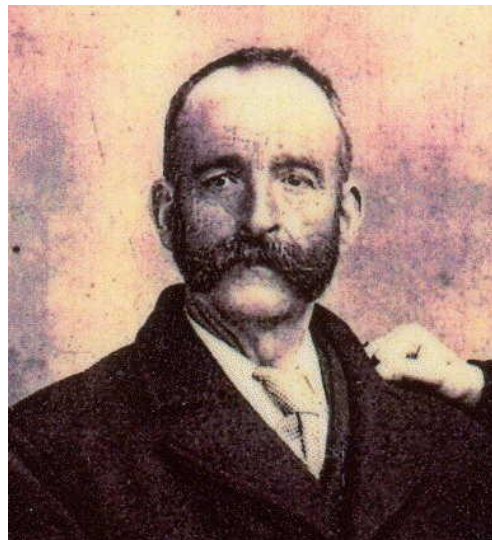
was headed

General Iron, Metal, Rope & Rag Merchant, perhaps, really, he was not much more than a scrap merchant.



John Downing, John Downing Jnr, Charles E Downing

John Downing, born about 1811, is listed in the 1841 census as a *Ropemaker*. He had sons, **William** born about 1841, died 1869, **John Jnr.**, born about 1843, died 1875, who are listed as *Ropemakers* in the 1861 census. Another son **Charles E Downing**, born 16th May 1852, died 1939, was apprenticed as a ropemaker when he was ten years old and he continued for



twelve years before travelling to Australia²⁴ and returning to Ipswich. In 1871 he was living with **George W Holmes**, a ropedealer, and was calling himself a *Rope-dealer*. In 1881 he was again trading in Ipswich as *Ropemaker and Fruiterer*.

Subsequently he moved to Framlingham where he traded as a *Rope Manufacturer*. He died in 1939 at Hitcham Almshouses, Framlingham.

John Downing Snr. cannot be found in the census of 1871; perhaps he too went to Australia, possibly with Charles, but John Snr. also returned to Ipswich, as he appears again as a *Ropemaker* in the 1881 census. He died 24th June 1891, in Ipswich Workhouse.

James Woods, born about 1781 appeared in the 1839 Pigot's Directory as *Ropemaker, Norwich Road* and as *Ropemaker* in the 1841 census. He was not found in 1851 census, but was entered as an *Almsman, formerly a Twine Spinner, aged 87*, in the 1861 census.

George W Holmes, born about 1832, the son of a Saxtead miller, started life as a miller and then, by the 1871 census, was set up as a *Rope-dealer* in Ipswich. He had young Charles E Downing living in his house, designated a *Rope-dealer*. **George W Holmes** continued to trade as a ropemaker or manufacturer and died in 1900.

Charles Taylor, born in Stowmarket, about 1851, went to London, worked as a warehouseman and then came to Ipswich, where by 1881 he had set up as a sack manufacturer, but is also in trade directories as a *Ropemaker*.

CHARLES TAYLOR,
Sack, Cloth, Rope, Twine, and Tarpaulin Manufacturer,
PUBLIC DECORATOR.
MARQUEES, TENTS, FLAGS, SACKS, RICK CLOTHS, &C., ON SALE OR HIRE.

Every Requisite for WEDDING BREAKFASTS, BAZAARS, CRICKET MATCHES, HORTICULTURAL,
AGRICULTURAL, and DOG SHOWS, POLITICAL MEETINGS, SOCIAL GATHERINGS, &c.

Marquees Decorated, Floored, Lighted, and Warmed.

46, OLD CATTLE MARKET, IPSWICH.
Telegraphic Address: "Charles Taylor, Ipswich."

John Giles, Jeremiah Giles, Frederick Giles

John Giles, born about 1800 in Ipswich, was a ropemaker in Woodbridge in 1841 and died in 1863. He had a relation, **Jeremiah Giles**, who worked for **Emanuel Rands** around 1836 (when he was accused of stealing a watch from his exemployer). John's son, **Frederick Giles**, born 24th February 1832 in Woodbridge, worked with, or for, his father in Woodbridge, but was in hospital in Ipswich in 1881 and subsequently, in 1891, became a *Labourer in a sack factory* and, in 1901, a *Rope Spinner's Labourer*.

