

INTRODUCTION

For many years I have had an interest to compile a history of St Helena's flax industry which was given up in 1966, but meantime the years began slipping by to lessen my chances of getting first-hand information from those who had actually been employed in the industry.

Eventually when destiny provided me with the opportunity to come to St Helena for what was my fifth visit to the Island, I made this work my top priority. Not that I imagined anyone outside St Helena would be interested in such a history, but I felt sure the Islanders themselves would see it as a valuable reference work covering a long and vital phase of the Island's history; I say vital in the full sense, because in all the other long period during which the flax industry prevailed, there was no other industry whatsoever. Moreover since the industry was abandoned in 1966 the Island has never had another industry sufficiently viable to sustain it's economy.

It soon became obvious that nearly 30 years after the industry ceased, very little was known about the origins of the various old flax mills, and of course since that time another two new generations of Islanders have arrived on the scene. Even so, many of St Helena's highest peaks and valleys are still lathered with flax as a living symbol to remind all the inhabitants of the industry that was for a very long period so vital to the Island's economy.

It will be seen that the flax industry of St Helena occurred in two phases, the first in 1874 for only a few years, and the second from 1907 for about 60 years. During both these periods industry world wide was highly labour intensive with very low wages, thus keeping down production costs which in turn made the product competitive for marketing. This situation was even more rigid on St Helena which had no other industry, unless the provisioning of passing ships might be considered as such, but during the passage of time these had become very few in numbers. In fact since the buoyant period of Napoleon's captivity in 1815 until his death in 1821 there has never been any similar period of prosperity.

I was surprised to find only a limited number of Island men and women who had actually worked in the flax industry. This dearth of witnesses is understandable, as even the youngest of these were at least then in their fifties. Sadly there were no witnesses who had worked in the earliest years of the industry.

It is appropriate to include many other aspects of history that occurred on St Helena during the era of the flax industry, not the least of these being the rapid decline of all other farming activities, and as is so evident today, this

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PRELUDE TO THE FLAX INDUSTRY

The remote little Island of St. Helena was originally endowed with very little in the way of natural resources. Apart from some useful stands of forest which were depleted to the point of extinction during the first one hundred years of man's occupation, there was practically nothing else of any commercial value growing on the Island, and nor were there any minerals or precious stones that could supplement such a deficiency.

This did not matter for the first 150 years of occupation, as the Island's value lay in its strategic position for serving as a provisioning port for the East India Company's trading fleet. For that purpose it could always be relied upon to provide good quality fresh water, plus some useful fruit, vegetables, and other crops which were produced at that time with slave labour.

After the East India Company lost its trading monopoly and withdrew from St. Helena in 1834, the Island was taken over as a Crown Colony, but the loss of the Company's shipping activity was a blow from which it never recovered, and the British Government became painfully aware that they had inherited a long term economic liability. However it was to be the British colonial trading system that eventually provided the enterprise for establishing a flax industry on St. Helena.

The plant of which the leaves were to become the raw material for St. Helena's flax industry, has the scientific name of phormium tenax Forster and is native to New Zealand and Norfolk Island. It is found in both main Islands of New Zealand, but is more abundant in North Island. Although it is known as New Zealand flax and often termed hemp, phormium does not belong to the flax group of plants, but to the leaf fibre group of the family agave (Agavaceae). However the name "flax" has stuck to phormium for a long time right up to the present, and for that reason it is the name I will more generally use in this work.

In 1770 when Captain James Cook was on his voyages of discovery in the southern oceans, he and his botanist, Joseph Banks, were interested in how the Maoris of New Zealand used phormium fibre for clothes, fishing nets, baskets, and other articles. They described how the Maoris used a sharp-edged mussel shell to remove the bark of the leaf and expose the fibre which was then washed in running water, the scraping process repeated, and the separated fibres dried in the sun. This description basically still holds good for the modern process of using machinery to extract the fibre.

When the early European settlers in New Zealand saw the value of phormium they first began exporting the fibre to New South Wales (Australia)

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in 1815 and subsequently to England in 1830 for use in rope and paper making. The flax industry expanded in New Zealand and soon drew an interest from several overseas countries who were keen to establish their own flax industry, one of which was the small British colony of St. Helena.

In a letter to a local newspaper *The Advocate* (or St. Helena News) of 2nd December 1852, Mr Frederick Moss expounded his views in favour of growing New Zealand flax on St. Helena. He stated that New Zealand flax now growing wild on St. Helena had been brought to the attention of the Farmers' Association as offering great potential to establish a flax industry. Mr Moss obtained some samples of flax leaves from the estate of Mr Melliss and took them to England for inspection by Messrs Dickson & Company who considered the fibre from this flax would be worth £20 a ton, at which price it would meet with a ready sale. He added that such an industry on St. Helena would give life and labour to a population already feeling the pressure of poverty, and an acre of ground is capable of growing 2,240 plants yielding a moderate estimate of ten tons of green leaves, equal to between two and three tons of fibre for export.

Despite the definite presence of poverty, at this time the development of the steamship had given some hope for increased shipping activity. In September 1852 the first propeller driven ocean-going ship in history, S.S. *Great Britain* on a voyage from England to Australia, had called to pick up an emergency supply of coal, and it was anticipated that St. Helena would become an established coaling port of call.

In view of this latter expectation there was then seemingly not enough urgency to develop a flax industry, but the evidence had been provided that somehow the phormium plant had already been introduced to the island. According to a version in the *St. Helena Almanac* for 1913 the phormium plant is known to have been bought to St. Helena from New Zealand by the Captain of an American whaler in the 1850's, and it was first propagated at "Walbro" estate. Whether this was intended for a small commercial prospect or for ornamental purposes, it is not known. Certainly today there is a lot of flax growing near the ruins of Walbro House.

In 1869 when the Suez Canal was opened to provide shipping with a 'short cut' to the Far East and Australia, all hopes were dashed of St. Helena becoming a coaling station, and with steamers being provided with extra bunkering capacity they were able to bypass the island. This setback extended the island's long period of poverty and caused a spate of emigration which soon gave reason to again consider the necessity to establish a flax industry. The promotion of St. Helena's first attempt to establish a flax industry was

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due in large measure to the efforts of the Governor, Hudson Ralph Janisch, who was appointed in 1873. He was the first Governor to have been born on the island. It appears St. Helena was either the first or amongst the first of the regions outside New Zealand in trying to establish a flax industry. The propagation of phormium plants is usually from shoots of mature roots, and due to the difficulty of growing from seed, it may be assumed that the first commercial plantings on St. Helena were made by using the shoots from existing plants that had been growing successfully on the island since the 1850's. As can be seen from surviving plantations today, New Zealand flax plants have thrived in their adopted homeland with a tenacity that is quite remarkable.

Under favourable conditions the flax leaves are ready for harvesting from 4 to 6 years after planting, and additional leaves can be cut thereafter at 4 yearly intervals. Thus it can be seen that a new crop of flax planted in 1871 would not be ready for cutting until 1875 at the earliest, but some account was taken that a sufficient quantity of leaves from the earlier plantings would be available to start the industry and keep it running until the new crop matured. An account of the first major planting was written by Benjamin Grant in *A Few Notes on St. Helena* -

"The flax crop is first noticed in the agricultural returns in 1873 when a fine large estate of 156 acres called Woody Ridge under 60 acres of flax and 15 acres of aloes was purchased by the Foreign Fibre Company for £1,200 sterling"

The Company referred to was the Colonial and Foreign Fibre Company which had been working on phormium fibre in New Zealand, aloe fibre in Mexico, and aloe and plantain fibres in the West Indies for some years. The Directors of this Company were induced to set up a flax mill on St. Helena after representations had been made by Mr Erridge of the St. Helena firm of W. Erridge and Company. The samples of flax he had taken to England were proven by experiments to be longer and the fibre stronger than at many of the Company's other enterprises.

The Colonial & Foreign Fibre Company decided to erect their factory at Jamestown and managed to avoid the expense of purchasing or hiring suitable premises. By some negotiations they obtained a concession from the Military Authorities for a space of vacant ground at a nominal rent on the line of fortifications known as James Line. This site was on the right hand side of the fort and lay in the area between the moat and the terrace ramparts. The address of their factory was given as Main Street as it was actually a sea front extension of that thoroughfare. There could not have been a more historic site than the one made available, as the first fort of the East India Company was built here in 1659. *The St. Helena Guardian* took issue with the letting of this

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vacant site as they understood it had hitherto been considered sacred to the exigencies of military defence, and which if it was to be made available for private use, ought to have been let at a heavy rent for warehouses, especially suitable for goods landed from ships under repair for reshipment.

“How was the Company given such exclusive rights”,

they asked. However this was almost certainly a decision taken in the Island’s interest due to the vital necessity of establishing an industry that could mean salvation for the economy.

As preparations continued for establishing the industry, some landholders were tempted to cultivate flax. The crop planted three years before was approaching maturity, and the arrival of machinery for the Factory at Jamestown was awaited with great anticipation. As reported in the *St. Helena Guardian* of 12th February 1874, the agents of W. Erridge and Company had received their machinery by the last mail steamer *Anglian*. An Engineer who came out with it, was then busy superintending its erection and preparing for work.

“This is a different plan from former attempts to utilise our products whether by hard labour or by contriving machinery for the purpose. It was always thought that a regular Factory in town on an extensive scale was the proper way to success.”

THE FIRST MILL

From available sources there does not appear to have been any fanfare when the mill began operate during 1874. The earliest report that signified it was actually running appeared in the *St. Helena Guardian* of 25th June 1874 under the heading -

"Accident at the Colonial and Fibre Company's works

A young man, Mr Smith, while attempting to clear a portion of the machinery while in motion, unfortunately got his right hand jammed between certain cogs, whereby three of the fingers on that hand were terribly crushed and mutilated. Dr. Fowler, on being called in, found it necessary to amputate the second and third fingers below the first joint, and the patient is reported to be doing well".

A slightly earlier report of 23rd June had suggested that the factory may now been seen at work any day, by permission of the agents, Messrs Erridge & Company. It was regretted that no samples of the phormium fibre were at the Industrial Exhibition which was then being held in Jamestown. But there were several samples of fibre from aloes which could also be milled by the Factory.

In October 1874 following an inspection of the Colonial & Foreign Fibre Company Works, the *St Helena Guardian* provided this report in their newspaper -

"The premises are situated in Main Street and are small and confined, sufficient for the present purpose, but not for an extended factory. The plant consists of a small Steam Engine of 7 or 8 H.P. and three Stamping machines, each having six stampers, but the Engine only has enough power to drive two out of the three Stamping machines. The staff consists of one engine driver, six small boys, and the Superintendent Mr Harrison, who is the Engineer sent out by the Company. The work is not hard and may be done by boys 10 or 12 years old. Girls might also later be employed. The two stamping machines with the six boys and the engine driver get through about 8 cwt. of phormium flax leaves a day, which ought by calculation to give 1 3/4 cwt. of fine fibre or half a ton a week, or 25 tons a year".

From this account one could perhaps be inclined to believe the mill was being *run on a shoestring*, but it has to be remembered that these were harsh times and considerable use was made of child labour worldwide. Actually on St Helena in the same year, an ordinance was introduced for compulsory schooling to help prevent the exploitation of child labour.

No records were thrown up to reveal accurate details of how the green leaf from up country was transported down to the Factory at Jamestown. According to Mrs E. Jackson in her history *St Helena* (published 1903)

"The flax was bought in it's raw state on donkeys to the flax works"

- but it can scarcely be imagined that donkeys alone were the only form of transport, as normally a donkey is only expected to carry two bundles of flax, each bundle is about 56 pounds. Considering the string probably consisted on ten donkeys, that would give half a ton of leaves per string which was sufficient to keep the Factory running for a day in it's early stage, but the capacity was soon greatly increased. The distance from the Company's main flax plantation at Woody Ridge was nearly six miles to Jamestown.

However it was revealed from another source that the Company had found it necessary to purchase horses and drays, etc., to convey the flax from the country. In addition this transport was needed to cart the wood which fuelled the steam engines. Numerous trees were felled on the property of 'Prospect' to supply the flax works with fuel for the full period the Factory was in operation. The ground thus cleared was then cultivated as a flax plantation.

A serious problem was the large quantity of water required for the steam engines and for the processing. St Helena has never had adequate storage reservoirs to compensate for the fact that it is extremely difficult to build dams on the island due to the porosity of the rock beds in valleys. At one stage the Public Works Department designed a scheme to build a reservoir on the line of the run (rivulet) adjacent to the Back Way in Jamestown for giving the Factory a more reliable supply. During the remainder of 1874 the Company were endeavouring to overcome production problems, and no exports of fibre were reported.

In 1875 they had seven stamping machines powered by a new 25 H.P steam engine which was estimated to treat about 20 tons of green leaves weekly. For that year only 9 bales of fibre were exported for a value of £30. The area under cultivation was put at 150 acres. Very little publicity was given the Factory in 1876, but the *St. Helena Guardian* reported in their issue dated 6th July 1876, of ^{to x} ~~the~~ [?]

"Very slow progress by the flax milling company. There were 110 bales of fibre exported to a value of £370".

In the local newspaper at this time it was quite rare to find any comment about the Factory, and it almost seemed that hope had already been given up for it's prospects.

The year 1877 saw some improvement with 243 bales of fibre exported to a value of £370. As both phormium and aloe fibre was being produced by the mill it is not apparent whether these are combined in the export figure. In 1878 by increasing the number of stamping machines to 16 including an additional 25 H.P steam engine, the capacity of the mill was greatly extended, but as this necessitated a temporary halt to production during installation, the

output for the year was seriously affected. During 1879 up to 40 men and boys were employed to lift production, resulting in a record 615 bales being exported to a value of £1,890 giving this the average price of fibre at £17 per ton. In 1880 when fibre prices slumped, the Company closed their factory and their considerable work force of men and boys became unemployed. Mr W. Erridge of W. Erridge & Company then hired the Factory and resumed production, but after about 12 months he too closed the works, giving as his reason that the fibre industry was not commercially viable.

The following table gives the exports of fibre produced during the seven years of production:-

Year	400lb Bales	Value
1875	9	£ 30
1876	110	£ 370
1877	243	£ 985
1878	100	£ 300
1879	615	£1867
1880	502	£1890
1881	226	£ 500

Animals on the Island in 1881, according to the Returns were:-

Horses - 202	Cattle -1444	Sheep - 4145
Goats -1491	Swine - 325	Asses - 922

It can be noted that donkeys were then called asses. The collapse of the flax industry after only a few years was a bitter disappointment to the people of St. Helena who had pinned their hopes on it being the island's economic salvation. Why did it collapse they must surely have asked, and certainly there would be other questions that deserved an explanation.

The Industry Abandoned.

On 17th March 1881 the *St. Helena Guardian* provided the evidence of the fibre works at Jamestown having closed down,

"All our readers are well aware that the Fibre Company ceased working a few days ago, owing it is alleged to the carelessness of the workmen causing damage to the machinery. The basic cause of the failure was due to it having been installed at Jamestown at the Lines, which necessitated the purchase of carts, drays, horses, etc., to convey the material and fuel from the country at a large outlay".

As mentioned in Chapter 1, it had

"always been thought that a regular factory in town on an extensive scale was the right way to success",

but this was now proven to have been the wrong way.

In the aftermath of the industry's failure, a Mr Davy set up his home made plant at Apple Cottage near Deadwood with a view to starting full time flax milling. He had on hand several bales of fibre ready for shipment, but he needed capital which was almost impossible to obtain, particularly after the recent failure of the fibre company. Despite its failure, St Helena's flax industry had produced a living symbol of its few short years. That was the 200 or more acres of flax growing very well around the hills and valleys. While that symbol remained so conspicuously, there were bound to be those inclined towards giving the industry another chance.

One who was well qualified to comment was Mr Daniel Morris, M.A., F.L.S & F.G.S., who was then the Director of Agriculture in the West Indies. Mr Morris visited St Helena in 1883 to report on its industrial possibilities. He said

"I commend the subject of the extraction of fibre from New Zealand flax to the careful attention of the proprietors in the island, and failing remunerative prices for the fibre, there is still an opening in shipping *half stuff* (the bark residue containing cellulose) for the paper manufacturers, and obtaining some return from the hundreds of tons of this material now growing uselessly on such extensive tracts in the island"

Mr Morris also expressed his views on the attempt made in 1874 to establish a factory at Jamestown for the preparation of the valuable fibre yielded by this plant, and many people were tempted to cultivate it. As the factory with expensive machinery had been established at Jamestown, several miles from where the flax was grown (Woody Ridge) the expense of transport - chiefly by means of a small breed of island donkeys - was so great as to

swallow up all the profits. It took about 100 tons of leaves to yield 5 tons of fibre.

In the same year when Benjamin Grant published his guide book *A Few Notes on St Helena* - (1883), he commented,

"It is a great pity that the Foreign Fibre Company's Works are closed, as there are thousands of tons of flax encumbering several plantations. Besides an abundance of flax there is also a great quantity of aloe (*Furcroea Gigantea*) growing wild all over the island, most in a wild state amongst the rocks and hedges".

At the same time there were others who had a definite faith that the flax industry could still have a future on St Helena. One such was Mr Thomas Deason, an enterprising farmer who had come out from England in 1858 to serve as farm bailiff for Mr Isaac Moss who was then the lessee of Longwood Farm which included Napoleon's old residence until that portion was extracted to become the property of the Emperor of France. After Mr Deason took over the lease of this large estate, he developed valuable grain and potato crops. His interest in flax led him to acquire a scutching machine for preparing samples of fibre which he sent to England for inspection.

The prominent firm of Solomon, Moss, Gideon, & Company, also had interests in flax. The business house of Solomons had been founded on St Helena in 1790, and was the only company on the island that had survived continuously since Napoleon's period of captivity. The principal in 1883 was Saul Solomon who was a grandson of the founder. His company were the main shipping agents, the largest stockholders and property owners on the island. Included in their investments was a plantation of flax at Woody Ridge where they prepared samples of fibre. Mr James Truebody, a metalworker, had made them a machine which he developed from the drum and wheels of an old threshing machine to help in cleaning the fibre and it was a great success. As is apparent from the above, the abandonment of the flax industry had not stifled an interest in its potential. Even so, in the 25 years that were to elapse before any definite plans were made to resurrect the flax industry, St Helena passed through some quite miserable phases of history.

In 1883 the island was reported to be in a very depressed condition. Most of the pensioners on finding their pensions insufficient to keep them on St Helena, left its shores to receive and spend their pension allowances of about £1,500 in overseas countries, thus rendering the island very poor indeed. As a consequence, many necessary works were neglected, and the labouring classes were unemployed. From the tragic failure of the flax industry there was just one relieving factor in the island's parlous situation. The inducements for the landholders to grow flax had not lasted long enough to affect agriculture

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which had remained productively efficient to give the island a large degree of self-sufficiency. In 1883 there were 150 tons of potatoes being produced annually including 50 tons from the Longwood district alone. Good grain crops were being produced; all kinds of vegetables including pumpkins and sweet potatoes were plentiful and cheap. A great variety of fruit was being produced, fresh milk at 3d. a pint was plentiful as also was fresh butter. Fish and poultry were also plentiful and cheap. About the only scarce item of food was fresh meat. I am well tempted to compare this with the situation today, when it is often not possible to buy an egg, an onion, or a potato. Imported inferior quality fruit from South Africa is very expensive, and fresh milk has long been non-existent.

Source?

Governor Janisch who so much had the interests of his native island at heart, also tried to promote a cinchona plantation in 1882, and for many years some of the experimental trees survived on Diana's Peak. Having witnessed the demise of the struggling flax industry, he died in 1884 at a time when the island continued to exist in dire poverty.

The population of St Helena as given by the census of 1881 was 5,059 including the garrison and shipping personnel, but by 1890 it had dropped below 4,000 due to increased emigration, particularly to South Africa where gold and diamond mining had created a strong demand for labour.

A NEW PROMOTION OF FLAX

When the telegraph cable linking St Helena with the outside world came into service during 1900 the island's remote situation was instantaneously transformed. Any despatch which had previously taken months, could now be sent or received within minutes. For example when Napoleon died at Longwood House on 5th May 1821, Europe only heard of this momentous news when the sailing ship *Heron* arrived at the port of London to deliver the despatch on 4th July 1821, thus it took two months by the fastest means available.

upper/lower case?

The telegraph was in time to receive news of the Boer War which was then running its dramatic course in South Africa. Along with Ceylon, India, and Bermuda, St Helena had been chosen to hold a large proportion of Boer prisoners of war. This was scarcely the kind of *industry* that might have been expected, but it did bring a fresh breeze of prosperity to the island's depressed economy, and ultimately with 6,000 Boers in prison camps, a large British garrison was bought in to guard them. Together with increased shipping including naval activity, all of which soon created vastly improved opportunities for commerce and agriculture, the island entered a new phase of buoyancy, but it was to be of rather limited duration. After the Boer War ended on 31st May 1902, all the Boer prisoners of war were soon returned to South Africa, and a substantial reduction was soon made of the garrison that had been guarding them. Eventually for economic reasons it was decided to withdraw the entire garrison. When the final contingent sailed for England by the *Cluny Castle* on 30th October 1906, St Helena for the first time in its history was left without a garrison. After the shock waves from the garrison's withdrawal had registered on the economy, it was soon realised that St Helena would rapidly revert to its old, so familiar, poverty stricken situation.

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Meantime the Colonial Government had become aware of the large amount of flax that was thriving so well on the island. There were occasional references given in the annual colonial reports, but suitable machinery and an adequate water supply were considered to be the main difficulties. The urgency attached to a possible new start of the flax industry led in August 1906 to an estimate being made of the amount of flax existing on the island, and this was put at 2,500 tons. It was calculated that one New Zealand stripping machine could treat about four tons of green leaves daily, so that the existing crop could keep one machine going for two years. More flax was to be planted, and if only land unsuitable for farming purposes was planted, it was estimated that the island could produce 10,000 tons of green leaves annually to yield 1,250 tons of fibre which at the lowest market price would

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A NEW PROMOTION OF FLAX

be worth £31,250 per year. Strongly supported by Governor Gallwey, the entire issue of resurrecting the flax industry was thoroughly gone into between the Colonial Office and the St Helena Government. Professor Dunstan of the Imperial Institute in London gave his favourable opinion for the establishment of the flax industry, and the New Zealand Government were to lend the services of an expert to start the industry on a firm footing.

The state of progress at the end of 1906 was given by Governor Gallwey in his Colonial Report for that year;-

"The Colony still remained in the unenviable position of being without an industry. By the middle of 1907 it was hoped that good progress will have been made in establishing the flax industry." Thirty years ago the flax industry proved a failure, owing chiefly I fancy to lack of business methods. The industry about to start is to be run on the most modern lines, and will for the first few months be supervised by experts from New Zealand. The working of the industry will lie with the Government, but the profits accruing therefrom will go chiefly to the flax growers. There is not a great quantity of mature flax available from which to feed the machines, and it therefore must be some four or five years before the real benefits of the industry become apparent. I would add that the Imperial Government are providing the funds to start the industry and run it for a few months. After this it is calculated the industry will pay its own way. In view of the proposed establishment of the flax industry in the Colony, the Colonial Government planted a certain amount of flax during the year, chiefly experimentally, to ascertain how the plant would thrive in wastelands. Only one landowner did any extensive planting. He put down about 50,000 suckers covering an area of 50 acres."

