

Lopen Flax Factory

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Below are two wonderful 1940s photos, recalling the once very important local flax industry.



Prior to 1939, the industry had all but died out in the UK but wartime shortages lead to a revival, of which the Lopen flax factory was part, and once again local farmers were encouraged to grow the crop. In the upper picture, 'workers' (especially posed) are seen pulling flax. They are, from left to right: Bill Callow (General Foreman of Lopen flax factory, Ida Parker and Doris Pippen. In the second picture, the flax is being inspected by, from left to right, Bill Callow, Lord de la Ware, Jeremy Jacobs (Manager of Lopen flax factory) and M Isaacs (Head of Directorate of Home Flax Production). Initial research suggests very little has been recorded about the factory and the work carried out there so it would be good to hear from anyone who can provide information, however brief. My own somewhat disjointed memories are as follows:

A fair number of Merriott people worked at Lopen and I recall a special bus, used to stop at Knapp (I grew up close by) to pick people up in the morning and drop them off again in the evening. At first the bus was a plain green one, probably government property; in later years it was Ernie Giles' Venture from Harp Road Garage, South Petherton.

Flax was grown by one or two local farmers, but in my memory not to any great extent. I can recall specific fields where it was grown.

The photo shows flax being pulled. This was the preferred harvesting method but was very labour intensive. During the war, casual labour was not readily available which may explain why I never saw flax being pulled. My memory is of it being cut by a mowing machine as used for cutting grass.

I can recall loads of flax being taken to the factory, possibly after lying in the fields for a few days as part of the 'retting' process, which softened the flax so that the fibres could be separated. Retting could also involve soaking the flax in streams, ponds or tanks.

I have no knowledge of what went on at the factory but I presume retting, 'scutching' and perhaps 'hecking' took place there. Scutching removed the coarse fibres; hecking combed the remaining fibres into long, fine strands, ready for spinning. A by-product of scutching and hecking is 'tow', the short fibres not considered suitable for spinning. I remember lorry loads of bales of what we referred to as 'tow', but what was more likely to be bales of perfectly good fibre, passed down through Broadway on an almost daily basis, possibly en route to Crewkerne station and to factories elsewhere in the country where it would be further processed.