The following are other Ipswich ropemakers about whom we know very little. Their names appear on marriage bonds, wills or other documents. Further research may bring more information. 1665 will of **Anthony Warner** of Ipswich ropemaker²⁵

1669 will of **Francis Searle/Searles** of Ipswich ropemaker²⁶

1690 will of **John Lambert** of Ipswich ropemaker²⁷

1673 marriage bond, **Richard Lockwood** of Ipswich ropemaker and Mary Ford ²⁸

1746 will of **Robert Garwood** of Ipswich ropemaker²⁹

1758 marriage bond **William Watson** singleman, ropemaker, St Clements and Sarah Bobbit singlewoman of St Stephens³⁰

1783 marriage bond **Samuel Philips Fenning** singleman ropemaker St Clements and Susanna Suter Singlewomen of St Peters³¹

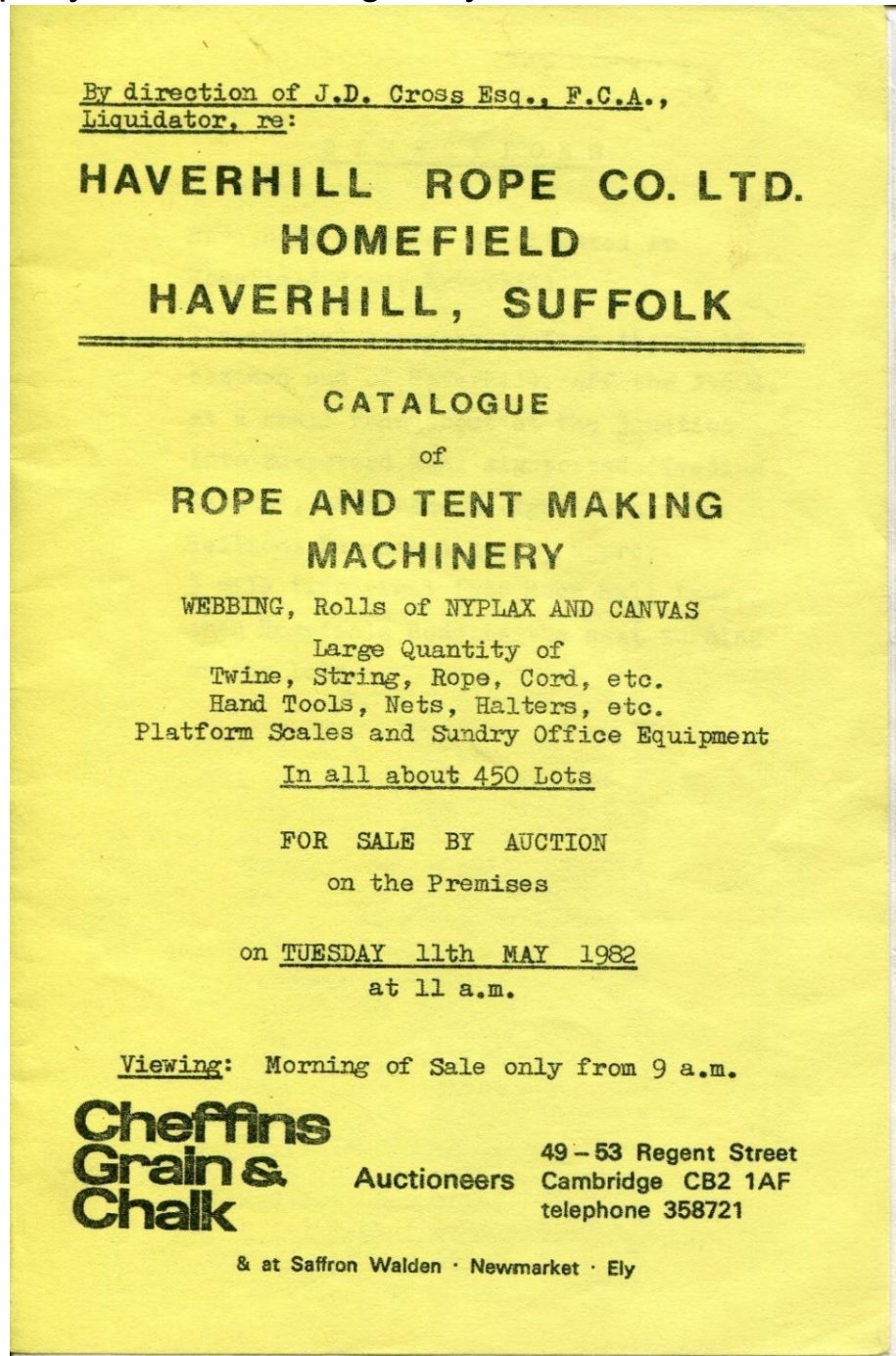
1789 marriage bond **Samuel Philips Fenning** ropemaker widower of Harwich and Sarah Orford singlewomen of St Clements to be married at St Clements³²

This looks like Samuel Philips Fenning's wife, Susanna, who died perhaps in childbirth, possibly at Harwich. With the easy river connection to Harwich, Samuel may have moved there for work, but kept up connections with Ipswich, and subsequently married Sarah Orford, from the parish in which he used to live.