The most salient point in Governor Gallwey's report was certainly the fact that the Imperial Government was providing financial support. This had not been given for the first attempt in 1874, and one can only wonder if such support had then been provided, whether it would have prevented the industry's collapse in 1881. Nevertheless such support now augured well for the resurrection.

Much speculation was mounted on a possible site for the flax mill, and one correspondent suggested that no better site could be obtained than the cattle yard at Jamestown. But certainly there was not going to be a repeat of the 1881 failure which was basically caused by all the green flax having to be transported several miles to Jamestown at great cost. As that had occurred 25 years previously, it can be assumed that the correspondent did not know that the mill had been at Jamestown. However, although many vital details still had to be finalised, all the portents looked favourable, as St Helena prepared to launch an attempt to resurrect what was destined to become the only

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long-term industry ever established on the island since man first discovered it in 1502

RESURRECTION OF THE FLAX INDUSTRY

In their issue of 14th February 1907 the *St Helena Guardian* reported that His Majesty's Government had decided to ask Parliament for a grant of £4,070 to establish the flax industry on St Helena. The interests of growers and others who would be concerned with the industry, gave rise to the formation of a Flax Committee. At their meeting held on 10th May 1907 at Messrs Solomon's office, the following gentlemen were present:- Messrs Lewis, Adams, E.Thorpe, and H.Solomon. The locality of Blackfield at Longwood was mentioned as being suitable for the flax mill.

A New Zealand flax expert, Mr C.J. Fulton, arrived on St Helena during May 1907. After giving his favourable report on St Helena being suitable for growing phormium, he selected Longwood as the site for the new mill. The land on which it was to be built, formed a small sector of the area known locally as Black Field, but all of this belonged to the Government owned Longwood Estate consisting of 557 acres including the 130 acres of Longwood Farm which was then leased by Deason Brothers, namely Frederick and James, who had taken over the lease from their father, Thomas Deason who died in 1898. After completing the preliminaries on St Helena, Mr Fulton left for London to purchase the engine and other gear. Meanwhile the stripping and scutching machines had been ordered and were already on their way via England from New Zealand which country had particular expertise in the manufacture of flax-milling machinery.

The selection of Longwood as the mill site brought much criticism from those who had little or no knowledge of the industry. The remarkable topographical features of St Helena made it very difficult to find a suitable site for a phormium mill, in respect of which there were two absolutely essential requirements; firstly there had to be a good water supply from a stream that was not depended upon for drinking water by houses that were below the mill site, as the water passing through the mill became contaminated with waste vegetable matter from the flax as it was being processed. Secondly a large drying or bleaching field was necessary, and should be as flat as possible, but there are very few fields on St Helena that are not on a slope. The site chosen at Longwood possessed both the advantages required.

When he returned to St Helena in August 1907, Mr Fulton was accompanied by Mr A.W.Hall, an experienced New Zealand phormium miller, who was due to take over the management of the new mill when it started, and meantime the work had begun on erecting it. In September 1907 the arrival of the machinery at the Wharf, and the calling of tenders for

transporting it to the flax mill is the subject of some interesting old documents now to be seen in the Archives at the Castle. The three tenderers were Deason Bros., Mr O.W.Bagley, and Solomon & Company. Deason Bros. of Longwood offered to convey the machinery from the Jamestown Wharf to the Black Field, at twenty shillings per ton including unloading, but exclusive of loading at the wharf. Theirs was the lowest tender. Mr Bagley's tender price was considerably higher, but the most revealing as regards the form of transport was that of Solomon's. They presumed the engine would weigh over two tons, and as this load would be too great for their eight bullocks, in the event of their tender being accepted they requested to have the engine taken to pieces as far as possible. It is not known whose if any tender was accepted, but further research confirmed that ox-drawn transport was the usual method of conveying such loads at this time on St Helena.

In an endeavour to increase the flax crop, the following advertisement was placed in the *St Helena Guardian* by Mr T.Broadway, the Clerk of Works, -"Assistance to landowners to plant flax" (19th September 1907). Construction of the new mill including the installation of machinery was completed on 30th November 1907. The water supply was provided from a concrete tank of 30,000 gallons capacity, which was fed from the water mains. Two days later the first milling of flax commenced. Advance notice for the opening of the mill was given by the *St Helena Guardian* on 28th November

Government Flax Mill

His Excellency the Governor will formally open the Government Flax Mill on Thursday 5th December at 3.30pm. After the opening ceremony His Excellency will be At Home at the Golf Club House on Longwood Plain instead of Plantation.

Within sight of Napoleon's old residence then known as Longwood Old House, the new Flax Mill now introduced a new phase of history for the district of Longwood which had already become world famous as a result of Napoleon's captivity from 1815 until his death there in 1821.

Definite signs that the Government Flax Mill was in business came from a notice in the *St Helena Guardian* 25th December 1907:-

"Government Flax Mill - Notice to growers. - Flax growers are hereby notified that thirty shillings per ton will be paid for the green leaves delivered to the Mill for the period ending 31st March 1908"

The progress made in starting the industry was well summarised in the Colonial Report for 1907 by the Governor, Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Lionel Gallwey:-

"A considerable acreage of land was laid out in flax (*phormium tenax*). The planting of flax however was chiefly confined to the two largest landowners, who

THE FLAX INDUSTRY

between them laid down about 118,000 suckers covering 110 acres. In addition to this, towards the end of the year 32 landowners were granted a total sum of £451 to assist them in planting flax - the land to be planted being about 245 acres. The poorer owners of those referred to, received wire and posts for fencing free of charge in addition to the money grants. Approximately only about 30,000 suckers were laid down under the grant referred to by the end of December 1907. It was plain that the only practical method of planting is by means of suckers. Efforts to grow the plant from seed failed utterly. The seed dealt with, was bought from New Zealand by Mr Fulton, the flax expert, and was laid down and treated strictly in accordance with his instructions. There is no doubt that the raising of phormium plants from seed is a laborious process, and it would probably be at least seven years before the leaves were ready for reaping. The young plant is very delicate and requires careful rearing in its earliest stages. The seed was sown on June of the year under review, and took four months to come up, when it was entirely destroyed by grubs. No export of phormium fibre was made by the Colonial Government during 1907 as their mill only commenced work in December of the year under review."

During 1907, Messrs Deason Brothers of Longwood Farm shipped a ton of aloe fibre to England, realising £29 a ton on the London market, this being more of an experiment, and aloe fibre had not been taken up seriously, although there were large quantities on the island and it was even more valuable than phormium fibre, but the fibre percentage obtained from aloe leaves was far less than for phormium. It takes 40 tons of aloe leaves to produce one ton of fibre, while only 8 or 9 tons of phormium leaves will produce a ton of fibre.

THE GOVERNMENT MILL AT LONGWOOD.

The Longwood Mill that was now running and had been officially opened by Governor Gallwey on 5th December 1907, comprised two main buildings in the form of wood and iron sheds, one 60 feet by 20 feet. The machinery in these consisted of a 32 B.H.P oil engine built by Hornsby & Sons and using about 18 gallons of oil a day. This was driving one Booth & MacDonald stripping machine, one scutching machine, and one fibre press, with all necessary shafting and pulleys. In addition there were two other wooden sheds, each 60 feet by 20 feet, one a fibre store, and the other a general store and office. The construction work had been supervised by Major Michie of the Royal Engineers in co-ordination with Mr Fulton, the New Zealand mill expert, who finally left St Helena on 5th January 1908 after handing over the management to Mr A.W.Hall. The Governor thanked the New Zealand Government for having come to the assistance of the Colony to establish their first genuine industry.

In the initial stage the mill dealt with four tons of leaves daily, producing about half a ton of fibre and tow. The term 'tow' which will occur frequently in this work, is given to the fine fibre material that becomes separated from the fibre hanks during the scutching operation. It was baled separately to the main fibre and has a much lower market value. The stripping machine was only worked five hours a day, the scutcher for the entire day of eight and a half hours. It was considered advisable at the start not to deal with more than four tons of leaves a day until it is seen how long the leaves ready for reaping on the island will last. The great object was to ensure a sufficient supply of leaves to last out until the plants put down lately are ready for cutting, and so avoid having to shut the mill down.

Besides the manager (Mr A.W.Hall) and a local manager (under instruction) the mill employed 16 hands whose wages totalled £12 weekly, giving an average wage of 15 shillings a week. The fibre produced from the green leaves by the stripping machine was usually washed before being taken out to nearby fields where it was laid out to dry either on the ground or preferably on wires strung between wood poles. For the Longwood Mill the drying fields to the east of the mill became known as "Mill Fields", the name by which the locality is still known. After being dried, the fibre was returned to the mill for scutching and baling in the fibre press. It may well be wondered if there was any unpleasant effect on the environment of those who happened to living near the mill, but at this early time Longwood was still a sparsely populated village, with scarcely one if any dwelling within close range of the mill. The emission of noise from the machinery, such as the

THE MILL AT LONGWOOD

engine or more particularly the stripping machine with its whine, might have posed a problem had there been a number of dwellings nearby. From the start it was quite evident that many sceptics who in the past had doubted the wisdom of establishing a phormium mill on the island, had seen fit to change their minds. To ensure success the island's roads would have to be kept in fair repair. A mistaken idea had got abroad that donkey transport could keep the mill supplied with leaves, but they had not the necessary stamina, and bullock drawn carts or drays proved to be a more efficient system to keep the mills supplied with a sufficient quantity of leaves. Even so donkeys were to more than prove their worth in bringing the flax bundles from difficult terrain and tracks where bullock carts could not operate.

In order to help the flax industry through its early stages, the Union Castle Steamship Company generously offered to carry the first 60 tons of fibre to England freight free, an offer that was gladly accepted. The first consignment of about 12 tons left St Helena for England on 5th January 1908 by the R.M.S. Goth. For such an historic event it is well worth while to give the entry on 5th January 1908 as recorded in the St Helena Shipping Register:-

"R.M.S Goth, Captain E. Travers, 3034 tons, 108 crew. Took the first shipment of Government fibre".

More than anything, this heralded the start of an industry that was to serve as St Helena's economic salvation for nearly 60 years. The Goth of 4,778 gross tonnage, had been built in 1893 by Harland & Wolff for the Union Line, and was at this time serving as an intermediate mail steamer for the Union Castle Line which had been formed in 1900 following the amalgamation of the Union Line and the Castle Line. Her passenger accommodation provided for 50 first, 60 second, and up to 500 third class passengers.¹

On 2nd February 1908 a further 16 tons of fibre left St Helena for England on the R.M.S Tintagel Castle. For the next 60 years the Union-Castle Line ships were to carry a large proportion of St Helena's fibre exports to England and Europe. Unfortunately at the time the Government mill started production, the price of fibre on the London market fell by £8 a ton due to a slump in the manila hemp market. In addition to the Government mill, another small mill was running on the property of Mr T.L.M.Adams. This had only been started about a year ago, but production was very small as he only ran a stripping machine and scutching was carried out at Jamestown. He worked under great

¹Footnote:- On 13th January 1914 after having been sold to the Royal Mail Steam packet Company and renamed "Cobequid", the former "Goth" ran ashore on Trinity Ledge, Bay of Fundy, and became a total loss.

difficulty due to an inadequate water supply, but transport of leaves cost him nothing as there was a very extensive flax plantation alongside the mill which was said to be situated at 2,000 feet above sea level. This appears to be the same enterprise mentioned by the St Helena Guardian as operating at "Rose Cottage" in April 1907 and situated at that altitude near Sandy Bay, but owing to scarcity of water and lack of proper drying fields, the venture was not successful and closed down the following year.

By February 1908 the Longwood mill was turning out 12 tons of fibre and tow a month. After four months working it was found to have not interfered with the supply of water to the community at Longwood, but as a precaution to ensure the mains could provide for extra demand, it was decided to replace an old 2 inch lead water main from Well's Gut to Longwood with a 3 inch water main. The old lead main had done its duty for about 97 years since 1811, and thus was in use during Napoleon's captivity at Longwood House. In his Colonial Report for 1908, Governor Gallwey stated that fibre and tow to the value of £3,557 was exported during the year. Total weight of phormium exported was 128 tons of fibre and 41 tons of tow, of which 111 tons and 33 tons respectively came from the Government mill at Longwood. The first shipment of fibre had reached £27-10s. a ton, and the second shipment £25-10s. a ton.

Large areas of land were laid out in flax during 1908 to give a total estimated area under flax as approximately 500 acres. The industry was then controlled by manila fibre which was coming on the market in large quantities. The 17 men employed at the mill had adapted very well to the new industry but there was a serious shortage of water at the mill. It was hoped that phormium fibre would prove suitable for spinning and weaving purposes, and so be used in the lace-making industry as a distinctly St Helenian characteristic, but although all kinds of devices for cleaning the fibres were employed, in no case were the results really satisfactory. One or two experiments produced a suitable thread for spinning, but the labour and time involved was too costly to make the thread of any practical use.

When the R.M.S. *Avondale Castle* took away 15 tons of fibre on 7th January 1909, this was a record shipment for four weeks production at the Longwood mill. It was hoped that the day was not too far distant when other mills would be at work and the exports will show a decided increase, as it all means employment and income to help the island's economy. From his report for the year ended November 1908 the mill manager Mr A.W.Hall stated that the chief difficulty was a shortage of water, but this was being overcome by having a new mains laid. From favourable reports in the St Helena Guardian of 7th October 1909, the quality of the last three shipments from St Helena

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had substantially improved, with the fibre being bright, strong, and silky, such as would have fetched 30 shillings per cwt. in better times, and hopeful for the future. At this time it was learnt from private sources that very little hemp was being sent to England from New Zealand, as the wages demanded in the latter country of 8 shillings per day was against the landowners there. Despite rumours that the Government mill would have to close during July 1909 due to a want of leaves, a sufficient quantity became available to hopefully keep it running until the end of 1909, but a different kind of problem arose when the engine broke down, and the mill had to close from 23rd October until the end of the year.

From the Colonial Report for 1909 by Governor Gallwey:-

"The export of fibre and tow for 1909 amounted to a value of £2,979, being some £600 less than for 1908. Fibre prices dropped to £20 a ton for two months, but rose to £28 by November, the highest price since the mill opened. Unfortunately the oil engine broke down the very week while the price reached that high figure. The mill had to shut down for two months while a new cylinder was obtained from England. The number of men employed at the mill rose to 19. The mill worked for 39 weeks of the year treating 905 tons of leaves to produce 126 tons of fibre and 39½ tons of tow. Due to the slow growth of new plantings it was said that the mill might have to close down for 9 months during 1910. The manager said it did not pay to mill leaves under six feet in length. It took the stripper keeper the same time to pass a 12 foot leaf into the stripper as it does for a 4 foot one. In both case the same amount of labour is employed and the engine consumes the same amount of oil".

The Longwood mill started running again on 31st January 1910. Water had become very scarce, and until there was a good fall of rain, the mill was generally only able to run every other day. During January 1910 no flax from New Zealand reached England, due to the high rate of wages, and while this situation existed, it was said that St Helena must take the front position. The mill manager, Mr Hall, left St Helena and was succeeded by Mr H.J.Broadway who had been trained by Mr Hall and received a salary of £150 per annum.

On 1st September 1910 the St Helena Guardian reported:-

"The Flax Mill is unfortunately closed, but we hope this will be remedied about next April. We also hope soon to see the Government lands known as Cason's, Hardings and Pounce's, turned into wide flax plantations feeding another mill erected at say New Ground (never built) where there should be no shortage of water. The oil engine breakdown was caused by a cylinder bursting".

The mill buildings and plant were insured with a London office for £1,000 with the annual premium being one per cent. At this time the mill was also

short of leaves, but with the engine out of service none could be milled. Colonial Report for 1910 by Governor Gallwey:-

"The mill was restricted to 21 working weeks of the year, due to a shortage of mature leaves and the engine breakdown. The mill treated 411 tons of leaves to produce 46½ tons of fibre and 13 tons of tow to a net value of £1,183".

This was Governor Gallwey's last report, as after 8 years his term of office ended on 10th September 1911. The Colonial Report for 1911 was given by the new Governor, Major H.E.S Cordeaux, who took office in February 1912,:-

"The mill remained closed until April due to a shortage of suitably long leaves. An endeavour was then made to reopen it by offering the growers 20 shillings for leaves longer than four feet, but this was not acceptable to the growers and the mill remained closed until November. For the short period until 31st December 1911, 172 tons of leaves were treated for 21 tons of fibre and 5½ tons of tow".

Colonial Report for 1912 by Governor Cordeaux:-

"Although the year 1912 did not open well for the Longwood Flax Mill, an unexpected rise in the fibre price of up to £32 a ton, helped to give a satisfactory year in which 1,202 tons of leaves were milled to produce 114½ tons of fibre and 35 tons of tow, to a total value of £3,400. It was found that planting the flax in trenches ensured a quicker and more luxuriant growth than the New Zealand method of planting in separate holes 6 feet apart.

Annual Production & Export Values(1908-1912 inclusive)

Year	Fibre (tons)	Tow (tons)	Total Export Values (Fibre & Tow)
1908	128	41	£3,557
1909	126	39½	£2,979
1910	46½	13	£1,183
1911	211	5½	£ 660
1912	114½	35	£3,400

For the first five years of its operations, the Government mill at Longwood had experienced some serious problems, particularly for the years 1910 and 1911 during which it had been beset by engine breakdowns and shortage of mature leaves. By reason of its having sustained a number of setbacks, definite credit was due to those responsible for operating and promoting it. Governor Gallwey deserved a special tribute for his unflinching faith and perseverance towards ensuring that St Helena would acquire a genuine industry. The imminent addition of several private mills would soon put the success of the islands flax industry beyond doubt.

The caption of this photo by T. Jackson in the Jamestown Museum is:- **"Longwood 1907 - Erecting a gas engine"**. Assuming that year is correct it was then an oil engine and not a gas engine. The first gas engine which

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replaced the oil engine at this mill, was installed in 1917. In the photo there is no sign of the scrubber and furnace which essentially formed the gas making plant to drive a gas engine.

PRIVATE MILLS AND A BOOM DURING THE GREAT WAR

It was fitting that the first private mill to participate in St Helena's revived flax industry, was established by Solomon & Company which was the island's oldest business house, having been founded in 1790. As one of the largest landowners which included their extensive flax plantations, it was logical for them to become actively involved in flax milling. The *St Helena Guardian* reported on 9th January 1913:-

"We are pleased to learn that Messrs Solomon & Company are about to put up their flax machine at Bamboo Hedge. This will be a great boon to growers in those districts of the island, as it will save a journey of several miles to the flax mill at Longwood."

In addition to Solomon's own flax plantations near their mill, there was an extensive belt of flax in the upper Sandy Bay locality of Rose Cottage where an attempt to establish a small private mill had failed in 1909.

Under the heading "Suction Gas Engine for Bamboo Hedge Mill," the *St Helena Guardian* reported on 30th January 1913

"It was quite a novel sight to see a large number of oxen (24) drawing five drays laden with machinery from the Wharf through Jamestown en route to Bamboo Hedge which they reached in five hours without a hitch."

The distance for this journey from Jamestown was approximately 8 miles and over some very hazardous steep hills. It can only be surmised that the *convoy* from Jamestown took the comparatively new Ladder Hill road which had been built from China Lane in 1882, rather than the Side Path on the opposite side which had several rather dangerous hairpin bends.

The suction gas engine was almost certainly a *National* of the type that were to become favoured by mills, at least in the earliest stages of the industry. They were manufactured in England by the National Gas Engine Company at Wellington Works, Ashton under Lyne, and included a gas making plant consisting of the furnace where the fuel was burnt in a long cylindrical vessel filled with damp coke through which the gas is passed and consequently cleaned on its way to the engine. The furnace was usually called the generator, and the wrought iron cylinder containing the wet coke was called the Scrubber. This plant could gasify all kinds of fuel viz:- anthracite, coke, sawdust, wood refuse, bituminous fuels, lignite, peat, waste vegetable matter, etc., but those used for the flax mills on St Helena used anthracite. To start the gasification process, a little wood was required to start a fire which ignited the anthracite.

Cradled in the middle section of Sandy Bay Valley, the mill had a beautiful setting against the mountain slopes of the Central Ridge which was already

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beginning to bristle with new flax plantations. After the mill had begun production during July 1913, on 25th September the Editor of the *St Helena Guardian* personally noticed three drays from Bamboo Hedge carrying bales of fibre to Jamestown.

From the Colonial Report for 1913 by Governor Cordeaux:-

"With the additional production from the new mill, the flax industry experienced a very satisfactory year, with an export value of £5,372. The average price of fibre and tow was £28½ and £14½ per ton respectively. There was an unlimited supply of mature leaves, and considerable further planting was carried out."

In 1913 the following prices were listed by W.A.Thorpe & Sons for their grocery shop at Jamestown:-

Sugar - 2½d. per lb
Ceylon tea - 8d. per ½ pound pack
Quaker oats - 5d. per lb
Assorted Jams - 6½d. per tin
Salt - 1d. per lb
Lifebuoy soap - 2d.
Capstan tobacco - 8d. per 4 ounces
Woodbine Cigarettes - 2½d. per packet of 10
Draught beer - 8d. per quart
Guinness stout - 7d. per pint

The Great War which started in August 1914 proved to be the greatest carnage brought about by conflict between nations in all the history of this world. Despite the danger at sea from enemy action, cargoes of fibre from St Helena continued to reach England where demand and prices began to escalate.

A small note in the *St Helena Guardian* of 29th January 1914 confirmed the type of engine at both mills.

"The *Gloucester Castle* took 500 empty oil drums for England to be refilled for use at Longwood, as the engine there is driven by oil, while the one at Sandy Bay is driven by gas."

The Government policy of attempting to grow flax on waste land in an endeavour to avoid using valuable pasture land, was evident from an official notice inserted in the *St Helena Guardian* on 26th February 1914:-
"Government Notification -

The following applications for Crown Waste Land for the purposes of planting flax are advertised for public information. Any person objecting to same must do so in writing on or before 7th March next."

(Then followed a list of 26 applications all for one acre each in various localities, mainly Longwood, but also included Blueman's Hill and Levelwood.).

"The plots applied for have been marked with whitewashed stones"

By command of His Excellency the Governor.

On 25th June 1914 there was a favourable report on the new mill at Sandy Bay

"It has a gas engine and is working admirably, keeping two strippers and two scutchers going, thereby giving employment to all in that district. For this great work the people have to thank Messrs Solomon & Company, the sole proprietors, who have some thousands of tons of raw material growing in their lands. It is difficult to find any occupation in the country which is not directly or indirectly influenced by the flax industry."

As given in the Colonial Report for 1914 by Governor Cordeaux, the combined exports of fibre for the two mills totalled 347 tons for a total export of £7,439. Wartime demand gave an even greater boost to St Helena's flax industry in 1915, resulting in a further increase of fibre exports, as summarised by Governor Cordeaux:-

"Total value of £11,101 for 395 tons of fibre exported, made up of 210 tons from the Government mill and 185 tons from the mill of Messrs Solomon & Company. The Government mill established a record as regards the quantity of leaves dealt with, and also in respect of the value, quality of fibre and tow produced. A speeding up of production was effected by placing the stripper hands on piece work."

There was no doubt that the boom in the industry created more incentive to plant flax and also for speculation by those who already had a mature crop on hand, such as was advertised in the *St Helena Guardian* on 29th April 1915:-

"A Bargain for Sale - as it stands at Horse Ridge - a crop of flax - of 3 years growth and contains about 36 tons - price £15 nett, apply to B. Grant."

The greatly increased income to the island no doubt prompted the Colonial Government to levy a tax of one shilling per ton on all leaves brought to the two mills. This would enable a larger sum to be expended annually on road works. For the purpose of convenience this tax was collected in the form of an export duty of ten shillings a ton on fibre, and five shillings a ton on tow. There was evidence that more private landowners had taken to growing flax. The old estate of "Oaklands" was advertised for sale on 2nd September 1915 by Private Contract -

"that well known country house (already furnished) with lands consisting of about 60 to 70 acres, also horses and donkeys in good condition. There is also about £100 worth of flax of good growth and fit for milling. For particulars apply W. &

R. Henry - Oaklands."

This property was destined to become the site for a flax mill.

The imminent start up of two new mills was revealed in the *St Helena Guardian* of 10th February 1916:-

"We are pleased to learn that St Helena flax, owing it is said to the failure of the New Zealand and Australian flax crops lately, is now realising £42 a ton. This will indeed be cheering news to our flax growers."

This was soon followed by their report of 27th July -

"The third mill has just been erected by the enterprising Deason Brothers, and is now probably operating, while the equally enterprising firm of Messrs Solomon & Company are erecting a fourth, we believe at Broadbottom. If our *progressives* would only capitalise and lay down a small cheap plant for the manufacture of rope, we are absolutely certain they would be quite as successful as they are in the flax industry."

The same issue was raised again on 10th August 1916 -

"There is a pressing want of a ropery on St Helena, as South Africa alone imports rope to the value of £60,000 per annum."

The fibre industry (from aloes) on Mauritius was commented on as being that island's second largest industry after sugar. It could have been predicted that Messrs Deason Brothers would be well to the fore in becoming involved with flax milling, as for a long period they had actively promoted the industry. Their new mill was situated at the upper end of Fisher's Valley near Hutts Gate in which district extensive plantations of flax had been established. At this stage of the industry it was the nearest mill to Jamestown at about 4 miles distant. Similarly to Bamboo Hedge the Hutts Gate mill used a National Gas Engine and a gasifying plant using anthracite. Production commenced in July 1916.

Solomon's new mill was being built on the site of a former military farm at Broadbottom where it was expected to begin production in 1917. The Colonial Report for 1916 was prepared during 1917 by the acting Governor, Lieutenant-Colonel W.S.Dixon, having temporarily taken over from Governor Cordeaux who had been recalled to England for wartime duty;_

"Total value of £21,907 for 472 tons of fibre and tow exported. The private mills grew and milled their own leaves, whereas the Government mill purchased its leaves from private growers, of whom there were 61 in 1916. Private mills:- Solomon's mill in Sandy Bay has worked throughout the year, milling 1,433 tons of leaves for which 164 tons of fibre and 45 tons of tow were shipped. This firm is starting another mill in 1917. A new mill belonging to Messrs Deason Brothers at Hutts Gate started work in July and by the end of the year had milled about 320 tons of leaves from which 34 tons of fibre and 6 tons of tow were shipped. At the end of 1916 there were 150 males and 36 females continuously employed in the industry. Land under flax increased to 750 acres"

With the rapidly rising market price in London, every available acre of land on St Helena was seen to offer lucrative prospects by planting flax, and in the long term this period, probably more than any other, contributed to the island ultimately becoming literally lathered with flax plantations. The expansion process was emphasised by the *St Helena Guardian* on 19th July 1917 while the Great War was raging on the Western Front and the fibre prices were soaring in London.

"In this Island this industry is going ahead by leaps and bounds. You will see it growing in almost every direction, and more land is being requisitioned. Prices of fibre have reached £92 a ton in London. We have many advantages over New Zealand. The labourer here receives per day only about one sixth of the labourer's wage in that country. Our freight being far nearer to London is only about one half of that from New Zealand."

The Colonial Report for 1917 by Acting Governor Dixon:-

"For the first time in the history of the Colony, the value of exports during the year exceeded the imports. The increase was due to the value of fibre and tow exported, viz.- 742 tons as against 472 tons in 1916. Exports for 1917 amounted to £54,830 as against £24,635 in 1916. The 44 H.P Suction Gas Plant at the Government mill started working in the middle of February, and a very considerable saving in the cost of fuel oil has been made thereby. There is now sufficient power at this mill to increase considerably the output when the supply of leaves is increased. A hydraulic press also started working early in June. Messrs Deason Brothers mill at Hutts Gate worked throughout the year, and Messrs Solomon & Company's new mill at Broadbottom commenced work in April 1917. At the end of 1917 there were 175 males and 42 females employed in the four flax mills. The land under flax increased to about 900 acres."

The flax mills exerted all their resources to take advantage of the high fibre price in London. Even ginger, a leafy plant fairly prevalent in secluded moist localities, was milled and its fibre fetched a good price. The situation lent itself to have anything milled which could produce fibre. The strong demand for St Helena's fibre during the Great War was due to its value as a strategic raw material in the manufacture of ropes and cordage. Manila fibre which had been more commonly used, was placed at a disadvantage due to the far greater distance to ship it compared to St Helena's fibre which had similar good qualities of strength and its resistance to the effects of sea water made it suitable for use in the maritime sphere. It also had other valuable uses including the manufacture of bags and for upholstery. The continuing boom into 1918 ensured a very healthy economic situation for St Helena, and the mill owners were well able to afford good maintenance and to upgrade their machinery, such as carried out by Messrs Deason Brothers who acquired a hydraulic press for their mill at Hutts Gate.

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The Colonial Report for 1918 was given by Acting Governor Dixon:-

"The value of fibre exported rose to £61,136 for 516 tons of fibre and 222 tons of tow. The maximum controlled price of £97 a ton was obtained. At the Government mill, 25 men were regularly employed on wages varying from 2s6d to 4s6d per day. Milling of ginger fibre was tried in 1917 and fetched £70 a ton, but it was considered that it would not pay during normal times."

Annual Production & Export Values

(1913 - 1918 inclusive)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Fibre & Tow</u>	<u>Total Export Values</u>
	(Combined tonnage)	(Fibre & Tow)
1913	-	£5,372
1914	347	£7,439
1915	395	£11,101
1916	472	£21,907
1917	742	£54,830
1918	738	£61,136

The rapid price increase is reflected in the steep rise of export values, while the greatly increased production was due to four mills being in operation.

The St Helena Rifles which was a local unit mobilised on the Island during the Great War, drew off some of the men from the flax industry, but women and girls were helping to avoid any serious labour shortage. On the Honour Roll now at the Castle in Jamestown there are nearly 300 names of men who served in the St Helena Rifles from 1914 - 1919

THE SHARP POST-WAR DOWNTURN

As could be expected following the end of the Great War in November 1918 the abnormal circumstances that created such a favourable climate for St Helena's flax industry, were bound to culminate in an anti-climax of plunging prices and uncertainty.

The Colonial Report for 1919 by Governor Cordeaux largely reveals the extent to which the industry was affected during that year:-

"After the Great War ended there was a sudden drastic downturn in the island's fortunes. A big fall in the market price of fibre, the withdrawal of the garrison, and the disbandment of the local volunteers, all added towards this reversal. As a result of the lower fibre price, two flax mills were temporarily closed. The value of fibre and tow exported for 1919 was valued at £27,108 for 603 tons. The wholesale harvesting of short and immature leaves in 1918 in order to take advantage of the high price being obtained in London, had led to a serious shortage of supply for 1919. The Government mill at Longwood had to close down for six months between April and November thus giving only 71 working days, and the price of fibre fell to £40 a ton, and £35 for tow. During the months the mill was closed, the permanent hands were all continuously employed clearing land and planting flax. A concrete floor was laid in the stripper shed to replace the old wooden floor which was becoming dangerous to the workmen. Private mills:- One of Solomon & Company's mills and Messrs Deason Brothers mill at Hutts Gate worked continuously throughout the year."

As evident from this report there were four flax mills, albeit the Government mill had to close down for six months and one of the private mills (Broadbottom) only worked for a limited period.

It is interesting to compare a few food prices on St Helena in 1919 with some that were given earlier for 1913.

Flour 5d. per lb
Bread 5d. per loaf
Sugar 9½d. to 10d per lb
Tea 2s4d to 3s per lb
Rice 4½d. per lb

Sugar for example had risen from 2½d in 1913 to 10d per pound, an increase of nearly four times, which suggests that wages ought to have risen by the same factor, but according to the evidence they had not even doubled during that period.

Surprisingly the industry improved substantially in 1920, even though there was a shortage of mature leaves, and high freight rates were a cause of great concern. In 1920 the much sought after rope factory was erected on the Longwood Golf Links by Captain Thomas Mainwaring formerly of the Royal

POST-WAR DOWNTOWN

Engineers, and who in April of the same year had married Miss Maude Deason the eldest daughter of Mr & Mrs F.G.N.Deason of Longwood Farm. The rope factory with machinery was insured for £1,900 and the building for £100, represented a considerable investment which hopefully would help boost St Helena's export earnings.

On 1st May 1920 following an improvement in fibre prices, the *St Helena Guardian* reported;-

"We congratulate the firm of Solomon & Company on having opened up Broadbottom Mill (which had been closed for a long period) and trust they will continue operations for a long time to come. This firm has again helped to alleviate a certain amount of distress on the western side of the island."

The Annual Colonial Report for 1920 was the last one to be given by Governor Cordeaux:-

"The average prices on the London market were £54 per ton for fibre, and £36 for tow. The Government mill worked for 186 days during 1920 as compared with 74 in 1919, producing 95 tons of fibre and 55 tons of tow. The amount exported was 838 tons, giving a value of £38,795. In addition 117 coils of St Helena rope was exported, valued at £391. Flax was still being cut much too young, and the Longwood mill was only able to be employed for two or three days a week due to a shortage of suitable leaves. Freights were also extremely heavy, and will be prohibitive in the near future, should any fall in price take place. Solomon's Sandy Bay mill ran for 302 working days, while their Broadbottom mill only worked for 126 days. Deason Brothers mill at Hutts Gate ran for 311 days during the year."

During 1921 the extremely depressed fibre market compelled St Helena's flax mills to greatly cut back production, resulting in short time working. The only bright prospect was the first modest output from the new rope factory at Longwood. On 18th June 1921 came a report from the *St Helena Guardian*-

"We hear that the Government Flax Mill is shortly going to close down, owing to the fact that there is no sale for fibre at present"

On 9th July 1921 it was announced that Mr J.A.Thorpe had imported the machinery for cleaning aloes which grew abundantly on the island. His small mill which was situated at Cleughs Plain, used a different technique from that for stripping flax leaves. At the same time Longwood was cheered up by the welcome sound of the Government mill once more at work.

On 3rd October 1921 an event of some significance was the departure of the first work force of 44 men from St Helena on the cruiser H.M.S *Dublin* to Ascension Island which had become a dependency of St Helena after 107 years of being administered by the Royal Navy. This party was the forerunner of a long tradition whereby St Helena has provided the work force for

Ascension Island, a practice which continues to this day. Unfortunately for St Helena's flax industry, this diversion of labour was to create some problems for the mill owners. It is of some interest that for the first party selected to go to Ascension Island there were four times as many applicants than the number required.

The Colonial Report for 1921 was given by the new Governor, Robert Peel, who took up his appointment in 1922:-

"The value of fibre exported was £11,984, well down from 1920 as the price had fallen to £28 a ton. For many months it was impossible to dispose of the fibre at any price, and shipments were not advised by agents. Fortunately the Union Castle Shipping Company agreed to lower the freight rates, otherwise the flax industry as regards St Helena would have *become a dead letter*. The Longwood mill only worked for 150 days during the year, producing 76 tons of fibre and 38½ tons of tow. Solomon's mill at Sandy Bay ran for 293 working days, but the Broadbottom mill only ran for 96 days and was closed early in the year. Deason's mill at Hutts Gate ran for 308 days. In the rope industry, Captain Mainwaring employed 20 men and boys in 1921 and produced 12 tons of rope of approximate value £700. It was hoped that this infant industry would have a successful career before it."

On 4th March 1922 a reference to the cause of the continuing depressed market for New Zealand flax fibre was given by the *St Helena Guardian*:-

"According to the latest market reports, owing to the fact that New Zealand fibre is deteriorating through inferior working, and consequently the fall in gradings, it is largely being ousted from the market by the African and Java sisal."

Following the Great War there had been a very large development of sisal plantations in East Africa where cheap labour was a big advantage.

Despite the adverse market trend, a prospective new flax mill was being planned by the old established firm of W.A.Thorpe & Sons. On 2nd October 1922 Governor Peel directed that he would be pleased if a representative of the firm could meet the Colonial Surgeon, Dr. W.J.J. Arnold, on the following Monday at 3pm, to point out to that official the proposed site for their mill. Messrs Deason Brothers were then in the process of establishing a new mill at Woody Ridge which had been the *cradle* where the first flax plantation was nurtured for the earlier unsuccessful attempt to establish a flax industry in 1874. The Colonial Report for 1922 given by Governor Peel:-

"Average price in London was £29 a ton for fibre and £20 for tow. The combined tonnage was 688 tons with an export value of £18,643. Solomon's mill at Sandy Bay ran right through the year, but their Broadbottom mill was closed. Messrs Deason Brothers continued producing at Hutts Gate. Captain Mainwaring employed 18 men and boys rope making, and produced 18 tons of rope to a value of £820."

POST-WAR DOWNTOWN

Annual Production & Export Values

(1919 -1922 inclusive)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Fibre & Tow</u>	<u>Total Export Value</u>
(Combined tonnage)		(Fibre & Tow)
1919	603	£27,108
1920	838	£38,795
1921	*	£11,984
1922	688	£18,643

(* tonnage not available)

A NEW MILL-OWNER AND TWO NEW MILLS.

Although the post-war downturn had so substantially reduced output and export earnings, there were ample signs of confidence in the future of the industry. As given by the *St Helena Guardian* on 25th August 1923 -

"It is satisfactory to learn that landowners all over the Island are still planting out flax. Two new flax mills have been started in the last month, so there are now no less than six at work. Six mills can deal with a large quantity of leaf, so growers need not fear any failure in their market. The Song of the Stripper is now being heard near Francis Plain. We wish the best of luck to the enterprising owner."

The new mill owner was the long established firm of W.A.Thorpe & Sons who in addition to running a grocery store and other shops at Jamestown, they were one of the Island's largest landowners.

The founder of this firm was William Alexander Thorpe, born on St Helena on 1st August 1842, his parents being Henry and Susannah Thorpe. William after being educated at the Government Under School, became a shop assistant and later set up a small shop in Market Street. He married Rose, daughter of William Harris, baker. After a Mr McDonald left the Island in 1872 he took over his business which prospered so well he had to enlarge his shop and later set up his goods store near the Market and Main Street. In the 1880's he purchased the condemned bark *Royal Harry*, repaired her and took her to Barbados, Australia, and eventually to England where he sold her and returned to St Helena. After engaging in the shipping industry for some time, about 1905 he purchased the whole of the Ridge, other lands and dwelling houses, for over £1,500 from Mr Scott Alexander. On purchasing Woodlands, Fairyland, Woodcot, Mount Pleasant, and other properties, he became one of the island's largest landowners, and the largest stockholder. After a serious fall at Stoney Point near his residence of Mount Pleasant, he died on 14th January 1918, survived by a large family.

Under the direction of four of his sons, the business he had established continued to flourish under the same name, as indeed it does today, and in a sense the name of W.A.Thorpe & Sons could be given as having become almost an institution on St Helena. The directors in 1923 when the firm first engaged in flax-milling, were the following sons - Edwin (Managing Director) - born 8th January 1875, Frederick - born 12th December 1881, Cecil (known as Randy) - born 20 June 1888, and Harold - born 7th July 1892. The firm already owned large flax plantations and were planting more. The site of their new mill was known as Francis Vale, just below Francis Plain sports field and only a few hundred yards up the valley from the scenic Heart Shaped Waterfall. The correct name for the locality of the mill was Francis Vale, but it was much more frequently called Francis Plain, and a long time later it was

named Scott's Mill. Most of the original equipment installed by Thorpe's in their new mill at Francis Vale is referred to in the insurance taken out on 31st October 1923 for £2,600 which covered the premises, machinery, and fibre stored therein. The machinery included a new National Suction Gas Plant with Engine and a Wakefield stripping machine. There was also a hackle scutching machine, a ratchet hand press for baling the fibre, and a washing trough. Drying of the fibre was carried out by spreading it along the hill slopes of the valley, and some of it was transported over Francis Plain to be dried on Barren Hill which was also owned by Thorpes. Although Francis Plain was geographically much closer to Jamestown than Deason Brothers mill at Hutts Gate, it was about the same road journey of four miles to Jamestown wharf.

The other new mill established about the same time was at Woody Ridge for Messrs Deason Brothers who now had two mills in operation, thus there were a total of six mills serving the industry. Colonial Report for 1923 by Governor Peel -

"Solomon's Sandy Bay and Broadbottom mills both worked through the year, while Deason's then had two mills operating, Hutts Gate and Woody Ridge, thus giving employment to 160. Messrs Thorpe opened their new mill at Francis Plain in the latter part of the year, 4½ months produced 22 tons of fibre and 20 tons tow, they had 22 hands employed. Value of fibre and tow exported totalled £23,164 for 634 tons of fibre and 216 tons of tow. The rope industry was at a low ebb in 1923, producing only £480 worth of rope. Captain Mainwaring is proceeding to England during 1924 so that he may be able to help promote the rope industry"

The following is a list of the livestock on St Helena in 1923:- There were 135 horses, 1123 asses, 14 mules, 1142 horned cattle, and 2981 sheep. Oats produced was 80 tons, but no wheat.

The flax industry was continuing to make a significant contribution to the island's economy, and although its exports were by no means balancing the budget against imports, it was providing a vital avenue of employment. Since that extremely valuable weekly newspaper, the *St Helena Guardian* had ceased being published in 1923, for a long time there were only scanty reports about the flax industry in the small *St Helena Diocesan Magazine* which was only published monthly. Furthermore the annual colonial report on the flax industry did not appear nearly so well detailed as in the earlier years. During August 1924 Governor Peel died and was succeeded by Charles Harper C.M.G., O.B.E., who was appointed Governor on 2nd February 1925 and duly gave the Colonial Report for 1924:-

"Governor Peel died in August this year and was duly succeeded by Governor C.H. Harper. The Government flax mill ran on 178 days up to 11th September. On the 16th October the working of the mill was handed over to the private London

company called the St Helena Corporation Limited on a lease. The average price of fibre was £33 a ton. Sandy Bay and Broadbottom worked throughout the year, as did Deason's and Thorpe's mills. The total value of fibre and tow exports was £34,197 for 694 tons fibre and 284 tons of tow."

The private leasing of the Government mill at Longwood came under the supervision of Major Brian Eltham-Jecks (known more simply as Major Jecks) who had come out from England during 1924 as manager of the St Helena Corporation. It was an unfortunate time for anyone to begin a new business enterprise, but the terrible worldwide depression that was so greatly to affect St Helena's flax industry, could not have been foreseen by anyone.

A report prepared by W.A.Thorpe & Sons on their activities for 1924 also provided a good insight to the general situation on St Helena and the development of the flax industry at that time:-

"Many of the properties in Jamestown have become very dilapidated, especially the government. The streets are in a bad state of repair and even worse than the country roads. The constant carting of hemp to the wharf looks very promising and breaks the monotony so prevalent in the past. It is quite evident that without the Fibre industry, the Island would be in a state of starvation, whereas one can see that it has become a staple industry, which means so much to trade in general in establishing a steady circulation of money by which everyone benefits and no longer solely dependent on shipping and a charitable garrison which has been withdrawn. From a commercial point of view, the prosperity of trade is better today than it has been since the days of the Boer War, and there is little or no unemployed. In consequence of the increased expenditure throughout the Island, I should strongly recommend special attention should be given to build up a better retail and wholesale business on a recommended profit to avoid competition that may arise with the St Helena Corporation.

The Flax Mill has been erected on the most satisfactory basis and is giving excellent results, but its success depends on the extension of planting to feed the Mill. Having adopted planting on an extensive scale it is essential to select a site for the erection of another mill say three years hence when the crop will be matured, and become more than one mill can take, in which case planting around the proposed site should now be considered. The most suitable is Fairyland, and it is proposed to put up a complete mill there, on the same basis as the present mill at Francis Plain, providing there is sufficient water.

Planting:- It is recommended that after completion of the planting on the Ridges, that we should extend the planting on either side of the flax at the Woodground, on all the available space, after that to plant the Gut in Woodcot and Woodlands, also in the forest. Fairyland planting to be extended on down towards Bay House, around the top of the Sheppound and above the Road where there is a considerable quantity of furze.

Green Leaf :- This should always be bought at a reasonable price and every assistance given to the small grower. Mount Pleasant:- To extend the planting

from Stoney Point down to the land adjoining Rock Water. With reference to the flax at Half Moon, co-operation with Messrs Solomon and Company should be made with a view to lessen the transport difficulties.

Purchase of Land:- On no account should this be anticipated at present when there is great excitement at present over flax on a rising market as values are much over-estimated."

In 1925 the output of all six mills were considerably increased, with 923 tons of fibre and 420 tons of tow being produced to a total value of £41,160, the best return since 1918. As mentioned by Governor Harper in the Colonial Report for 1925 there were 300 men and women employed in the flax industry, and a considerable impetus had been given to the lace industry.

In August 1925 some of the flax mills were visited by the Prince of Wales during his Royal tour which extended to a stay of two days on St Helena. A photograph showed him on horseback leaving Francis Plain Mill. Also in 1925 Messrs Solomon & Company set up a stripper mill at Rock Rose in the Levelwood district.

One of those employed here at this time was 14 year old Stanley Henry who is now aged 81. His first job was to fasten bundles of flax to S hooks on an aerial cableway which was often used to convey the flax down from steep mountain slopes. His duty included collecting the S hooks (usually 18) down at the lower end and transport them back up to the loading end. Rock Rose mill only catered for stripping and drying, and the dried fibre was carted to Solomon's Bamboo Hedge mill for scutching and baling. Another stripper mill known to have existed was Seales Flat which is a locality above Arno's Vale and just below the peaks. Access was given by a network of tracks through the flax plantations.