1829; **John Brown** of St Mary Key ropemaker has a bastardy order made against him³³

To have a listing in a trade directory as a *Rope and Twine Maker* did not automatically mean that they made their own rope or employed others to make rope, they may have bought in some or all of their stock.

Whilst the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century saw more and more ropes being brought into Ipswich from the large industrial roperies in London and the north of England, with perhaps just animal halters being made locally. There was a small walk at Hadleigh up until just before the 2nd World War and the last remaining ropemaker in Suffolk, The Haverhill Rope, Twine and Sack Company, ceased trading early in 1982.



Catalogue Cover of the Bankruptcy Sale 11th May 1982

References etc:-

¹ Research is a collaborative venture.

Thanks for help from: Francis Beaumont, John Blatchly, Willem Bosma, John Collins, Jill Freestone, Frank Grace, Stuart Grimwade, David Jones, David Kindred, Bob Malster, Liz Pawson, Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich.

² EVANS, Nesta: *The East Anglian Linen Industry*, Gower Publishing Company, Aldershot, 1985

³ SRO IC/AA1/33/82

⁴ [calendar of patent rolls, 16 Elizabeth part xiv 375 quoted in *History of Ipswich* R Malster]

⁵ [SRO FB98/E3/5 St Clements Church wardens accounts 1788-98] as quoted in Frank Grace *Rags & Bones*

⁶ SRO HD 1208/1-3

⁷ *Ipswich Journal* 15th March 1800

⁸ SRO FB98/G3/61

⁹ SRO FB98/G3/90

¹⁰ The place of residency or business is not necessarily the place where the rope was made as is shown by Emanuel Rands and Nathaniel Rands having walks away from their place of business.

¹¹ Suffolk record office SROI X1/8/5.1

¹² Suffolk Record office FB93/G1/1/45

¹³ SRO FAA/23/1/9

¹⁴ SRO FAA/23/8/34

¹⁵ SRO FAA/23/17/231

¹⁶ Collection of 'Het Zuiderzeemuseum', Enkhuizen, the Netherlands.

¹⁷ *Ipswich Journal* 11th November 1820

¹⁸ *Holden's Treenial Directory* 1811

¹⁹ *Whites Directory for Suffolk* 1844

²⁰ *Ipswich Journal* October 23rd 1847

²¹ It was often the practice for the first born son to be given the name of his grandfather , hence 2 boys of a similar generation with the same name

²² Harvey Benham; *Last Stronghold of Sail*, page 54

²³ Ipswich Journal September 10th 1872

²⁴ Information on Ancestry.com from a family member

²⁵ SRO IC/AA1/95/131

²⁶ SRO IC/AA1/99/32

²⁷ SRO IC/AA1/120/121 ²⁸ SRO FAA/23/

²⁹ SRO IC/AA/175/95

³⁰ SRO IC/AA/175/95

³¹ SRO FAA/23/29/272

³² SRO FAA/23/32/180 where the name has been transcribed as Tennings

³³ SRO FB98/G4/20

Ipswich Maritime Trust

Registered Charity No. 286603



The Trust began life in 1982 at a time when the Wet Dock was in serious decline with very few vessels and many redundant historic buildings. Its aim was to find ways of bringing life back to the Wet Dock, and its success in this endeavour was largely achieved when its 'Sail Ipswich' event in 1997 drew over 35,000 people to the Waterfront over a single week-end. Today, the principal aim of the Trust is to bring to everyone's attention the astonishing maritime history of the Orwell and its Port, reaching back to before the 7th Century, enabling Ipswich to claim to be the oldest English town. We undertake a wide range of activities which includes holding a series of winter and spring talks on a maritime related theme, and running the Window Museum on Albion Wharf for which we are always keen to collect and display maritime artefacts.

More details on the Trust can be found at the IMT website www.ipswichmaritimetrust.org.uk

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Ipswich Maritime Trust.

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