In January 1926, at the request of the Governor-General of South Africa, 5,000 flax suckers were sent from St Helena for Messrs Barratt & Pelham Limited, at Newcastle, Natal. But when a dangerous fungus diseases was detected, the further importation of flax suckers was prohibited. However there was no evidence of such a disease affecting the flax on St Helena, and it seemed proven that it must have developed in South Africa.

In the Colonial Report for 1926 Governor Harper stated that owing to the development of the flax industry, general farming activity had decreased. He also referred to the fact that there was then no hotel on the island, only one boarding house in Jamestown. The value of exports was £39,977 for 751 tons of fibre and 417 tons of tow. Flax seeds to the value of £243 and flax suckers to the value of £20 were exported during the year. Six flax mills were working, employing about 500 men and women. Tenders were called for the

cutting and transport of flax. The area under flax cultivation in 1926 was 1,800 acres.

An insight to the great amount of transshipping required for machinery and spare parts from New Zealand, was revealed in the records of Messrs W.A.Thorpe & Sons. In fact this applied to all the mill owners as they basically all used similar equipment from New Zealand which was the foremost country in the world with expertise in the manufacture of flax-milling machinery. This was manufactured by Messrs Booth MacDonald & Company of Carlyle Street, Christchurch, in the South Island of New Zealand. Their catalogue (1925) gave the following prices:-

Carlyle (Wakely Patent) 9A Stripper = £60

Ditto with patent double roller chairs = £80

Power Press = £75

2 - man scutcher = £27

3 - man scutcher = £30

The following is a list of Flax Stripper spare parts which were often needed:- drums; first grade beater bars; steel rubbers; bottom feed roller spindles; roller shells.

The route as given in their shipping records for 1927 is typical for the transshipment by which this equipment reached St Helena:-

S.S. *Kairanga* from Lyttelton (N.Z.) to Sydney (Australia); transhipped on S.S. *Ulysses* from Sydney to Cape Town (South Africa); transhipped on S.S. *Gloucester Castle* from Cape Town to St Helena. Ordering and enquiries involved a considerable amount of correspondence which meant that letters also had to be transhipped to the same extent or even more. An ordinary letter from St Helena to New Zealand or vice versa, cost only one penny in 1927 and a reply could take at least six months.

From the Colonial Report for 1928 by Governor Harper:-

"Flax prices averaged £30 a ton for fibre and £19-10s for tow. The amount exported was 770 tons of fibre and 380 tons of tow, to a total value of £22,515 for fibre and £6,933 for tow. Area under cultivation estimated at 2,000 acres. Four firms engaged in flax production, and there are eleven stripping and scutching machines operating."

Annual Production & Export Values (1923 - 1928 inclusive)		
Year	Fibre & Tow (combined tonnage)	Total Export Value (Fibre & Tow)
1923	850	£23,164
1924	978	£34,197
1925	1,343	£41,160

1926	1,168	£39,977
1927	1,103	£34,274
1928	1,150	£29,448

Exports of Rope & Twine

Year	Tons	Value
*1925	32	£1,500
1926	35	£2,105
1927	18	£ 810
1928	26	£1,246

* In 1925 Messrs Deason Brothers set up machinery at their Hutts Gate mill to manufacture binder twine for export, but a proportion was supplied to the rope-making works at Longwood.

With six mills now in operation, the following information is given to explain the labour intensive processes of the flax industry and its valuable contribution in providing employment opportunities on the island. Cutting of the green flax was often carried out on a contract basis (usually 4 men). Each cutter was expected to cut 60 bundles of 56 lbs per bundle, giving a total of 1 1/2 tons per day. They usually started cutting at dawn or first light, having proceeded to the plantation in the dark, and often by 11 am or noon they had cut their quotas and gone home. The bundles of green flax were transported to the mills by strings of up to 20 or more donkeys each carrying two bundles, but where the terrain was not too difficult ox-carts were often used for the final run to the mill.

On arrival at the mill the bundles were weighed to ensure that they were each 56 lbs., failing which the cutter could be penalised for short weight. The leaves were then sorted into uniform lengths as otherwise the stripping machine could not efficiently strip them. Three men were involved in the weighing and sorting. The stripping of the leaves required a further two men, one being the stripper-man who fed three or four leaves at a time, butt end first, into the machine which emitted a peculiar whining noise that became so familiar wherever there was a flax mill. The leaves were crushed between a revolving drum and a bar whilst being tightly held by two slow moving grooved rollers. In this manner, most of the green bark was removed from the fibre which was caught by the second man, known as the catcher, who was sitting below the machine. He caught the fibre from 10 or 12 leaves at a time and formed them into loose hanks of fibre. These two men were expected to handle 9 tons of green leaves a day.

The hanks of stripped fibre were shaken and washed by two men known as shakers and two men known as washers, after which the wet fibre was taken

by ox-carts or horse-drawn carts to the drying fields where the hanks were thrown out in rows, opened up and spread out. The action of sun, rain, and air bleached out the green fibre to make it light brown or yellow. After a period of between four to eight days, the fibre was turned over to expose the other side. In addition to a field foreman, there were about six men, or up to ten women and girls, employed on this work. Finally, after a further period and on ensuring that the fibre was dry, it was returned to the mill and stored for two or three weeks before the final process of scutching.

The scutching or cleaning of the fibre was carried out by three men on a large power driven cylindrical drum containing a series of wooden bars. While one man was engaged up to bring up the fibre, the other two men worked at the scutching machine. Each held a hank of fibre and fed one end into the machine where it was beaten by the rapidly revolving drum of bars. It was then pulled out and the other end fed in to be beaten and cleaned. The folded hanks of cleaned fibre were then transferred to be pressed into 560 lb bales for export. The residue of fine fibre that became separated in the scutching process was collected by a tow-boy as he was termed. Tow was baled separately for export and was used for twine and rope-making.

In addition to all of the above, each mill had a foreman who was the highest paid, and an engine-driver who received the next highest pay. Several other categories of employees included the drivers of donkeys, oxen, or horses, carpenter, handyman, and other shed hands, giving a typical labour force for a mill in full production of about 40 including those in the drying fields.

THE YEARS OF WORLDWIDE ECONOMIC DEPRESSION

The worldwide economic depression which was triggered off by the Wall Street stock exchange crash in America during 1929, did not immediately affect production or the fibre prices of St Helena's flax industry. In fact the fibre price of £30 ton was the same as for 1928, while exports of fibre and tow in 1929 were considerably more than for 1928. As given for the Colonial Report by Governor Harper, the amounts exported for 1929 were 889 tons of fibre and 505 tons of tow to the value of £26,759 for fibre and £9,191 for tow.

A small milestone in the history of St Helena during 1929 was the importation of the first motor vehicle, a Baby Austin 7 H.P. car, by Mr Homfray Solomon. It received registration No.1 and gave him the distinction of being recognised as the "Father of Motor Transport" on St Helena. Shortly after this as will soon be seen, the first motor transport was being used in the island's flax industry.

In 1930 when the price of fibre on the London market dropped to £22 a ton, production on St Helena was accordingly reduced. Later that year the Longwood Mill which in 1924 had been leased to the St Helena Corporation by the Government, ran into financial difficulties and went into liquidation. Their manager, Major Jecks, had embarked on an enterprising experiment of planting flax on Crown wastelands which were unsuitable for any other agricultural purposes. The land leases he took out included 101 acres in two separate lots at Horse Point and Gregory's, 23 acres at Horse Pasture, 4 acres at Five-wall Gate, and 54 acres at Deadwood, but the experiment was not successful. The Corporation had to pay a specified price to small growers for green leaves as obliged by their lease, this having been fixed at 5 per cent of the London price, but when fibre prices began to fall, the Corporation appealed on the grounds that milling could not be carried out on the 5 percent basis and managed to have it reduced to 4 per cent, down from 20 shillings to 15 shillings a ton, in 1928. At the time they went into liquidation the Corporation had paid no dividend to local creditors.

The Liquidator appointed by the Colonial Government was Mr Edwin Thorpe of Messrs W.A.Thorpe & Sons who on 6th September 1930 accepted responsibility for payment of rent on the Corporation's leased flax mill at Longwood. In this episode on 24th November 1930 an interesting letter by Mr Edwin Thorpe (the Liquidator) was addressed to Major Jecks who then lived at Willowdene - "I have requested the Colonial Government to re-enter and take possession of the Longwood mill tomorrow 25th instant at 3pm and shall

be glad of your assistance in handing over the same. I shall be passing your way in the car about 2.30pm, and will be pleased to convey you to the Mill". It can be noted that Mr Thorpe had the "use of a car" which must have been the Armstrong Siddeley, registration no.16 of March 1930, in the name of his brother Mr Fred Thorpe. Thus only a year after the first one imported by Mr Solomon there were already at least 16 motor vehicles on St Helena. The Governor, Sir Charles Harper, then had an Austin 16 H.P., but just as is the case with the Governor's car today, it did not seem to bear a registration number.

About this time the existence of a Chevrolet lorry is revealed. Major Jecks had purchased it for the St Helena Corporation, but on their liquidation he purchased it for his own account, although this then became the subject of a dispute, as he was not authorised to sell any of the Corporation's assets which were all placed in the hands of the Liquidator. However that Chevrolet lorry was almost certainly the first motor vehicle to be used in the flax industry.

Major Jecks soon went into business on his own account and formed a local company named the *St Helena Trading Company* which was to establish several supply stores in various parts of the island. All the leasehold lands of the liquidated Corporation were disposed of and delivered into the hands of W.A.Thorpe & Sons, their heirs and successors. Leases made as the agreement of 6th June 1930 on lands to be used for flax growing included 26 acres at Horse Point and Gregory's, 76 acres at Horse Point and Gregory's, 54 acres at Deadwood, all at a rent of one shilling per acre for W.A.Thorpe & Sons.

During the period while the liquidation was being processed, and for a long period thereafter, the Longwood mill remained in a vacuum of inactivity, with no employment for the millhands, no purchases of green leaves from the small growers, and of course no production, although with plunging fibre prices much of the output would have had to be kept in storage. The reduced output from the other mills for 1930 is reflected in the Colonial Report for that year by Governor Harper. The amount exported was 540 tons of fibre and 340 tons of tow, to the value of £11,890 for fibre and £4,915 for tow.

On 7th January 1931 Messrs W.A.Thorpe & Sons submitted a Tender for the lease of the Government Mill at Longwood and its appurtenances. They offered to pay an annual rent of £120 for a lease of five years with the option of renewal. In a separate submission Thorpes offered to purchase the entire mill including the land of 24 acres, for £900, but neither this nor their Tender was accepted, and the mill remained closed, a decision that was no doubt influenced by the drastic slump in the fibre price to £17 ton on the London market in 1931. The Colonial Report for 1931 by Governor Harper gave the

THE FLAX INDUSTRY

amount exported as 644 tons of fibre and 296 tons of tow, to the value of £10,975 for fibre and £3,693 for tow. Rope and twine exports were valued at £300. Any delayed effect on St Helena at the beginning of the world trade slump, was more than counter-balanced by the great weight of the disastrous situation that struck its flax industry in early 1932. The fall in fibre price to £15 a ton forced all the mills to close, thereby bringing serious unemployment and poverty throughout the Island.

On 4th April 1932 the three mill owners, Messrs Solomon & Company, W.A.Thorpe & Sons, and Deason Brothers jointly wrote to Governor Harper and advised that they could no longer continue operations without a subsidy, as they were unable to continue production at a loss. After having taken over the St Helena Corporation's flax which was fully mature and their own flax nearly matured, W.A.Thorpe & Sons had considered building a new mill alongside their existing mill at Francis Plain, but instead during 1932 they decided to erect a new mill at Fairyland where extensive planting of flax had recently been carried out.

Fairyland estate in 1828 had a splendid two-storey residence and became known as the favourite resort of the elite. In the 1850's it was the home of the Colonial Auditor, George Edwards, who erected a dairy and made many improvements together with being responsible for planting most of the trees along the walks. The last tenants to reside there were the American Consul, Mr McKnight and his wife. Subsequently it was purchased about 1905 by Mr W.A.Thorpe. Although the new flax mill at Fairyland was completed during 1932, owing to the adverse circumstances of the flax industry, the firm decided to leave it in abeyance until market conditions improved.

While all the mills remained closed, and poverty began to grip the island, the Colonial Government was considering the introduction of a subsidy scheme which could enable the mills to reopen. There was also a proposal to cut the wages by 25 per cent which it was said the men were prepared to accept, and in this respect a weekly wages list for one of Solomon's mills was prepared as a guideline in addition to their estimated production costs:-

Solomon's Estimate of Production :- 5th September 1932

Five tons of Green Leaf can be handled in one day as has been stated; it does not necessarily follow that an average of 30 tons per week of 6 working days can be maintained. Given sufficient engine power, good and uniform length of leaf, favourable weather conditions and no serious setbacks in connection with machinery, 30 tons of Leaf can be dealt with in one week.

Notes on costs in 1932:-

Anthracite cost £5 per ton
 Lubricating oil cost 4/- per gallon
 Wire was used for baling (1 coil cost £1)
 Horse, ox or donkey for transport of Green Leaf
 Transport of bales to Jamestown @ 7/6 per ton
 Freight & Shipping @ 74/- per ton
 Management at 30/- a week

Production cost:-

Hemp @ £17-5/- per ton
 Tow @ £8 per ton
 Stripper Tow @ £7 per ton

Stripper Tow was the pieces of green leaf thrown out during the fibre-stripping process. It was separated from the main fibre, dried, and then baled for export. A percentage was used to mix with No.1 Tow for rope-making.

At the time of the above estimate, 5th September 1932, all the mills on St Helena had been closed since April due to the slump in the market price, but Solomon's had been operating their Broadbottom and Sandy Bay mills.

The following is the price for Green Leaf delivered to the Mill for the previous five years:- (except 1931)

Year

1927 = 129 tons @ 20/- per ton (as paid by the miller)
 1928 = 31 tons @ 15/- per ton (as paid by the miller)
 1929 = 342 tons @ 15/- per ton (as paid by the miller)
 1930 = 270 tons @ 15/- per ton (as paid by the miller)
 1932 = 211 tons @ 7/6 per ton (as paid by the miller)

Note During 1931 when the market price of fibre dropped to £17 per ton, this was less than Solomon's estimated production cost of £17-5/- per ton. The millers were therefore operating at a loss during 1931, and this was certainly the reason why no Green Leaf was purchased at this Mill for that year.

Weekly Wages List for one mill (Solomon's) 6-day week

<u>Type of Employment</u>	<u>Standard Wages</u>	<u>Number of Employees</u>
	<u>per day</u>	<u>per week</u>
Foreman @ 5/-	=£1-10/-	1
Engine Driver @ 3/6	=£1/-	1
Scutching 2½ tons @ 30/-		
¾ tons @ 5/-		
¼ tons @ 12/6	=£4-1-10	3
Cutting 30 tons @ 2/3	=£3-7-6	3

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<u>Type of Employment</u>	<u>Standard Wages</u>	<u>Number of</u>	<u>Employees</u>
	<u>per day</u>		<u>per week</u>
Drivers (Donkey, Oxen) (& or Horse)			
6 @ 2/3 day, 2 @ 2/6	=£5-11-0	8	
Graders @ 2/-	=£1- 7-0	2	
Strippers 30 tons @ 9d	=£1- 2-6	1	
Catcher @ 2/3	13-6	1	
Shakers @ 2/3	=£2- 0-6	3	
Washers @ 2/3	=£1-17-0	2	
Cartman @ 2/3	13-6	1	
Field Foreman @ 2/6	15-0	1	
Field Spreader @ 2/-	=£3-12-0	6	
Handy Man @ 3/-	18-0	1	
	<u>£28- 0-4</u>	<u>34</u>	

The annual upkeep of the plant and machinery was £3-14-0 per week in 1932. The Colonial Government subsequently approved a subsidy of £3-15-0 per ton of fibre produced, but imposed the following conditions on the mill owners:-

"Not less than 58 persons to be employed by you in connection with cutting, transport, and milling operations. Payment of the subsidy to be limited to a total production of your mills of 20 tons of fibre per month."

On the same date (9th November 1932) the export duty of fibre and tow, which had been introduced in the good times of 1915, was abolished, and the mills were reopened.

Governor Harper left St Helena in August 1932 and was succeeded by the new Governor, Sir Spencer Davis, who provided the Colonial Report for 1932

"Early in 1932 owing to the fall in the price of hemp to £15, all the nine mills on the island closed down, thus causing serious unemployment and privations throughout the island. As a means of relieving unemployment, a subsidy of £3-15/- per ton of fibre produced was approved and the mills reopened in November. The exports amounted to 234 tons of fibre and 144 tons of tow, for a price of £14 a ton for fibre and £8-15/- for tow. Average rate for men in flax mills was 1/9 for an 8 or 9 hour day. The wages for women were 1/- day. In the rope works, the average wage for men is 15/- a week and for women 10/-"

It can be ascertained from the Governor's report that the wages had been reduced by 25 percent, viz:- the average rate of 1/9 as compared to the previous list of wages which put it at more like 2/3 per day. With the area of flax plantations having expanded to an estimated 3,250 acres, it was most unfortunate that no advantage could be taken of a bountiful supply of green leaves. As it was, due to the dismally low fibre price of £12-18-0 a ton in 1933, a considerable proportion of the output from the mills had to be put into

storage which involved certain precautions having to be taken. Firstly there was the risk of fire which necessitated insurance being taken out. There are several early records of flax mills being insured. Messrs. Deason Brothers insured Longwood Barn with fibre stored therein for £500. Also the premises called "The Store" at the back of Napoleon's New House with fibre stored therein, being constructed of stone walls and slate roof, insured for £500. In Jamestown they insured the fibre stored in the Commissariat stables for £200. A storeroom with fibre in Government buildings on the Jamestown wharf was insured for £200.

Messrs. Solomon & Company stored fibre in the Rickmer's warehouse at Jamestown. This old building had formerly been the Rickmer's Hotel, named it would appear after Rickmer O. Stolt who was the master of a German ship in 1878, also named *Rickmer*. Solomon & Company were also insurance agents and no doubt insured their own fibre. W.A.Thorpe & Sons had a good fibre store in lofted premises situated between the White Horse Inn and their own shop in Jamestown. After being delivered to the Wharf for loading, during any delay there was a risk of the fibre bales being damaged by bad weather and also the ocean rollers which occur annually usually in the first three months.

On 9th February 1933 due to the continuing fall in fibre prices, Messrs. Solomon & Company wrote to the Government stating that after consultation with Messrs Deason Brothers and W.A.Thorpe & Sons, they were authorised to agree on their behalf as well as on their own, to continue milling operations for a further period of 3 months, viz:- March, April, and May, if the present subsidy of £3-15/- per ton can be increased by 10/- for each fall of 10/- per ton below £3-10/- on the London market price as notified by the Crown Agent for the Colonies. On 28th February 1933, the Government agreed to the continuation of milling subject to the following modification in the conditions previously operating, mainly that the maximum production on which the subsidy will be paid, be limited to 75 tons (as under), that a minimum of 210 labourers be employed instead of 270, and that seven mills be worked instead of nine mills.

Messrs Solomon & Company	33 tons per month
Messrs Deason Brothers	30 tons per month
Messrs W.A.Thorpe & Sons	12 tons per month

On 20th May 1933 W.A.Thorpe & Sons insured a new mill on land they had leased at what was then called Warrall's Gut (later known as Warren's Gut) at Levelwood. From the records this mill contained a 36 H.P. Gas Engine of value £200; a Fibre Stripper of value £70; a Flax Scutcher of value £40; and a Baling Press of £40 value. Warrall's Gut mill did not appear in

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subsequent reports, and similarly to the recently built Fairyland mill it must have been held in abeyance until better times occurred. They had also planted a considerable amount of flax on the leased land at Warrall's Gut.

A new stripper mill at Oaklands appeared in the records of 1933 as being operated by Deason Brothers. Oaklands was another of St Helena's historic estates. In 1920 when this property was purchased by Mr David Francis it consisted of about 70 acres, most of it under flax, and with large adjacent plantations at Spring Gut and above the Hermitage, this district was particularly well served for green leaves. After being stripped at Oaklands mill the fibre was transported to Hutts Gate for drying and scutching.

The following mills were reported to be operating in 1933:

Hutts Gate	(120 employees)
Sandy Bay	(99 employees)
Broadbottom	(included in Sandy Bay)
Francis Vale	(37 employees)
Woody Ridge	(included with Hutts Gate)
Oaklands	(included with Hutts Gate)
Longwood	(included with Hutts Gate)
Longwood Rope Works	(11 employees)

It can be noted that Longwood mill was grouped with Hutts Gate (Deasons), but the following year it was reported as having been leased to Solomon & Company under the condition that they were required to purchase the leaves of smallholders. Rock Rose mill was also reported in 1933 as being owned by Solomon's, but it was apparently not being operated.

From the Colonial Report for 1933 by Governor Sir Spencer Davis:-

"The fibre market showed no improvement during the year and prices continued to be the lowest recorded since the inauguration of the industry in 1907. Of the nine mills on the island five have been in operation throughout the year working on an average subsidy of £3-15/- per ton of fibre produced as a measure of unemployment relief. Of 855 tons of fibre produced, 668 tons were exported at £12-18/- per ton. Of 326 tons of tow produced, 289 tons were exported at £9 per ton. Rope industry:- Small consignments have been exported from time to time by the small factory operated by Messrs Deason Brothers"

During 1934 an obituary that appeared in the April issue of the *St Helena Diocesan Magazine* and headed "The Late Major Jecks", must have a place in this history:-

"The death (on 18th March 1934) was recorded with regret of Major Brian Eltham-Jecks at the early age of 51. Major Jecks as we then knew him, came to the island some ten years ago when as the manager of the St Helena Corporation he took charge of the former Government flax mill at Longwood. Flax was then selling at £35 a ton and no one could foresee the coming worldwide trade

depression which reduced the price to £18 a ton. This spelt ruin to the Corporation and forced the company into liquidation. Undismayed he turned his enterprise into trading and well stocked shops erected in various parts of the island, which proved a boon to country people who before this had to send to town for everything they needed. The familiar blue-painted shops were established at Longwood, Sandy Bay, Half Tree Hollow, St Pauls, and Jamestown (viz Canister). Lately Major Jecks had acquired possession of Prospect, Rural Retreat, and Rose Bower, rebuilding the houses in a splendid undertaking in an island where owing to bad times so many fine country houses were allowed to fall into decay, and clearing the lands with a view to intensive agricultural production in the hope of finding a market overseas. His enterprises meant the employment of many people, and for his foresight and energy he will be a man greatly missed. He was buried at St Paul's Cemetery and the large crowd who attended the service conducted by the Bishop gave an indication of the affection he inspired. The Boy Scout buglers sounded for him the Last Post and the Reveille."

Although there was some improvement in the fibre market during 1935, it was a bleak year for St Helena as indeed it was for the world at large. Apart from a few mills that managed to keep going, there was no other work available on the island, while a desperate housing shortage could not be tackled due to the low economy.

Fairyland Mill which had been put on a caretaking basis since it had been built by Messrs W.A.Thorpe & Sons in 1932, was opened on 1st November 1935 and produced its first export fibre. Prior to this the estate had been used for grazing only, but its extensive plantations of flax had steadily been maturing. At the same time this mill and contents were insured for £1000, the building was described as being constructed of masonry with a corrugated iron roof. Contents included one flax stripper, one scutcher, a baling press, one 44 H.P. Gas Engine, belting pulleys, and shafting, plus the fibre in a storeroom.

From the Annual Report for 1935 by Governor Sir Spencer Davis:-

"The fibre market as a result of the European situation, improved during the course of the year. Five mills have been in operation during the year. Fibre exported was 857 tons at £13-15/- per ton, and tow 319 tons at £9-10/- per ton. In the flax mills the average daily rate for men is slightly under 1/9 for a 9 hour day. The wages paid to women are slightly under 1/- per day. In the rope works the average wage for men is 12/- per week and for women 5/-. The number of persons employed in the flax mills is 247, and in the rope works 16."

The market for fibre improved during 1936, certainly influenced by events in Europe where the Spanish Civil War had started, while in Africa there was Italy's annexation of Abyssinia. For the first time since 1929, nine mills were

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in operation on St Helena. These appear to have been the following:- Hutts Gate, Woody Ridge, and Oaklands, operated by Deasons; Broadbottom, Sandy Bay, Longwood, and Rock Rose, operated by Solomons; Francis Vale and Fairyland operated by W.A.Thorpe & Sons. After operating for nearly one year, production at Fairyland mill ceased during October 1936. On 23rd September 1936, 130 tons (650 bales) of fibre caught fire on the Jamestown wharf and nearly all destroyed. The fibre belonged to W.A.Thorpe & Sons, and was insured.

In the Colonial Report for 1936 by Governor Sir Spencer Davis, the London price of fibre had improved during the year and there were nine mills at work. The amount of fibre produced was 850 tons of which 804 tons were exported at £17-8-4 per ton. The amount of tow produced was 426 tons of which 425 tons were exported at £13-4-2 per ton. In the Report 1937 by Governor Sir Spencer Davis, for the greater part of the year good fibre prices prevailed and nine mills were at work, but in the last quarter there was a substantial reduction and by December a number of mills had closed. Production of fibre was 1,046 tons of which 1,090 tons were exported. Improved prices and production during 1937 had suggested a recovery taking place in the industry, but no one could have forecast that 1938 would be the worst year of the entire economic depression which had been running its dreadful course with varying intenseness since 1929. During 1938 Governor Sir Spencer Davis completed his term of office and was succeeded by the new Governor, Guy Pilling. Precious little flax milling was carried out on St Helena in 1938 as evidenced by the miserably low figure of 484 tons of combined fibre and tow exported to a value of £6,960 which was the lowest since 1913. As most of the mills were closed during this year, it appears that a sizeable portion of the exports must have been fibre previously held in storage.

Some idea of the situation on St Helena in 1938 can be gauged from the publicity given to a letter by the senior partner of W.A.Thorpe & Sons, Mr Edwin Thorpe, who was visiting London at this time. His letter was published on 15th November 1938 by the London newspaper *Daily Express*. Headed

“Wages are 1/6 a day on forgotten Isle

Britain is sending ten million pounds to Czechoslovakia when the money could be well spent on the Empire. St Helena is in a bad way now. Its flax mills are mostly closed, the poor beg for bread at the Cathedral and the wages for the labourer are 1/6 for a ten hour day. A fraction of the ten million pounds would help to put the Island right” said Mr Thorpe, “but nobody worries about it. I was born on the Island” he said. “My three brothers live there and I came to London to sell the flax which they produce in their mills. The mills have been closed down for more than a year now, because flax is selling in London at £16 a ton

market price. That is £4 below what it costs on St Helena to produce it, with the freightage and insurance to London. It is the only industry of the island. Now that it has stopped working many of the islanders - there are 4,500 - are forced to live in very poor conditions. Workers thrown out of employment have been put to work on the roads. The road makers are paid 1/6 a day and they live on dry bread and tea without milk. Little can be done without help from the Government"

Unfortunately the Colonial Government of St Helena was not authorised to do much more, other than the subsidy which they had been providing to the mill owners since 1932 as a measure of relieving unemployment. On 10th December 1938 the Government Secretary, Mr G. Kitching, notified the mill owners of conditions attached to payment of the subsidy:-

(a) no employee shall be paid a lower wage than 1/9d a day in respect of a day of nine working hours except on Saturdays when the day shall be five hours only

(b) Overtime work shall not be enforceable, but employees may volunteer to work overtime at the rate of not less than 4d an hour.

(c) The following days shall be given as holidays without loss of wages Every Saturday from 1pm onwards

*Christmas Day

Good Friday

Empire Day

*King's Birthday

First Monday in August

If any of the days marked with an asterisk should fall on a Sunday, the following Monday shall be observed as a holiday instead.

Annual Production and Export Values (1929 - 1938 inclusive)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Fibre & Tow</u> (combined tonnage)	<u>Total Export Values</u> (Fibre & Tow)
1929	1,394	£35,950
1930	882	£16,805
1931	940	£14,668
1932	378	£ 4,542
1933	957	£11,182
1934	1,015	£10,392
1935	1,176	£14,171
1936	1,229	£19,692
1937	1,508	£31,654
1938	484	£ 6,960

Annual Production and Export Values for Rope & Twine (1929 -1938 inclusive)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Rope & Twine</u> Tons Cwt.	<u>Gross value</u>
1929	51	£2,051

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1930	52	£2,243
1931	23	£ 300
1932	37	£ 925
1933	45	£ 968
1934	25	£ 498
1935	11	£ 237
1936	17-10	£ 417
1937	11- 5	£ 292
1938	14	£ 337

In the Governor's report for 1938 the following mills are listed as having been in operation for that year:-

Hutts Gate Mill
Oaklands Mill
Sandy Bay Mill
Longwood Mill
Broadbottom Mill
Rock Rose Mill
Francis Vale Mill
Longwood Rope Mill

By comparison with the list for 1933, Woody Ridge Mill has apparently been phased out, and Rock Rose Mill was re-introduced.

The following is a summary for the stocks of donkeys held by Messrs W.A.Thorpe & Sons in 1938:-28 geldings, 26 mares, 18 stallions, 5 foals:- Total - 77 head. There were eight deaths from accidents etc. during this year.

Typical examples of the donkeys' names then in use:- Noble, Violet, Jonny, Nelson, Tony, Sambo, May, Una, Jack, Girlie, Blackie, Topsy, Queen, Jeffrey, Daisy, Alice, Albie, Kitty, Johnson, Gypsy, Fairy, Neddy, Saul, Lady, Eggie, Emperor, Flossy, Bagley, Major, Mary Ann, Bird, Diamond, Softy, Pearl, Prince, Bumpsey, Charlie, Handy, Jamy, Neighbour, Peter, Beauty, Maggy, Blucher, Stanger, Harry.

Although no records are available, the other two mill owners probably kept as many or more donkeys. They all kept a considerable number of working oxen and a certain number of horses as well.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR ERA.

By 1939, little more than 20 years after the Great War, Germany under their Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler, had risen from the humiliation of defeat to become the dominant military power of Europe, a fact that was to be so painfully emphasised, as within only a few months after the Second World War started on 3rd September 1939, his blitzkrieg campaign had brought about the fall of France, the evacuation of all British troops back to England, and practically all resistance had been crushed in his occupation of Europe. Fortunately for St Helena, her mother country of Great Britain escaped the same fate of occupation, but remained in dire peril from invasion while being subjected to a merciless campaign of bombing by the German air force.

By comparison with the great boom in the flax industry at the beginning of the Great War, there was to be nothing like that during the Second World War. The main factor to affect the marketing of St Helena's flax fibre was the rise of sisal fibre as a competitor. Large plantations which had been developed in East Africa during the inter-war years of the 1920's and 1930's were providing regular supplies of fibre to the London market. In addition, manila fibre which was traditionally used for rope-making, was also available, at least during the first two years of the war. In the early months of 1939 there was only a modest improvement in the market for St Helena's fibre, although the average London price of £17 a ton was only slightly above that obtained during the bleak year of 1938. After the war broke out in September there was a definite improvement in demand, resulting in the exports being boosted to 833 tons of fibre and 512 tons of tow.

Unlike during the Great War, the shipping route between St Helena and England posed a deadly hazard from the activities of long-range German submarines which quite early in the war began to inflict enormous losses on British and Allied shipping. As such they became the greatest threat to the survival of St Helena's flax industry during the war.

Territorially it is doubtful if there was ever any threat to invade St Helena, but it is, and always has been a very strategically situated island. Along with Ascension Island which is 700 miles to the north, there is no other land in this vast region of the South Atlantic Ocean. Certainly for that reason alone there was an endeavour to provide the island with at least some means of defence, mainly from two 6-inch naval type guns on Ladder Hill. The Royal Marines who formed a small garrison up until the outbreak of war, were replaced by a unit of the Royal Artillery. The St Helena Rifles Brigade, a local unit under Major E. Moss, was re-formed in 1939 mainly for local service, and there was also the voluntary St Helena Home Guard unit under Captain Mainwaring.

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This was about the full extent of mobilisation which included the manning of searchlight batteries. There is no doubt that the drawing off of men from the flax industry for military duty, did reduce production which during the full period of the war never matched the higher peace-time tonnages

Meantime in New Zealand, the original homeland of this flax, their industry had seen a drastic decline since 1915 when they had 240 mills in operation, but by the beginning of the Second World War these had been reduced to no more than 20 mills, while their acreage under flax had fallen from about 22,000 in 1915 to less than 5,000 in 1939. Two factors which had contributed to this decline were the high cost of labour and the high cost of shipping cargo from New Zealand to the U.K.

In October 1939 the German pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Von Spee* was on the rampage in the South Atlantic Ocean, sinking British merchant ships over a wide area. Her high speed and strategy of rapidly changing target areas, outfoxed the Royal Navy, and at one stage she was reported as having been sighted off St Helena. Combined with the menace from submarines, this led to cargo ships being compelled to sail in well-guarded convoys which almost resulted in St Helena becoming isolated, as very few ships were inclined to run the risk of leaving the convoy. Of the ships which called at St Helena during 1940 only six appear to have taken on cargoes of flax fibre. These were the *Windsor Castle*, *Athlone Castle*, *Llanstephen Castle*, *Llandory Castle*, *Empire Success* and *Arundel Castle*

Despite problems and dangers of the high seas, fibre production for 1940 was well up from the previous year. The amounts exported were 1,095 tons of fibre at £24-18/- per ton and 419 tons of tow at £19 per ton. As the annual reports were discontinued for the war years, it has to be surmised that for 1940 the same seven mills as listed for 1938 were all producing to some extent. The Longwood Rope Mill produced 16 tons to a value of £474. In 1941 with the market price of fibre having risen, there was an incentive to increase production, but a serious problem was the interruption to regular shipping calls, due to the deadly hazard posed by prowling enemy submarines.

In practically all the flax mills on St Helena at this time, the machinery was driven by National Gas Engines of 36 to 40 B.H.P and suction gas plants fuelled with anthracite coal which had to be imported together with supplies of lubricating oil. Whenever either of these latter precious commodities ran out, so did production until new supplies arrived.

Another kind of setback to production occurred when Thorpe's mill at Fairyland burnt down. At 5.40 a.m on 11th March 1941 an alarm was received that this mill was on fire. One of the Company's representatives together with

the Firemaster arrived on the scene at 6.10 a.m by which time the building was gutted from end to end, and the mill was totally destroyed. Fortunately the building and machinery were insured for £1,000.

On 20th March a report on the condition of the relics was issued by Captain Mainwaring R.E. who considered the gas engine was so badly damaged by fire it was unfit for further service as the outer cylinder was badly cracked. He also considered that the gas producer plant had suffered so badly from the heat of the fire, it would have to be completely dismantled and rebuilt, but in its present state it was totally unfit for service. He estimated the value of the relics as £50, or approximately their scrap value. The cause of the fire remained a mystery and no explanation was offered. The whole of the machinery was damaged beyond repair, but Messrs W.A.Thorpe & Sons were not slow in having Fairyland mill rebuilt, although it did not immediately begin producing.

A notice displayed at Fairyland mill after it was rebuilt, very significantly conveyed its situation

"This Mill was destroyed and burnt down on the 12th March 1941. From the ashes of the burnt out fire this mill was restored and rebuilt within four months of the above date. closed down 10th August 1945 in the hope some day the wheels of industry will again return to production, and the workers return to enjoy the fruits of their labour". God Save the King

By Order - W.A.Thorpe & Sons

It is apparent that this notice was written when the Mill closed in August 1945. As obtained from the ledger records, this mill did resume production in 1941, but closed again on 7th November 1941, as also did Francis Plain Mill on the same date. It is certain that several other mills had their production affected for one reason or another during this year.

In September 1941 the food situation on St Helena was reaching a critical stage, as supplies had rapidly dwindled due to the scarcity of ships. For W.A.Thorpe & Sons it was serious enough for them to contemplate closing down their retail business in Jamestown, and as mentioned their two flax mill did close in November. The food shortage on the Island became so acute that people were without bread. The Colonial Secretary was appealed to for intervention, but the Colonial Office advised that they had no jurisdiction on the matter.

All possibilities for down-playing the seriousness of the situation entirely disappeared during October 1941 when a terrible event occurred practically on the doorstep of St Helena. It was known that German submarines were active in the region, but the Royal Navy whose supremacy for more than 100

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years had assured the island's preservation, were so hard pressed in patrolling more strategic sea routes, it had not been possible to station a full time naval presence although they made periodic calls at St Helena. For the purpose of refuelling their ships, the R.F.A naval tanker *Darkdale* arrived on 4th August 1941 to remain on station in Jamestown Harbour.

At 00-40 in the earliest hour of 22nd October 1941, an enormous explosion shook the island and was followed by a blazing inferno that consumed the *Darkdale* as she sank. Unknown at this time, a German U-boat had torpedoed her. Of the *Darkdale's* crew 41 men perished and only two survived. The Captain, two officers, and three other crew members, all on shore at the time, were miraculously saved. With the impact of war having arrived on their doorstep, the people of St Helena could have no illusions about the dangerous situation that faced them. There was no way another tanker could wait like a sitting duck at Jamestown, nor for that matter would any other ship want to remain anchored there for longer than it took to unload or load.

Of the ships that ran the gauntlet to call at St Helena during 1941, nine appear in the records as having taken on cargoes of flax fibre. These were *Sandown Castle*, *Rochester Castle*, *Rowallan Castle*, *Richmond*, *Roslin Castle*, *Orient City*, *Riley*, *Trevalgan*, and *Manchester Port*. For such a year of difficult and dangerous circumstances it is not surprising that the flax industry had a very retarded production which amounted to exports of 720 tons of fibre at £25-8-4 per ton, and 242 tons of tow at £19-6-8 per ton. The market price continued to show an upward trend. Only 12 tons of rope and twine were exported to a value of £375.

Some insight to the situation on St Helena during 1941 is revealed in a letter written on 17th April 1941 by Mr Edwin Thorpe to the St Helena Association at Jamestown.

"The day of reckoning is drawing nearer every day, when we shall be faced with the shortage of food supplies beyond anything the island has experienced in the past. The Government already alarmed with the situation with the shipping services being restricted to one vessel in three months, have taken inventory of food supplies on hand. Notwithstanding the serious position, the Government has done nothing to relieve the present shortage, but have adopted a policy which has a tendency to create a shortage of local grown produce by taking over the cultivated land for the erection of houses. We earnestly appeal to your Association to at once take drastic measures to prevent Government from acquiring any further arable land for building purposes. The erection of several houses on the Black Field at the farm Longwood covering 8 acres, deprives the owners of this valuable cultivated land which concerns you, and a vital importance to our food supplies. I understand from the owners that the Government now contemplates taking a further 25 acres of this valuable

cultivated land with the same object in view of building more houses. This farm comprises of 70 acres of cultivated land, and if this insane policy is put into operation, the Owners will be deprived of 33 acres nearly half the original acreage in question, it looks like taking advantage of a sick man. Inasmuch as the houses are not wanted in that vicinity and would serve a better purpose if erected at the labour centres such as Half Tree Hollow, Ruperts, and Jamestown”

This interesting letter is referring to Longwood Farm which was then occupied on a long-term lease by Deason Brothers under their surviving principal, Mr Fred Deason, who was then 70 years of age. In the Black Field sector was the Government flax mill, then leased to Messrs Solomon & Company and occupying 25 acres including the drying fields known as Mill Field.

Certainly the 8 acres taken by the Government to build houses, was valuable cultivated land, but as there had been such a desperate housing shortage with none having been built for a long time due to the low economy, and in view of the expanding community at Longwood particularly in the flax industry, there was a fair reason. At this time on St Helena practically all workers walked to work, many of them over a great distance from other parts of the island. Those working at Longwood and who lived at Jamestown, Half Tree Hollow, or Ruperts, would have had to walk five miles each way, giving a tally of 10 miles for the day.

During 1941 it was apparent that wharf facilities badly needed improving. The methods of loading and unloading were described as obsolete. A new crane costing £8,000 was found to be more obsolete than the old one which had been destroyed, and the loading of hemp and the unloading of cargo was still dependent on an old crane. The cargo was simply dumped on the wharf (no sheds) quite unprotected from the sea or rain, and often kept in the lighters for some time after the vessel left. The lighters employed are mostly unseaworthy and leaking badly, the supervision of labour on the wharf is appalling. Naval ships often call for fuel and fresh water, but are often compelled to rush off without water, owing to no facilities. The only water-boat recently foundered and sank; owing to its condition it was no surprise

With the devastating Japanese attack on the strategic American naval base at Pearl Harbour in late 1941, America was compelled to enter the war, but it was to be a long time before the Japanese were halted in their relentless southward invasions which included all the Malayan Peninsula, all the Dutch East Indies, and all the Phillipines. It was the last-named that held some implication for St Helena's flax industry, as the supply of manilla from the Phillipines was effectively cut off to world markets, and with supplies of jute

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from India also being under threat, it may have seemed that there would be a big demand for St Helena's flax fibre, but it still had to compete with sisal fibre which although having to be shipped from a greater distance, its market price in London was quite favourable.

Despite the great danger from enemy submarines, a few ships were getting through to pick up cargoes of fibre at Jamestown, and production during 1942 proved to be the highest for any year of the war. On 19th November 1942 when the *Clan Alpine* arrived at Jamestown Harbour the people of St Helena were once again reminded of the terrible hazards in the war at sea. The *Clan Alpine* had called to land 99 survivors from the cargo\passenger ship *City of Cairo* which had been torpedoed on 6th November 1942 nearly 500 miles south of St Helena by a German submarine. The *City of Cairo* was too slow to sail in a convoy to England, and had been proceeding on her own via Pernambuco (South America). Of several lifeboats carrying survivors, two had drifted to within 50 miles of St Helena when they were sighted by the *Clan Alpine* and rescued.

The *Clan Alpine* was not scheduled to call at St Helena when she picked up the survivors, but she is recorded as having called at St Helena earlier in 1942 to take on a cargo of flax fibre. Unfortunately the *Clan Alpine* did not survive the war. During March 1943 she was sunk when her convoy was attacked by U-boats. Other ships that called at St Helena to take on cargoes of flax-fibre during 1942 were:- *Melskerk*, *Ocean Vestal*, and *Capo Olmo*. Included with the *Clan Alpine* these were recorded as having taken on consignments from Messrs W.A.Thorpe & Sons, but almost certainly included some from other mill owners whose export records do not exist.

Both of Thorpe's mills, Fairyland and Francis Plain, reopened during February 1942 after having been closed since November 1941. On 2nd February 1942 Francis Plain mill had 41 employees made up of:-

1 Manager	1 engine driver
1 carpenter	3 scutcher room
1 tow boy	4 flax cutters
10 shed hands	6 ox drivers
3 donkey boys	1 rope boy
10 women and girls in the field	
<u>41 Total</u>	

From the good production figures for 1942 the other six mills were probably in operation for most of the year. Exports amounted to 1,102 tons of fibre at £32-19-2 per ton, and 396 tons of tow at £15-19-5 per ton. Rope and twine exports improved with 26 tons to a value of £1,077 With the cutting-off of manila supplies in 1942, the mill owners on St Helena during 1943 were

anticipating an increasing demand for their fibre, albeit they had to compete with sisal, and right at the beginning the agents in London, John I Jacobs, advised on 1st January 1943 that St Helena hemp and tow was being marketed at very low prices.

The millers on St Helena were holding a large quantity of fibre, and Thorpe's alone had 200 bales they were anxious to have shipped. This was confirmed in a letter of 2nd January 1943 to their manager Mr E.A.Thorpe then in London on one of his periodic visits to promote his Company's interests, especially in the flax industry:-

Shipment of hemp per *S.S.Strasbourg* received in a bad way. We believe shipment of footwear is lost. We are awaiting shipment to take our hemp holding here over 200 bales and close on 100 bales of No.1 tow. Little or no retail business being done here. Flax mills are keeping up their output of 3 tons per week. Fairyland is still leading with her usual 13 bales of hemp per week. Rock Mount final cutting at the end of November 850 tons. Solomon's continuing at Red Rock up to the present about 450 tons; after the cutting should there be any, balance of green leaf will have to be made at Head of Vane or at Half Moon; we are cutting green leaf at Chest-Nut for Fairyland mill; we still have trouble with Francis Plain mill in securing sufficient flax for the mill, we hope to continue with better results. We are ordering anthracite and lubricating oil, have to check if vessel is detained."

Shortly after this, Mr Edwin Thorpe wrote to advise that one of their fibre consignments from St Helena had been lost by enemy action. It was fully covered by insurance.

On 15th February 1943 the Governors secretary advised mill owners that the Government approved a subsidy of 10/- per ton to be continued on condition that the present rate of wages for mill workers is increased by 1 1/2d (a penny halfpenny) per day to take effect from 15th February. For a 6-day week this would amount to an increase of 9d.

The Warrall's Gut mill which was owned by Messrs W.A.Thorpe & Sons on land leased from the Government at Levelwood, had apparently been inactive during most of the pre-war years due to the economic depression, although from time to time it may have produced some fibre as this mill had been fully equipped with machinery since 1933. Following the increased demand for fibre in 1942, the Government having become aware that this mill was not being used and its potential to help boost the island's exports, wrote to Thorpe's on 15th January 1943 with a proposal to purchase as outlined by the Government Secretary:- "In view of the need for increasing production during the current year, it is important that a decision should be arrived at as early as possible, and the Government would be glad to know whether your

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demand for fibre in 1942, the Government having become aware that this mill was not being used and its potential to help boost the island's exports, wrote to Thorpe's on 15 January 1943 with a proposal to purchase as outlined by the Government Secretary:--

"In view of the need for increasing production during the current year, it is important that a decision should be arrived at as early as possible, and Government would be glad to know whether your firm is prepared to sell the mill, or failing this, to sell the engine. If your firm is prepared to sell either of these, would you please inform us of the price required".

However subsequent negotiations resulted in messrs Deason Brothers agreeing to purchase the mill including the machinery which was said to be in bad condition, and the green leaf on the land surrounding the mill. They also took over the lease on the land at a rental of £3-15/- a year from the Government. At this time, the mills operated by Deason Brothers at Oaklands and Woody Ridge were being phased out. Their mill at Warrall's Gut which became known as Warren's Gut, was then operated as a stripper mill only, and the fibre was transported to their Hutts Gate mill for scutching and baling.

The periodic business trips to London by Mr. Edwin Thorpe during the war, resulted in frequent correspondence to his Company (W.A. Thorpe & Sons) on St. Helena. Written in a notably forthright and down-to-earth style, his letters must be commended as having now become a treasure of history, particularly for their references to St Helena's flax industry and its struggle to survive during the Second. World War.

His vision in looking beyond the end of that conflict, is evident in the following letter written on 12 March 1943 to John I. Jacobs & Company who were also agents in London for both Messrs Deason Brothers and Messrs Solomon & Company:-

Reconstruction Finance:-

"To avoid the unfortunate circumstances which overtook the St. Helena hemp industry at the close of the last war and to prevent a repetition of events, we are now applying to the Control to be permitted to build up a reserve on the eve of victory to enable the millers to face the situation that may arise without appealing for subsidies to prevent a collapse. Finance after the war is required to replenish spare parts and machinery damaged, and repairs which have been neglected during operations, and the crops are becoming exhausted and choked with furze much of which has been prevented from cutting during the war period; there was not the labour or the funds available to remedy the evil; to enable the continuity of crop it is essential that prompt attention is necessary, while on the transportation side, carts and wagons must be renewed.

Labour:- There are four men allocated to each mill for flax-cutting carried on by piece-work. A man working the 8 hours can comfortably cut two tons of green

leaf daily, whereas today each man cuts 1½ tons per day and is on his way home between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m., and receives 4 shillings per day for practically half day of work. To keep a mill in operation it requires 6 tons per day, not less, and with inferior quality of leaf even that is insufficient, but they cannot be induced to work longer to increase their earnings to expedite output. Here again the cart drivers deliver two loads per day and frequently finish at 3 p.m., not even with the increased wage can they be persuaded to work the full hours for which they are paid. This applies also to the donkey drivers. The mills are run on a 5½ day week, they stop work on Saturday and receive their full pay. I am convened to operate the mills on Saturday. The fire is lit (for the gas producer) at 8 a.m. and often to 9 or 10 o'clock before it's underway, whereas at 12 noon they are drawing the fire, and much anthracite coal and lubricating oil is wasted; if a 5 day week was adopted I venture to say that production would not suffer, the present system is not an economic proposition."

It was hoped that if the millers received the price rises asked for (£5 for hemp and £3 for tow) the wages of millhands would rise by 30/- a week. In a letter of 2 June to his brother in London, Mr. Fred Thorpe reported that the people are in need of clothes, going about poorly clad, and the island is in a very bad way.

During August 1943 the Government advised the mill owners that they required 100 men in two batches of 50 for work on Ascension Island where between March and July 1942 the American army had built a new airfield which they had gouged out amongst the cinders and volcanic cones. This was an emergency landing strip for refuelling aircraft on long distance flights from America via Brazil and Ascension Island to the north African war zone where an Allied army had landed and was engaged in battle with several German divisions. From Thorpe's mills three men working in the sheds were taken and replaced by a woman, but the Government informed Thorpe's that they would not take any of their key men.

In an interesting historic sidelight in 1945 on St. Helena, Mr. Solomon was selling off most of his properties. A hotel known as the "First and Last" in Main Street facing the Jamestown Public Gardens was sold to the Working Mens Association for £300, an insurance office near his own office was sold for £150; "Enfield Lodge" was sold for £200. He also sold the cinema project and many other small properties. In addition the historic estate and residence of "Prospect" was sold for £2,000. Mr. George Moyce of the Consulate bought the historic house of "Teutonic Hall" for £500. During August 1943 the Government after a long delay, started erecting a roofed shed on the wharf for placing cargo from protection of rain and sea. It was said that at last this will mean good protection for all hemp and tow when stored on the wharf

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awaiting shipment. Sometimes the hemp and tow remained on the wharf two to three days before shipment was made.

According to Mr Edwin Thorpe's letter of 30 August from London, the only export orders then being granted were for small quantities of shoe leather. He had great faith in St. Helena when the war ended. As he said - "It had been named as a base for the all British Airways".

The only ships listed in the records as having taken consignments of fibre from Thorpe's mills (and no doubt from the other millers) during 1943 were the *Strasbourg* and *Manchester Division*, but as exports were quite substantial during this year, it seems there must have been some other ships that called. Even so it was another deadly year for losses of shipping from German U-boats, and it was this year that the *Clan Alpine* was torpedoed while in a convoy.

Exports for 1943 amounted to 1,051 tons of fibre at £25-7-6 per ton, and 373 tons of tow at £16-10/- per ton. Exports of rope and twine were remarkably increased with 59 tons valued at £2,746.

The following are some records of Messrs. Solomon & Company's mills for the 4 years ending 31 December 1943:-

Green Leaf purchased - about 7,000 tons
 3,500 tons at Longwood mill - average price 21/- per ton
 500 tons for other mills - at 10/- per ton.

Hemp production:-	Per year
Bamboo Hedge mill - average 5 years 1939-43	149 tons
Longwood mill - " 5 " " "	148 "
Broadbottom mill - " 5 " " "	124 "
Rock Rose mill " 4- " 1940-43	143 "

Average output per week - 2 tons 17 cwt.

Anthracite consumption at 8/1 /2d. par cwt.

Average consumption per mill per week - 18 3/4 cwt.

Lubricating oil at 6/7d per gallon

Weekly consumption for three mills is 19 gallons.

Bamboo Hedge total 480 gallons for 1940, 520 galls. for 1941

Longwood for first 6 months of 1944 -160 gallons.

Bamboo Hedge " 6 " " " - 160 "

Broadbottom " 6 " " " - 160 "

Cost of rope per bale - 7/6d. It can be noted that rope was still being used to tie bales; wire which was also used to tie bales was at this time almost unobtainable due to wartime restrictions. All of Solomon's mills were using

National gas engines at this time except Rock Rose mill which had a Petter paraffin oil engine.

Although there were no Government annual reports issued during the war years, it is possible to establish with reasonable certainty the mills that were then operating:-

Bamboo Hedge	Solomon's
Longwood	"
Broadbottom	"
Rock Rose	"
Hutts Gate	Deason's
Warra11's Gut	"
Oaklands	"
Francis Plain	Thorpe's
Fairyland	"

At this time the Longwood Rope Works was being operated by Deason's with twine supplied from their Hutts Gate mill. The Governor in 1943 was Major William Bain-Grey who had succeeded Governor Pilling during 1941.

For 1944 the difficulties of maintaining production in the face of war-time shortages and other problems including the scarcity of shipping were all responsible for the reduced exports during this year. Thorpe's mills averaged 8 bales per week at Fairyland and 9 bales per week at Francis Plain, as compared with an average 12 bales per week in 1943.

Between March and June 1944, Messrs W.A.Thorpe 8 Sons purchased large amounts of green leaf from the property of Mrs. Prosser at "The Hermitage". As this was adjacent to the property of Oaklands where the Oaklands mill was operated by Deason Brothers, it gives reason to believe that this mill had ceased production.

During 1944 the Government set up the Phormium Mills Board Fund (also known as the Cess Account) to which the millers had to contribute £2-7/ per ton (or every 4 bales of fibre) for the purpose of renewals and repairs to their mills. As will be seen later this Fund became quite a controversial issue.

On 12 June 1944 while Mr. Edwin Thorpe was in London on another visit, his brother Mr. Fred Thorpe sent him a letter which conveyed the latest situation on St.Helena:-

"We require two of the largest tarpaulins for covering the fibre on the Wharf while awaiting shipment during the wet weather. We have received a memo from the Government stating that an extra 15/- per ton is to be put on the price of hemp in order to raise the minimum level of wages to male labourers at the mills to that of Government employees, 3/1d. per day, which has taken place in our

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mills from 1 April. This has caused a lot of bad feeling at the Mills, as it is only given to men. The cutters of the flax are now also asking for a rise per ton for cutting. Solomon & Company has given their cutters 3/1d. per ton up to 6 tons and 2/- per ton over the six tons.

All telegrams in the future will have to be sent to the Intelligence Officer at Ladder Hill. Business on the island is very stagnant. Solomon & Company doing little or no business under the present restrictions. Latest rumour Government going to ration fresh beef, which was said to be ridiculous, because there was nothing to ration, only Solomon & Company had 300 to 400 lbs. to sell to customers mostly overseas people at 1/2d. lb. The Market doing no business in this line as no animals to slaughter. Vegetables for the past month been very scarce, and potatoes a great scarcity and subsidised at 10/1/2d per gallon."

A cable sent on 14- June:-

"Mills closed down owing to bad weather".

The early reference in this letter to tarpaulins being required, for covering the fibre on the wharf, seems to indicate that the Government had not completed the roofed shed they were building on the wharf for that purpose, as mentioned in 1943.

A list of expenses incurred by Thorpe's in 1944 for the Cess Account (Phormium Mills Fund) revealed some interesting items:-

- Washing trough - £3-17-6,
- and repair to Scutcher - £5-19-0 (Fairyland Mill).
- Horse hire and feeding oats - £3-2-0.
- Military Transport Hire.
- Mainwaring Garage Account - £12-18/-.
- Sickles for flax cutters.
- Motor tyres.
- Oats for farm horses.

Of the above the Military Transport is interesting, as some military vehicles must have been hired for transporting the bales of fibre to Jamestown wharf, although Thorpe's had their own truck, a Bedford model WL 2-ton - of 1934 vintage, but as also with their Ford V8 car 1935 model and Reg. No.31, they were both awaiting spare parts from London for repair. The "Mainwaring Garage Account" is a reference to the motor repair business known as the St. Helena Motor Company run by Captain Mainwaring in premises at Back Way, Jamestown. He also undertook a great many repair jobs on flax engines and vehicles belonging to the mill owners. From all accounts, Captain Mainwaring's services were under extreme pressure during the war period. He was a member of the original St. Helena Chamber of Commerce when it was first formed, in 1932 and he continued to be a member during the war years.

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In August 1944-, after the "Sisal people" as they were termed, had been given a contract extending until two years after the cessation of hostilities in Europe, a similar concession was sought for St.Helena's flax industry.

In an exercise of production costs for 30 tons of green leaf on the ground and milled at Francis Plain Mill in 1944, this yielded 2½ tons of hemp at £28-5/- per ton and 1 ton of Tow No.1 at £17-5/- per ton, but the net result was a loss of £9-2-2, as given:-

Total production costs = £96-19-8

Sales from Hemp & Tow = £87-17-6

£9- 2- 2 loss

In a reference to Solomon's mill at Broadbottom for 1944, it was described as being a rented site, with its own drying fields, pasturage for 70 donkeys and 30 oxen employed at the mill.

Production for 1944 was lower, but prices were higher. Exports of fibre for 1944 amounted. to 909 tons at £27-5/- per ton, and 373 tons of tow at £16-10/- per ton.

Of the nine mills that existed at the beginning of the Second World War, eight were still working when the war entered its final stages in 1945. The one not operating was Oaklands. Amongst the few references to individual mills at this time, in March 1945 Messrs Deason Brothers required. the services of Captain Mainwaring (St. Helena Motor Company) for overhauling their National Gas Engine at Hutts Gate mill and the Ruston-Hornsby Gas Engine and Generator at their Warrall's Gut mill. In addition to Hutts Gate and Warrall's Gut mills, Deason's were maintaining insurance on their old Woody Ridge mill which was not operating. They also continued to insure a store containing fibre on the Jamestown wharf.

With the surrender of Germany on 8th May and finally the surrender of Japan on 2 September 1945, there was at least a measure of satisfaction for St Helena's flax industry which despite the enormous difficulties, it had survived throughout the war. What lay ahead was whether it could survive the peace. Difficult problems for the industry they were indeed, perhaps the greatest as events were to prove, was in maintaining Phormium fibre as a commercially viable product in the face of competition from other fibres including synthetics. Amongst other urgent problems the industry had to address was the woefully low wages and the often wretched conditions under which the mill employees had to work.

The Fairyland mill of Messrs W.A.Thorpe & Sons closed down on 10 August 1945 for a long period that transpired to be 4 years, while their Francis Plain mill was affected by restrictions that were imposed after an

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outbreak of' anthrax was suspected amongst some cattle. Due to this setback Thorpe's were compelled. to send a cable to their agent in London:-

"6 December 1945 - Outbreak Anthrax among cattle - owing to Government regulations cannot comply working - mill closed down - cancel contract inform controller".

Francis Plain mill actually closed on 7 December.

Some dissension by the three mill owners had come to a head on 22 September 1945 when they forwarded a joint petition to the Secretary of State for the Colonies to protest against the manner in which the Phormium Mills Ordinance of 1944- was being operated.:-

"They had. paid out cash for renewals and repairs for eleven months, while the funds set apart for this purpose are still in the hands of the Phormium Mills Fund Board. They cited the case of Solomon & Company which had leased the Longwood Mill from the Government for the past 14 years and under the terms of their lease they have to keep the buildings and plant in a good state of repair. Any sum paid out on account of that mill was to be paid to the Government. At the same time there was no mention of Owners of Mills being entitled to draw money from the Fund. They humbly craved that the Secretary would exercise his prerogative to ensure the Ordinance being carried. out in the proper manner and justice being done."

Signed by

Deason Brothers

Solomon & Company

W.A.Thorpe & Sons

On 4 December 1945 Thorpe's advised Chairman of the Phormium Mills Board Fund that both their mills were closed owing to causes adversely affecting the production and in consequence of the deduction made of £2-7/- per ton, the market price is no longer a commercial proposition under control, and. being deprived of' a free market. They therefore asked for repayment of the capital they had deposited in the Fund.

However despite these problems, a reasonable output had been maintained at most of the mills during 1945, giving total export's of fibre as 956 tons at £25-5/- per ton, and 357 tons of' tow at £17-5/- per ton.

Exports of rope and. twine amounted to 36 tons of value £1,845.

The following ships called at St. Helena during 1945 to take on cargoes of flax fibre for England:- *Empire Rawlingson*, *Empire Kitchener*, *Empire Success*, *Arabstan*, and *Antilochus*

Annual Production & Export Values (1939 - 1945 inclusive)

Year	Fibre & Tow	Total Export values
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	(combined tonnage)	(Fibre & Tow)
1939	1,346	£20,327
1940	1,514	£35,206
1941	962	£22,992
1942	1,500	£32,752
1943	1,424	£32,823
1944	1,233	£30,253
1945	1,313	£30,297

Year	Rope & Twine tonnage	Total Export values
1939	21 £ 497	
1940	16 £ 474	
1941	12 £ 375	
1942	26 £1,077	
1943	59 £2,746	
1944	33 £1,662	
194-5	36 £1,845	

THE POST-WAR REHABILITATION SCHEME

In 1946 nearly all the flax mills were still powered by gas engines, several of which had given good service for the past 25 years or more, but during that long period they had become outmoded by diesel engines. In addition, much of the milling machinery had deteriorated and needed replacing. A more serious aspect was the apparent exhaustion of large areas of the flax crop which was then estimated to cover an area of 3,550 acres in total, although in terms of true surface area on the many steep hills and valleys it must have been double that figure.

In his reply of 29 January 1946 to a Government query concerning the reason for his Company having closed down Fairyland mill in 1945, Mr. Edwin Thorpe referred to the exhaustion of the flax crop amongst other reasons that had given cause to close the mill:-

- "1. For more than a year Fairyland had shown a decline in revenue and it was no longer a commercial proposition.
2. Public roads in the wet season had become impassable and greatly handicapped transport without any co-operation from the Government.
3. Continuity of the flax crop was becoming exhausted, as it had been cut for the past six years. There is a considerable quantity of flax in areas which are inaccessible due to neglected public roads.
4. The lack of organisation in the transport of green leaf must be very noticeable to the layman not concerned with the industry, to see flax being transported from Oaklands to Hutts Gate, while another miller is carting flax from Hutts Gate to Francis Plain; all efforts made by us to remedy this wastage has failed
5. For the purpose of the Cess Fund the Government has greatly under-estimated the cost of transporting leaf to the mills as given at 7/6 per ton. No one can explain how they arrive at that low price.
6. Referring to Francis Plain Mill the less said the better, and may the ashes of the fires of the Agricultural Department on the alleged Anthrax be forgotten. This mill was reopened on 7 January (1946) and an attempt is being made to revive the industry on an economic basis, providing it may continue without interference.
- 7 Lack of co-operation and no unity, it is regrettable to see.

As I am leaving for London shortly I trust I may continue the negotiations where I left off, and should I be successful in disposing of the business, we trust; that our successors with considerable influence, may enjoy the fruits of their labours to a more beneficial advantage when supply and demand finds its own level."

On 26 February 1946 he advised their London agents, Messrs Ide & Christie, that as they were operating one mill only (Francis Plain) their

anticipated output for that month was 50 bales of hemp and 15 bales of tow. They were also holding 20 bales of hemp.

As given in a further letter of 8th April 1946 to the same agents:-

"The Government is constantly taking away the labour to send to Ascension, (Island), consequently we are now employing women labour paying them men's wages; this will inevitably have a bad result in the discontent in the labour market. We have protested to the Government that if any further men are taken away without replacements, we shall have no alternative but to close down. We are without lorry tyres and not allowed to import them, no import licences are granted".

Due to the scarcity of tyres, ox and horse-drawn carts had to continue being used to a large extent. On the other hand, with the development of automatic flax-milling machinery in New Zealand, the manufacturers Messrs Booth & Macdonald had sent Thorpe's a catalogue to publicise their new automatic catchers, washers, shakers, and automatic scutchers, but none of this labour-saving machinery was ever imported to St. Helena.

On 6 June 1946 as reported in **The Times** the price of sisal produced in East Africa was increased by the Board of Trade to give a rise of £18-9/- per ton. From previously £27-15/- a ton F.O.B. it had now risen to £46-4/- a ton. As a consequence of the increase for sisal, Mr. Edwin Thorpe wrote to the Secretary of State seeking his consideration on a price rise for St. Helena hemp and tow. He stated they have had heavy expenditure, and sustained transport losses due to oxen dying during the outbreak of anthrax.

His appeal was responded to at a meeting arranged by the Colonial Office in London and attended by the Board of Trade who agreed to purchase all of St. Helena's hemp at £40 per ton F.O.B., the contract to run from 1st July 1946 to 31 December 1947, but no increase in the price of tow. This was an increase of £10-5/- a ton on the old price, allocated to give £3-15/- to millers for covering the increased cost of wages, production, and increased profits. It was also proposed to give £1 to the Phormium Mills Fund and £1-10/- for General Revenue. The £4 unaccounted for as yet was to be divided equally between a fund for the welfare of labourers and a Stabilisation and Improvement Fund.

A serious blow to St. Helena's flax industry during 1946 was the destruction by fire of the Longwood mill. This was burnt down at night and is believed to have been caused when sparks from the engine's gas plant lodged in dry fibre which ignited after all the workers had gone home. The Government-owned mill which had been leased to Messrs Solomon & Company since 1933, was the first to be built when the industry re-started in

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1907. Its loss was now a serious setback for fibre exports, and although plans were soon made to rebuild it, this would be a lengthy project, particularly as a new engine and machinery had to be ordered from overseas. In addition, Fairyland mill remained closed, thus devolving production on the remaining five mills, these being Hutts Gate, Sandy Bay, Broadbottom, Rock Rose, and Francis Vale. The Longwood Rope Works also continued in production.

Although no system of grading the fibre was used on St. Helena, the millers had their own system of classification. Messrs W.A.Thorpe & Sons exported their bales of hemp and tow under either the "Tiger Prime" brand or the "Stag" brand

Due to the reduced number of mills in operation, exports for 1946 were the lowest since 1938, amounting to 720 tons of fibre at £39 per ton average, and 332 tons of tow at £22-5/- per ton average. Rope and twine exports of 66 tons valued at £3,540 were the highest ever recorded since rope-making began on St. Helena in 1920.

During the war and thereafter, the idea of establishing a scheme to rehabilitate the flax mills on St. Helena, continued to be circulated. If the phormium industry was to maintain and even increase its share of the fibre market, there was need to proceed with a scheme of rehabilitation at the earliest. The general standard of living on the island was very low and unemployment very high, this latter being further aggravated by two mills (Fairyland and Longwood) being out of action, and there was no other industry of any consequence.

On 29th April 1947 a new lease of excitement was given by the visit of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth together with the two Princesses, Elizabeth and Margaret. In more than 100 years since the island became a Crown Colony this was the first visit by a reigning monarch, but it was of very short duration as they arrived and departed on the same day. They made a brief visit to Napoleon's old residence of Longwood House and it is possible as they passed along Longwood Avenue they may have caught a glimpse of the Longwood flax mill which was being rebuilt after its destruction by fire the previous year. The mode of operations and the type of machinery used in the flax mills at this time was almost the same as when the industry was restarted in 1907.

From an account I received from one of the men who worked in the flax mills before the war, they received 9/- for a six-day week. They were unable to afford the purchase of boots, and the flax residue which was a reddish-coloured fluid just flowed over their bare feet to give a perpetually squelchy and unpleasant situation. A rather pernicious system of piecework

was allowed to be practised by the strippers who fed the stripping machines with green leaves and sought to exert every ounce of energy from the other mill-hands. At this stage in 1947, and although wages had then more than doubled to average 3/5 per day for males and 2/6 for females, it still represented a pittance as the price of food and other commodities had risen to nullify the increase in wages.

The passing of Mr Frederick Ralph Thorpe who died on 19th June 1947 needs to be recorded here, as he had been involved in the flax industry for a long period while participating in the management of W.A.Thorpe & Sons. He was buried at St. Paul's Cemetery.

An important meeting between the Governor, Sir George Joy, and the three millers represented by Mr F. Deason, Major E.J. Moss for Solomon & Company and Mr. E.A. Thorpe, was held at the Castle on 10 September 1947. His Excellency stated that the meeting had been called at the request of the Millers, but before proceeding with a discussion on the Phormium Industry, he wished to establish a more co-operative and friendly spirit between the Millers and Government.

Major Moss stated that at present costs, complete new machinery and buildings would cost around £5,000. A hydraulic press and pump which cost almost £500 before the war was now probably £1,000. As regards building material, Major Moss thought that engine vibration from a gas engine would crack the walls if they were made of cement blocks. Mr. Thorpe stated there was no vibration from the engine at his mill. Mr. Thorpe asked if the fund could be used to subsidise production should the market for fibre fall. The other millers were not in agreement with this suggestion. Mr. Thorpe stated that since he commenced milling 20 years ago, he had only to effect one renewal and that was a new generator which he had recently installed. Major Moss stated that automatic receivers, washers, and scutchers could be obtained, but were very expensive and could not be maintained locally, and that they: would reduce manpower which was probably undesirable.

Mr Thorpe said he had no power press, but he thought his hand press was reasonably efficient. Major Moss said Solomon & Company's buildings were in a shocking condition and needed renewing throughout. Mr. Deason and Mr. Thorpe also said their buildings were in bad repair. Major Moss said that hostility between the Government and the Millers had not existed before 1930. The Millers agreed with the Governor's suggestion that plans and estimates should be submitted for the renewal of mill buildings and any extensions contemplated. The question of fibre storage in Jamestown and at the Wharf was discussed Mr. Thorpe said he was obliged to close his mill for

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a period owing to the weather and a lack of drying space for the fibre. The Government Secretary asked if wires could not be used for drying, but Major Moss and Mr. Thorpe did not think this method was practical. Major Moss stated that Solomon & Company used wire fences for drying at all their mills and considered the method satisfactory. Meantime in respect of the earlier Phormium Mills Board Fund set up in 1944, the three millers submitted to the Government their joint proposal for a planned programme of repairs, replacements, and renewals to plant and buildings.

"It is proposed to embark on the programme of repairs, etc., as soon as the necessary material becomes available without awaiting the accumulation of funds in the Phormium Mills Fund to meet the expenditure as it occurs. Claims in this respect will be rendered to the Board at the appointed times for approval and payment made as and when cash is available in our respective accounts in the Fund."

The above proposal was jointly signed for Deason Brothers, Solomon & Company (per E.J. Moss) and W.A. Thorpe & Sons.

As mentioned by Mr. Edwin Thorpe in a letter to their agents in London during October 1947, his company W. A. Thorpe & Sons was making enquiries with manufacturers in Leeds (England) for the machinery to make rope and twine and also the machinery for bag manufacture. Captain Mainwaring is mentioned at this time as having a small hand loom for making mats, also an interest in bag manufacture and had already made coal bags. (A handloom still exists in Jamestown and is used to make craftwork from fibre.) The weather had been appalling with heavy rains for months. There was also a shortage of anthracite for the gas engines, and the mills might have to close if it does not arrive. A certain amount of hemp was then being exported to South Africa.

It is apparent that Messrs W.A. Thorpe Sons never proceeded with the scheme to import rope making machinery. The Longwood rope works which was being operated by Deason Brothers, continued to produce a range of rope sizes from $\frac{3}{8}$ " diameter to $1\frac{1}{2}$ " diameter, with twine supplied from the Hutts Gate mill.

The first Colonial Annual Report since the end of the war was given for 1947 during the term of Governor Sir George Joy.

"Chief export of the Colony was New Zealand flax, of which production was maintained at maximum capacity, for 784 tons of fibre and 194 tons of tow exported in this year to the United Kingdom under contract to the Board of Trade. A rise of £15 a ton was given on both fibre and tow. A plan was completed by the end of the year for the rehabilitation of the flax mill buildings and the industry in general, the finance to be provided by the contributions of the millers

themselves to a Fund at the rate of £11-5/- a ton of hemp exported. In furtherance to improve the industry, a sum of £900 was set aside under a Colonial Development & Welfare Scheme for the visit of a flax expert from New Zealand to advise the Government and the Millers on those matters. A small quantity of fibre was manufactured locally into rope, twine, and matting, 61 tons being exported to South Africa. There were 177 workers employed in the flax industry, the average daily wages being 3/5 for males and 2/6 for females, per day. The Government mill at Longwood was completely rebuilt at the end of the year. The former mill was burnt to the ground in 1946. The layout of the new mill incorporated the experience gained over many years by the mill owners."

The average price for fibre in 1947 was £43-0-7 and £24-15-1 for tow.

During the early post-war years the following ships were calling at St. Helena to load cargoes of fibre for England:-- *Sampan, Defender, Kenilworth Castle, Umtata, Umgeni, Empire Duchess, Fort Carillon* and *Llangibby Castle*.

With the introduction of the Phormium Industry Ordinance in 1948, the rehabilitation fund for St. Helena's flax industry was officially termed "The Phormium Industry Rehabilitation and Improvement Fund." In conjunction with the rehabilitation scheme, and by arrangement between the Colonial Office and the New Zealand Government, the services of Mr. E.W. Sutton who was the Mill Superintendent of New Zealand Woolpack & Textiles Limited, were made available to the Government of St. Helena to visit the island, make an examination, and report on the flax industry.

Mr. Sutton arrived at St. Helena by the S.S. *Arawa* from New Zealand on 18th April 1948. His report which was completed during May 1948 is a valuable account covering conditions of the flax mills and the state of the industry on the island during that period, together with his recommendations for improvement. The following is an abridged version of his report:-

"The peak period in the industry was reached just prior to the Second, World War with nine mills situated at Longwood, Hutts Gate, Warren's Gut, Rock Rose, Bamboo Hedge, Fairyland, Broadbottom, Francis Plain, and Oaklands. All except the last mentioned and Fairyland were still in operation on my arrival. But that at Fairyland was in working order and has since recommenced operations The one at Oaklands has been dismantled

The ownership was:--Longwood (leased to Solomon & Company)

Rock Rose	Solomon & Company
Bamboo Hedge	Solomon & Company
Broadbottom	Solomon & Company
Hutts Gate	Deason Brothers
Warren's Gut	Deason Brothers
Francis Plain	W.A.Thorpe & Sons
Fairyland	W.A.Thorpe & Sons

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Rock Rose and Warren's Gut are stripping mills only, and the dried fibre from these mills is scutched at Bamboo Hedge and Hutts Gate respectively.

Owing to the extreme mountainous nature of the country, the green leaf has to be first transported by donkeys or ox-drays, either if it is close to the mill, direct into the mill, or if further away, to some adjacent point on a road where it can be picked up by lorries. In some instances heavy fixed cables are used to convey the bundles from the hillsides to the roadway ready for transporting into the mills by lorries. Mill buildings generally in a very bad state of repair and the working conditions are deplorable. Floors in a rough uneven state and certain sections of the mill are not sufficiently covered in. Most are under-powered due to engines being in a very worn condition and considerable loss of power caused by bad alignment and in some cases the belts are too light for this type of work. The Stripper in general use is the Booth MacDonald No.9A Wakely type which is entirely suited for the class of leaf. On arrival at the mill the leaf is weighed and sorted into three separate lengths before stripping.

The same type of hand-scutchers are used as in New Zealand. Before baling the finished product is graded roughly into two grades, namely "Superior" and "Ordinary". These cannot be accepted as standards, and merely serve to distinguish one class of fibre from another at each individual mill and vary considerably from one mill to another. With the exception of a small portion of fibre which is manufactured locally into rope and twine, the bulk of the production is exported as baled hemp.

If an engine has to be replaced it is recommended that a diesel unit should be installed in preference to a gas engine, and they have a much more uniform run without any variations in speed and moreover the space for housing a diesel engine is cut down by two-thirds,

Inspection and recommendations for specific mills:-

Longwood

Has a 38 H.P. Lister Diesel. Rebuilding completed within the past six months. Water supply limited. Excellent drying fields and very handy to the mill. Good sanitation and well-planned mess hall.

Bamboo Hedge

Entirely new building required to house the existing engine and plant. This can be carried out by rebuilding around the existing engine. 42 H.P. National gas engine in fairly good order. A new generator and a few minor repairs are recommended. Good Water supply. Drying fields are good and within reasonable distance of the mill. New lavatories and mess-hall on similar lines

to Longwood are recommended. A workshop should be provided as near as possible to machinery.

Broadbottom

Very bad road needs attending to. Mill to be entirely rebuilt on an adjacent site. The 28 H.P. National gas engine is far too small and output is only half of what it would be with a sufficiently powered unit. New engine definitely required, preferably a diesel of not less than 38 H.P. Very poor water supply. Drying fields quite suitable but road from the mill needs attention. Workshop and tools should be provided

Rock Rose (stripper mill)

Complete new building required on same site. The engine, an 18/21 H.P. Paraffin oil engine *¹ (Petter) is unsuitable for the purpose, and I would recommend a new engine to be installed, preferably a diesel. A new stripper frame (Wakely type) is required. The present type was discarded in New Zealand 30 years ago. Additional water storage tanks are required. The present fibre paddocks at this mill are adequate, but the wagon roads thereto need improvement. It is suggested that the fibre might be transported to Bamboo Hedge mill for bleaching if adequate space is available there. No scutching or baling is done at this mill. Sanitation and mess-hall should be provided, and a workshop with tools.

Francis Plain.

The road via Francis Plain to the mill is in good order, and if the road from the mill to Red Gate was put in order it would be convenient for taking the fibre out to Jamestown. This mill cannot be visited and several modifications are necessary. The 42 H.P. *² National Gas Engine has been running for a great number of years and is in a very bad state of repair and not efficient. A new engine is required and preferably a diesel. New trestles required for the stripper, and badly cracked pulley needs replacing. Fibre drying paddocks are suitable but drying fences are recommended.

The type of hackles presently used in scutching should be replaced by the pin-hackles and the shoeing-irons are too heavy. The hand-press used in baling serves the purpose but it does not make such a compact job as the hydraulic press. Sanitary accommodation and a mess-hall should be erected after the style of Longwood.

*¹ A piece of this engine now lies buried in the grass at the old Rock Rose mill site below the Levelwood road.

*² According to Mr. E.A. Thorpe this engine was rated at 36 H.P as mentioned in his reply of 31st May 1948.

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Fairyland

The lower part of the road and hairpin bend require widening to enable a lorry to get around in one lock. The buildings are erected on the only suitable site available and, need extensive repairs and, improvements. The present external timber and corrugated iron walls should be replaced, and the mill reroofed. Engine:- 38 H.P. National gas engine. Generator and engine in good order and should run efficiently for many years. The stripper is in fairly good condition, except chairs and feed-roller bearings which need replacing. Poor water supply, and I recommend a large storage tank, also a wider washing-box. A hand operated press is used here, and the bales are not as tight and compact as could be obtained by a hydraulic press.

Hutts Gate

Complete new buildings are required throughout as they are presently in such a poor state. This building is at present housing two strippers and two scutchers. The miller has agreed to close down one unit and if necessary run a double-shift on the other in order to allow complete rebuilding of one self-contained unit without unduly retarding production. As soon as the new unit is completed and in production, the other can be rebuilt. There is no other suitable site handy. Alternatively as the second stripping unit in this mill is only being run half-time and there is some doubt whether the miller concerned has sufficient leaf to maintain two strippers in full production, it is suggested that a single stripper working efficiently could deal with all the leaf available. In this case it is to be recommended that two separate buildings be erected, one to house the stripper and the other the two scutchers and press, and that these buildings should be resited in the same field.

Engines (two):- 38 H.P. National Gas Engine and 30 H.P. Crossley Gas Engine. The Crossley Engine is completely worn out and must be replaced with a new one. The National is in fair order and, with a general overhaul and strengthening of the engine-bed, should last for a number of years. I recommend a diesel to replace the former.

If the alternative suggested as above re the building scheme is adopted, the 38 H.P. National should be used to run the two scutchers and press, and the new diesel the stripper. The wearing parts in the two strippers now in use, are absolutely worn out and they should be renewed without delay. The fibre of this mill is not being washed at present and this is most unfortunate. It is strongly recommended to get water to this mill. No hackles are used in the scutchers at this mill. I recommend pin hackles be used in a suitable position in the beaters. The presses are quite suitable. Suitable sanitary accommodation and a mess-hall should be provided.

Warren's Gut (previously called Warrall's Gut)

Not owned by the miller, but no doubt some satisfactory arrangement could be made between the miller and the landowner as regards either buying the land or the procuring of a satisfactory lease. Complete new buildings are required. This site has the advantage that there is a considerable supply of leaf right handy to the mill.

Engine:-- 30 H P. Hornsby Gas Engine. Has been running about 25 years and is in very bad state of repair. Needs a new engine preferably a diesel. Stripper:-- Certain working parts are completely worn out and require immediate renewal. No washing is done at this mill, but a good supply of water within a very short distance of the mill which could be used to advantage. The fibre paddocks, although some distance from the mill, are quite suitable, but the erection of drying fences would be an advantage. Scutcher not applicable. Baling not applicable. Requires suitable sanitary accommodation and a mess-hall."

General

Further to his report, Mr. Sutton suggested. that where flax is now transported from the hillsides by donkeys, the use of wires should be given a trial. In this respect he recommended that No.8 English wire be used, in preference to the heavy cables now used in some places, as this type of wire is more easily moved to the different points. He recommended that the present two grades of "Superior" and "Ordinary" fibre be altered to be "High Fair" grade, and "Low Fair" grade. All inferior fibre i.e. not sufficiently clean, washed, or scutched, should be placed in the lower grade.

Local Manufacture

A small factory at Hutts Gate owned by Deason Brothers is manufacturing binder twine. A part of the output of twine * is used in the manufacture of rope. A factory in a very small way was operating in Jamestown for the production of matting and sacks. The looms used are entirely home-made and as a result a very loose weave is produced. If a more up to date loom and a finer yarn were used, a closer and finer weave would be obtained. and a lighter article produced.

To assist in costing for the rehabilitation scheme, Mr. Sutton prepared the following estimate for each mill:--

Longwood -- not including engine and workshop	£2,845
Broadbottom -- not including workshop	£2,960

Footnote * The twine used for rope making at the Longwood rope works was supplied from Hutts Gate mill

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Rock Rose	£1,500
Francis Plain -- not including workshop	£1,580
Fairyland -- not including washing and workshop	£1,270
Hutts Gate -- three versions suggested (a)	£4,635
(b)*	£2,925
(c)	£2,775
Warren's Gut -- in blockwork	£1,415
or in timber and sheeting	£1,615

On 31 May 1948 Messrs W.A. Thorpe & Sons submitted their reply to the report by Mr. Sutton on the flax industry of St. Helena, and more particularly the references concerning their own mills:--

"Francis Plain Mill:- The road via Francis Plain Mill is in fairly good order except that it required to be metallised again.

Buildings:-- The necessary improvements to the remainder of the Mill as mentioned in your Report is the recommendations of the writer to Mr. Sutton, and has been approved.

Engine:- There is some confusion and Mr. Sutton has been misinformed, the Engine is 36 H.P. and not 42 H.P. National Gas Engine. Mr. Sutton tested the revolutions of the shaft which read 215 revolutions.

This mill as a single unit for some time past has been putting through 8 tons of green leaf per day with time to spare and it has taxed the transport to keep up supply. It is not advisable to force production beyond that quantity, the leaf would soon be exhausted. The production of Hemp under "Tiger Brand" is second to none on the London market; in quality and colour, and the output compares favourably with any other Mill on the Island., and the percentage of Tow is not more than 1 in 4 hemp, which speaks for itself.

The National Gas Company are the manufacturers of both Gas Plants and diesel engines; enquiries were made to ascertain what was more suitable. They could not recommend diesel engines for our purpose. In view of the foregoing we see no reason to replace the present engine for a Diesel engine, the working of which in the island is in its infancy

Transmission:- There is some misapprehension here, the shaft complained of, apparently refers to Fairyland Mill which has been rectified, it was partly due to the belt not been in use for three years, got stiff, and now stretched the bearings are working normally and perfectly cool. The trestles at the mill in question have recently been renewed, four days working was lost in doing so.

Stripper:-- The Feed Rollers and bearing has recently been renewed, and, the Pulley of the Drum Spindle is at present under repairs at Captain Mainwaring.

Washing:-- The present water supply coming through this mill is not fully turned

*Footnote:-- The scheme eventually decided on for Hutts Gate was basically version (b) which allowed for a completely new mill building on a new site in the same area.

on, and is sufficient in quantity to suffice the requirements of two mills, with the outlet partly opened, and the water is constantly on the move without removing the plug, therefore we cannot support your recommendation for a 4 inch pipe. The washing box will receive attention as requested. A great deal of stress is laid on washing, and we are somewhat puzzled to understand that in theory is not borne out in practice, in so much that there are two mills in operation on the island for a considerable time past, who use NO WATER and who receive no complaints of their Hemp either in quality or colour, and the Hemp realises the same price as other St. Helena hemp. In my 40 years experience in the marketing side in London, associated with Spinners, Manufacturers, Buyers and Brokers, I found on more than one occasion, Brown Hemp was preferred for mixing with Manila Rope, being the same colour.

Scutcher:-- We admit the mouth-piece is slightly worn and very easily renewed, since the bar has been renewed there is a very small percentage of tow; the shoe-iron will be considered.

Workshop:-- There is a workshop at this mill to be enlarged. It is fitted with all the necessary tools required in the carrying out of repairs, viz:-- two sets stocks and dies, machine and. hand drills, a heavy vice, circular saw, and a complete set of carpenter's tools.

Sanitation:-- This is required and under consideration.

With reference to the suggestion that an officer be appointed acting in an Advisory capacity to assist the strippers, I have ascertained. from the Foreman of both Mills, they very much resented the idea, and said to be instructed by an officer whose knowledge of milling was less than theirs, would serve no useful purpose. We are of the opinion that it may cause much dissension, and we consider it unnecessary.

We are very grateful to Mr.Sutton for the information he has imparted in the Milling industry, having carefully noted his remarks, trusting that the same will be a beneficial advantage to all concerned.,

With our best wishes for a bon voyage back to his beloved country (New Zealand).

(written by Mr. Edwin Thorpe for W.A.Thorpe & Sons)

The re-opening in early 1948 of the rebuilt Government mill at Longwood added greatly to the potential to increase fibre exports in 1948. The layout of the new mill buildings which continued to be leased to Messrs Solomon & Company, incorporated the experience gained over many years by the mill owners. During 1948 when the millers began to undertake urgent repairs and alterations, they soon submitted their claims for payment from the Phormium Mills Fund. The following example is a claim by W.A. Thorpe & Sons for work carried out at Fairyland mill which was being made ready to resume production;:-

4 June 1948:-

Building extension of Stripper Platform at Fairyland mill,
as recommended by Mr. Sutton. Cost £13.

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Building ox dray for Fairyland mill. Cost £10.
Building Green Bark cart for cleaning. Cost £ 6.

On 22 June 1948 Messrs W.A.Thorpe & Sons advised. their London brokers, Messrs Ide & Christie, that they were unable to deal with ginger fibre as they were too occupied fulfilling hemp contracts. A large amount of Thorpe's exported fibre was recorded as being unloaded at Black Eagle Wharf, Wapping, London.

The number of mills operating in 1948 had increased to seven, which included Longwood and Fairyland, the latter having resumed production in October 1948 after having been closed for 4 years. An improved output resulted in increased exports which amounted. to 940 tons of fibre and 377 tons of tow, giving a total value of £73,021. Rope and twine exports of 40 tons were considerably lower than for the previous year.

In early 1949 the Government proposed wage increases for mill-hands of a flat rate of 10d per day to workers in receipt of 3/5 per day or less. Any increase for workers in receipt of more than 3/5 per day was left to the millers and the workmen thus affected. to negotiate between themselves The Rehabilitation scheme for St. Helena's flax mills began in full measure at the end of February 1949. During May of that year the first of the mills to be rebuilt* was opened by the Governor, Sir George Joy. The Public Works Department which supplied the work-force to rebuild the mills was put under great; pressure and other urgent work had to be deferred.

Sandy Bay mill, known by this time as Bamboo Hedge mill, was also being rebuilt. Mr. Dan Smith who had previously worked on Ascension Island for 5 years, was one of the St. Helenians engaged as a carpenter on the building of this mill during 1949. He subsequently emigrated to England, and in 1992 after an absence of 42 years he made a sentimental visit to St. Helena where he gave me his account. Both Hutts Gate mill and Rock Rose mill were also under construction.

Fairyland mill which was closed from 10th August until 27th October 1949, was given considerable attention in improving the mill facilities, water supply, and access roads to flax plantations, as described in claims submitted to the Rehabilitation Fund in November 1949:-

Excavating and building a dam 15 feet x 9 feet; x 6 feet
Cost of making 1¼ miles of road from mill to Fowl House.
Open road from Fairyland to Rock Mount.

*Footnote Although it has not been possible to confirm it, I believe this first mill to be completed was Broadbottom mill.

Rebuilding and concreting new scutcher and washing troughs.

The passing of Mr. Frederick Deason gives reason to include a special tribute for his enormous contribution to the welfare of St. Helena, most particularly for his valuable farming activities and his active participation to ensure the success of the island's flax industry.

The monthly St. Helena Magazine of October 1949, published by Reverend. L.C. Walcott, provided an obituary:--

"With the death of the Honourable Frederick G.N. Deason on the 1 September 1949, the name Deason after 100 years, dies out on the island. So the last of the two Deason Brothers has now passed on. For many years the brothers were the rallying point of the Longwood. district, and they bore the burden of the district on their shoulders. The opening of the Government Mill in 1907 and Deason's own mill in 1916 eased the local situation considerably, and the burden of unemployment."

Mr. Deason was born at St. Helena on 19th April 1877. With his brother James they formed the firm of Deason Brothers and took over the lease of Longwood Farm from their father Thomas Deason who died in 1898. In addition to his well known farming enterprises and flax mills, Mr. Deason was a member of the Advisory Council and Sheriff of the Island. In the 1914-18 Great War he served as Lieutenant in the St. Helena Rifles. He had the honour of receiving the Prince of Wales in 1925, and King George VI, the Queen, and two Princesses in 1947. He was also honoured by the Order of the British Empire. He was buried at St. Matthew's Cemetery and survived by his wife and a married daughter, Mrs. Maud Mainwaring.

There were no figures given for the exports and values of fibre and tow in 1949, but with most of the mills being rebuilt under the rehabilitation scheme, the exports must have been very low, and that may account for curtailing any figures in the annual report which stated that there had been no change in the daily rate of wages for flax workers.

Meantime very significant changes had occurred. in the ownership of flax mills on St Helena. During 1948 the London-based company of John I Jacobs purchased the holdings of both Deason Brothers and Solomon & Company for whom they had previously served as their London agents. Thus all the former interests of Deason Brothers and those of Solomon & Company, were acquired by Jacobs & Company who named their new holdings Solomon & Company (St. Helena) Limited. As such, the old company passed from control of the Solomon family for the first time in its more than 150 years existence, but Mr. Homfray Solomon remained as Managing Director with Major E.J. Moss as Manager at the Jamestown offices.

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The former mills of Deason Brothers which included Hutts Gate, Warren's Gut, and the Longwood rope-works, all passed into the holdings of Solomon & Company (St. Helena) Limited., who continued to operate the former Solomon's mills of Bamboo Hedge, Broadbottom, Rock Rose, and the Government owned mill at Longwood. Messrs W.A. Thorpe & Sons were unaffected by this re-structuring of mill ownership. A further four mills had been rebuilt and were in production by September 1950. These were all built by the Public Works department, whereas Messrs W.A. Thorpe & Sons had opted to rebuild their own two mills.

At this time the flax industry on St. Helena employed some 230 people, and in total about 30 per cent of the island's population was dependent either wholly or partly on the industry. In addition to new mills, the rehabilitation scheme included improved water supplies, roads, machinery, and better amenities for workers in the form of water-borne sanitary accommodation and mess-rooms. New stores for fibre and bales, oil storage, workshops, garages for lorries, and offices were also provided. At five of the mills, new Lister diesel engines were installed in place of the old suction gas engines. The engine rooms at most of these only needed to be half the size of those housing the old engines and their large generating plant. The cost of running the new engines was approximately the same as the old ones.

All the mills were built of locally made concrete blocks, corrugated asbestos roofing, termite resistant Iroko timber, and steel roof trusses were used throughout. As for building materials, the cost of machinery had greatly escalated from earlier times, as for example the Wakely 9A Stripper supplied from New Zealand by Booth & MacDonald and commonly used in the mills on St. Helena, had risen to a price of £295 from £60 in 1925. Automatic scutchers were being offered at £1,280, but they were not considered to suit St. Helena's mills. Fairyland mill was being supplied with a new scutcher of the ordinary hand type, for which the scutcher room had been re-roofed. Under the rehabilitation scheme at the same time, an extensive flax-planting programme was being carried out at Fairyland, including 94,380 flax suckers at, Peak Gut. Imported by Thorpe's from England in that period were three dozen sickles at £1-16/5 per dozen, baling hoop (rolled steel) 1 inch wide in coils at £39 per ton, and bags of baling buckles at £2 per bag, all shipped by their agents Messrs Wigglesworth of London.

During 1950 Mr. Edwin Thorpe visited East Africa where he viewed the Ground Nut Scheme which cost 34½ million pounds and soon became an economic disaster. From there in June he flew on to England where he received news of St. Helena from his brother Harold (Mr. H.C. Thorpe) who advised of long intervals between ships, and at one stage it was two months

since any shipment of fibre had been made. A small amount of tow No.1 was sent to South Africa and it was hoped they would become a competitive buyer. Their production of Hemp from both mills (Francis Plain and Fairyland) this month was up to capacity, 3 tons per mill per week and making every effort to maintain this output. They were successful in obtaining an order of 100 bales of Tow No.1 from Durban. It appeared to be a good year for the St. Helena hemp industry. Thorpe's wished to build a fibre store within the precincts of the coal yard at the Jamestown Wharf, but the Government would not permit it, and Thorpe's then had to build a fibre store at their Bridge store where it can be seen to this day as the familiar lofted building adjoining their shop.

As a point of interest during August 1950, Governor Joy approached W.A. Thorpe & Sons for a small piece of land at the Dungeon to establish a cemetery for which he received their agreement to lease during 1952.

During 1950 a scheme was started to establish a flax industry in Swaziland, for which a consignment of flax suckers was exported from St. Helena but subsequently it was found that the flax plants were being attacked by a grub which was eating the plants from halfway downwards.

The mill owners of St. Helena decided that an embargo should be placed on the export of flax suckers in order to protect the island's own flax industry, so on 28 October 1950 they jointly sent a letter to the Governor asking him to ban the export of suckers, but the Governor replied, that he could not accede to their request.

The production of fibre and tow for 1950 proved to be a record, with exports amounting to 1,200 tons of fibre at a value of £103,912, and 642 tons of tow at a value of £31,132. The average market price of fibre was £86 10/-. Rope and twine exports were 36 tons to a value of £3,611. The good export performance was encouraging, and the substantial capital outlay in rehabilitating the flax mills and working conditions, appeared to be justified, but the wages paid were still very low. Although the flax industry could certainly be described as St. Helena's only industry of any consequence, it was not a popular industry amongst the islanders. In spite of improved conditions, the work in flax mills was largely considered unpleasant, arduous, and unremitting. In 1949 when 100 St. Helenians, predominantly agricultural workers, emigrated to the U.K. there can be no doubt that most of them did not see the island's flax industry as offering any future, although wages in the U.K. were then quite low and unemployment was high, but even so the wages were far higher than those on St. Helena. However the sad fact was that the dream for a large proportion of islanders at that time was for getting to

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England, and it must be given that the same is true today, but apart from a very small quota of contract workers, a rigid new set of U.K. immigration rules has now shut them out. Annual Production & Export Values (1946 to 1950 inclusive) During this period nearly all the fibre and tow was shipped. to England. Only a small proportion was shipped to South Africa.

Year	Fibre & Tow (combined tonnage)	Total Export Values (Fibre & Tow)
1946	1,052	£34,843
1947	1,177	£43,426
1948	1,318	£73,021 (includes rope & twine)
1949	(figures not available)	
1950	1,843	£135,044

Year	Rope & Twine (tonnage)	Total Export Values
1946	66½	£3,540
1947	60½	£3,178
1948	40½	(included with fibre & tow)
1949	(figures not available)	
1950	36	£3,611

A SHORT BOOM FOLLOWED BY A SLUMP

By the beginning of 1951 most of the mills had been rebuilt and one or two of the others had been considerably improved. Together with more efficient engines and machinery, and spurred on by record exports in 1950, there was reason for optimism in the industry. The mills that appear to have been in production at the start of 1951 were:--

Bamboo Hedge --	Solomon & Company (St.Helena) Ltd.
Broadbottom	" "
Rock Rose	" "
Hutts Gate	" "
Longwood	" "
Francis Plain	W. A. Thorpe & Sons
Fairyland	" "

At this stage Warren's Gut mill did not appear in the records, and any plans to rebuild it seem to have been abandoned, but Solomon & Company had either taken over the lease or purchased the land it was on, and for a time they may have used this mill for stripping only, as was its function when run by Deason Brothers

The Government Secretary advised millers that the Cess or Phormium Mills Fund of 1944 was to be discontinued, but both it and the Phormium Mills Rehabilitation Fund of 1948 were to remain in existence until they have been exhausted by the payment of the usual claims against them. For this purpose the Cess Fund was combined. with the Rehabilitation Fund.

The Korean War which began in June 1950 had an influence on the market price of fibre which increased rapidly during 1951 to reach a maximum of £140 per ton. The millers took advantage of this to increase production and exports which rose to a record level and value, with 1,130 tons of fibre exported to a value of £158,973, and 573 tons of tow to a value of £43,748. Rope and twine exports were also a record value of £8,523 for 53 tons. The overall value of £211,244 was a record that would never be exceeded.

Fairyland mill closed down in November 1951 and was still closed in January 1952, due to the supply of flax in the district having become exhausted. Messrs W.A. Thorpe & Sons advised the Government that they proposed in the meantime to take the opportunity of rebuilding the mill on up to date lines, the cost of erection and. repairs to be borne by the Rehabilitation Fund, and which they trusted would meet with approval. As many men as possible from Fairyland were put on flax planting. At the same time the Agricultural Department requested that they be informed of flax planting plans, and to ensure that all planting on steep land should be made on

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contour lines. The Rehabilitation Fund continued to function, but on 1st October 1952 the mill owners were no longer required to make contributions. They were entitled to continue drawing on the Fund until all that they had paid in was withdrawn in payment for claims.

During 1952 the rebuilding of Fairyland mill was being carried out, while from the very sparse records concerning other mills, the building of another was probably being carried out about this time. Known as Woody Ridge mill, it was nearly a mile from the old Woody Ridge mill that had been phased out in the late 1930's. The geographical feature of Woody Ridge had been the site of the old mill, and as the new one was known by the same name, it has created some confusion. The new mill which was built for Solomon & Company, had the advantage of fronting on the main Levelwood Road, and was quite close to large flax plantations. There were substantial drying fields adjacent, but due to frequent mist and fog this district was not ideal for drying fibre. This mill may have been built by Solomon's to mill the flax previously put through the Warren's Gut mill which was only a quarter of a mile down the road.

During the term of Governor Sir George Joy, the Annual Report which combined 1952 and 1953, revealed the effects of the slump that occurred in 1952--

"Two firms were operating all the mills. The Government owned Longwood mill is leased, to one of the firms (Solomon & Company) on condition that they will purchase all leaf offered by small growers at approved prices. During 1952 the industry received a sharp setback when the fibre market broke and prices fell steeply. At the same time the supply of leaf became very short, and these two events led to the closing down of a number of mills. At the end of 1953, of the 8 mills on the island only 2 were in operation. The price of flax fibre in U.K. was then £72 per ton as against £155 at the end of 1951, and £167 early in 1952. The total value of flax and flax products (including rope and twine) exported in 1952 and 1953 were £137,020 and £82,828 respectively."

Another unfortunate setback during 1953 was the fire which burnt down two sheds full of fibre at Longwood mill on 2 June 1953. A very significant event, being the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II at Westminster Abbey, was celebrated on St. Helena the same day and it was this coincidence that helped Norman Benjamin (who was then a young boy) to remember the occasion as he was able to give me his reminiscence of the fire which occurred at night.

In April 1953 the critical situation caused by the downturn in the island's flax industry prompted Mr. Edwin Thorpe to write a letter to the London *Daily Express*

"This historic island has again fallen on evil days, with the one and only industry,

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its hemp mills, are at present passing through a critical phase. Today more than half the mills are closed, and the remainder likely to follow in the same direction. This is owing to the slump in the market prices, and the crop of New Zealand Flax has become exhausted. The cutting has continued for the past 10 years without a break, and the recovery of the next crop will take from 3 to 4 years to mature."

In September 1953, due to the serious downturn in the industry, the Government granted a proviso whereby the millers received an abatement of 16/- of the tax on hemp, on every £1 of the London market price falling below £71 assuming C.I.F. price.

Due to the increase of rats in the dense flax plantations, the Rat Control Committee decided on a trial scheme of poisoning to be carried out in the Vaughan's and Long's Valley areas. The Committee in January 1954 consisted of:--

Mr. N. Humphrey (Chairman)
Dr. E. Rombyko (Acting for S.M.O.)
Major E.J. Moss M.C.,J.P.
Mr. C.F. Gould
Councillor F.J. Broadway MBE
Mr. E.A. Thorpe J. P.
Mr. H.C. Thorpe (by Invitation)
Mr. A.W. Joshua
Mr. F.C. Graham (Secretary)

In February 1954 a trial consignment of one ton of hemp at £92 and one ton of tow at £74 was shipped by Thorpe's via Durban to Wellington, New Zealand, as arranged with their London brokers Messrs Wigglesworth. This was rather unusual as New Zealand still had its own flax industry, and being the native habitat for this type of flax they would have not needed to normally import any.

The island's potato crop had seriously declined. When Messrs Deason Brothers had been in occupation of Longwood Farm, in spite of adverse weather conditions they produced two-thirds of the island's supply including for the Garrison and Ascension Island at an average price of only 6d to 7d per gallon, but in 1954 they were reported as almost unobtainable and sold for 2/4- per gallon.

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During early 1954 Messrs W.A.Thorpe & Sons purchased a Wakely 9A flax stripping machine from Mr. Fulton of Kiptoi Farm, Kitale, Kenya, who had originally purchased it from Booth MacDonald (New Zealand) for £355 and £90 for spares, but Mr. Fulton never unpacked it as three years of poor rains ruined his flax crop. He sold it to Thorpe's for £300 including spares and it was shipped from Mombasa by the *Durban Castle* which arrived at St.Helena on 6 April 1954. Today nearly 50 years on it can still be seen at Fairyland mill.

In June 1954 the Rhodesian Jute Industries wrote to Thorpe's asking if it was possible to send phormium plants for growth and cultivation in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia, but Thorpe's replied that this was prohibited. The previous Governor Sir George Joy had declined to prohibit the export of flax suckers, but; it is possible the new Governor 1954, Sir James Harford, had agreed to the prohibition at this time.

The price of sisal on the London market was reduced to £85 per ton, thus making it that much more difficult to sell St.Helena's phormium fibre. Thorpe's had to settle on a price of £71 a ton in order to gain a contract in August 1954.

Some further insight to the island's flax industry for 1954-55 is given in the Annual Report for these combined two years during the term of Governor Sir James Harford

"Two firms own the bulk of leaf-growing areas and the mills. Owing to low price and shortage of leaf, only 3 mills were in operation at the beginning of 1954, but by the end of 1955 two more were running and the general appearance of the plantations was much improved, owing to the weather conditions of the last two years. The Government-owned mill at Longwood has been permanently closed and the site and buildings are to be used for other purposes. In 1955, 594 tons of fibre, 250 tons of tow, and 71 tons of rope and twine were produced. There were 247 workers in the flax industry (1955), weekly wage of 33/6 for males, and 29/- for females."

As given in the above report, the most dramatic revelation is the permanent closing down of the Government owned Longwood mill during 1954-55. This was still being leased by Solomon & Company, and although the fibre sheds had been destroyed by fire in 1953, the mill which had been rebuilt and only reopened since 1948, remained intact.

As also mentioned in the report for 1954-55 there was a shortage of green leaf and a low market price for fibre, but the closing of the Longwood mill must have affected confidence in the industry. As the first mill built in 1907 it had a special meaning as the foundation mill, and its demise could almost be regarded as the beginning of the end for the flax industry. However, Solomon

& Company did have five mills of the seven that were still operating on the island. In addition they were also operating the Longwood rope works which appeared to have consistently maintained production through all these years, aided by a supply of twine from the twine works at Hutts Gate mill. At the time, Solomon's were obtaining supplies of fibre for their Sandy Bay mill from leaf milled at Rock Rose mill, but the drying of the fibre was at Longwood, which meant heavy expense in transport as it had to go all the way back to Sandy Bay (Bamboo Hedge) mill to be scutched and baled. When the Longwood mill closed down, its extensive drying fields at Mill Fields continued to be used for drying the fibre from Hutts Gate mill.

During 1954, Jacobs & Company sold part of their shareholdings in Solomon's which was restructured accordingly but still trading as Solomon & Company (St.Helena) Limited. Their letterhead at this time had the following directors:-

Homfray W. Solomon (Managing)
Edward J. Moss (Manager)
Hugh R. Kennedy (Accountant)

While other mills were working short-time or closed in 1954. The Fairyland mill was being given considerable attention towards increasing its productive capacity. From September 1954 the Governor approved the road works and completion of the mill which as requested by Messrs W.A. Thorpe & Sons was to be carried out by the Public Works Department. In the same month the firm advised that having changed their plans in working Fairyland mill to operate mostly with oxen, they were unable to supply any further killing cattle as these were all wanted for transport.

In December 1954 the new baling press purchased by Messrs Thorpe's arrived by the *Rhodesia Castle* and was delivered to Fairyland mill where it has been maintained in working order up to the present day. When Solomon & Company increased the lighterage for cargo at Jamestown, Messrs Thorpe's felt this was an extra burden of cost the flax industry could scarcely bear, so they purchased their own two lighters for use in the loading of hemp for export. Approval for payment of this was granted by the Phormium Rehabilitation Fund.

Export figures were not available for 1954 but the trend was certainly downwards, as there was a considerable drop in exports for 1955 with the total value at £54,536 including rope and twine. This compared with £82,076 total value for 1953.

Annual Production & Export Values (1951 to 1955 inclusive)

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Year	Fibre & Tow (combined tonnage)	Total Export Values (fibre & tow)
1951	1,703	£202,721
1952	1,218½	£128,094
1953	1,434½	£ 77,464
1954	(not available)	
1955	844½	£ 47,793

Year	Rope & Twine (tonnage)	Total Export Values
1951	53	£ 8,523
1952	51	£ 7,449
1953	42	£ 4,612
1954	(not available)	
1955	71	£ 6,743

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE FLAX INDUSTRY IN NEW ZEALAND

During 1955 a decision was taken by the St. Helena Government in conjunction with the island's flax industry, to support a study of the flax industry in New Zealand, with a view to improving efficiency, new methods of production, and the possibilities of reducing costs for enabling phormium fibre to compete on the world market. For this purpose they selected Mr. George Moss of St. Helena who had considerable experience in the flax industry and was also the manager for one of the mills owned by Solomon & Company. Half the cost of his visit to New Zealand was borne by the St. Helena Government.

After voyaging to the U.K., Mr. Moss left there by air on 5 September 1955 and arrived in Wellington, the capital city of New Zealand on 9 September. His first visit to a flax mill was that of the New Zealand Woolpack and Textile Limited at Foxton. This was a six stripper mill of which four strippers were working. He visited several flax areas, particularly the Moutoa Estate. At Waikuku he visited a Rope and Twine Works and a one stripper mill. At Christchurch he called on Messrs Booth MacDonald & Company, the flax milling machinery manufacturers who had supplied a large amount of the milling plant used on St. Helena. Continuing south he visited Invercargill and several mills in that area. Mr. Moss returned to St. Helena during October of the same year.

Subsequently his "Report on a Visit to New Zealand to study the Phormium Industry", was published in St. Helena later that year, and is a most informative work of which the following is a summary:-

The history of the flax industry in New Zealand began in the early years of the 19th century and was built largely on the export trade to overseas cordage markets. Peak production was reached in 1907 when 28,547 tons were exported. A yearly average of around 20,000 tons was exported from 1900 to 1920, a sharp falling off in 1921 until exports ceased in 1933. Apart from the general world depression, the rising sisal production in East Africa contributed to the decline of the industry. Moreover for purposes of cordage, manufactured phormium fibre was considered rather variable in quality compared with sisal or manila due to imperfections in the stripping process.

In spite of efforts to revive the industry from time to time, such as improving machinery, introducing a grading system and plant breeding research, the export industry collapsed and attention was given to the

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possibilities of local market requirements such as cordage, baler and binder twines, plasterers' tow and ratting, and woolpacks (the most important).

In 1933 an attempt was made to establish at Foxton an industry for manufacturing woolpacks from tow for which there was no market. However this enterprise coincided with the collapse of the fibre market, and there was insufficient tow being produced to meet their requirements and thus line fibre was used. This led to considerable difficulties on the plant when processing fibre on machines designed for working tow. Furthermore about this time many of the flax areas were being converted over to farming, and also Yellow Leaf Disease was taking its toll of flax plants.

Woolpacks sought and received help from the Government to ensure adequate supplies of green leaf and also re-equip with suitable plant if they were to keep going. The Government also took over the Moutoa Estate as a "Phormium Development Area" and work began to ensure an adequate supply of green leaf for the Woolpacks mill. However in spite of this, just before the Second World War the industry had reached its lowest ebb for many years. Only when Japan entered the war, when manila supplies were cut off and jute supplies were threatened, was a serious effort made to ensure supplies of flax fibre to replace manila for rope, and jute for woolpacks. A subsidy scheme was introduced to stabilise the cost of green leaf. In 1948 the Government introduced certain measures for the rehabilitation of the industry. These included guaranteed fixed prices for fibre and tow and loans to develop their flax plantations. There was also a royalty of £2-5-0 per ton on green leaf to encourage farmers to maintain their flax crops by giving them a return comparable with sheep farming on the same land.

In 1955 the estimated annual production of fibre in New Zealand was 5,000 to 6,000 tons, of which some 2,000 tons was produced by the "Woolpacks" mill. Virtually all production was used for home consumption, and in fact some 2,000 tons of sisal and/or manila in addition has to be imported annually to make up the total requirements of around 7,000 tons. Actually the manufacturers of baler and binder twine prefer to use a mixture of sisal and flax fibre in order to achieve the desired quality in their product. There were three rope and twine works in New Zealand in 1955, while in addition to "Woolpacks" mill at Foxton which is the biggest in New Zealand, there are 16 other mills in operation, the production of these other mills is taken up by "Woolpacks" and the three rope and twine works. In some instances millers found it uneconomical to bother with their stripper tow, and they just dumped it.

Guaranteed prices for New Zealand fibre in March 1954

Good fair	£95 per ton
High fair	£89-10/- per ton
Fair	£84-10/- per ton
Common	£74--10/- per ton
Reject	£66-10/- per ton
Tow	£30 per ton

Number of mills in operation in New Zealand (1870 to 1955)

1870 --	161
1915 --	240
1920 --	47
1930 --	57
1931 --	22
1932 --	17
1933 --	20
1947 --	16
1955 --	15

Summary of fibre exports from New Zealand (1900 -- 1939)

Export Period	Total products Tons	Yearly average (to nearest ton)	Value total	Average price per ton
1900-1909	212,441	21,244	£5,373,808	£25
1910-1919	226,370	22,637	£7,127,466	£31
1920-1929	136,817	13,682	£4,088,922	£29
1930-1939	47,108	4,111	£ 755,305	£18

Although there were areas of natural or wild flax in New Zealand, most of the crops in 1955 were planted by man, and nearly all were established in drained swamps. The only maintenance work required was the keeping down of willows, gorse etc., and attention to drains or ditches. In most cases regular flooding occurs to keep down weeds and insect pests, and leaves behind a deposit of silt. This silt acts as a fertiliser and to some extent prevents the situation arising whereby the root or rhizome grows out of the soil. Owners of such areas are not concerned with cultural or fertiliser treatments as it is virtually done for them. Although flax is a "thirsty plant" it does not appear to do well when growing in stagnant water, and it produces its best yields in drained swamps when the water table conditions are such that there is adequate moisture without the plant roots being actually in the stagnant water.

At Redan in Southland the conditions are very similar to those on St. Helena, temperatures being similar, except that they have frosts there in winter. The plants growing in the gullies showed better progress in most

instances, as on St. Helena. Their cutting cycle is just about the same as St. Helena, 3½ to 5 years. In order to keep up the yields as far as possible, Johnston Brothers have carried out cultivation work between the rows of plants, the flax being planted with 8 feet spacing between rows to enable a crawler tractor equipped with a rotary cultivator to work between the rows. Although it was difficult to determine whether the yield benefited by cultivation, there was one particular cultivated area bordering an uncultivated one, that exhibited a marked difference in favour of the cultivated. All green bark from Johnston Brothers mill was put back in recently cut plantations and seemed to "freshen" them up. Some aerial top dressing was carried out with superphosphate and molybdenum, but it was too early to draw any conclusion.

In New Zealand "side cutting" (i.e. the annual cutting of the outside leaves) has found to be unsatisfactory as it affects the succeeding yields. Thus the "full out" is preferred. After a "Full out" new shoots or suckers appeared, whereas after the "side cut" new growth tends to be confined to the old stock. In Brazil at Sao Paulo, side cutting was said to be carried out. The mechanical cutting of leaf in New Zealand was then only in the experimental stage and all cutting is done by hand. Some experimental work in the artificial drying of fibre was being carried out in New Zealand, but at that time no satisfactory method had been found as the fibre tended to dry a green colour and it would be necessary to perfect the washing process to remove all colouring before drying.

Woolpacks Mill, Foxton. All leaf arriving at the mill is weighed on the lorry on a weigh-bridge, and then the lorry drives right into the stripping room and unloads direct into the leaf stalls or pens. The mill has six strippers in line abreast. No grading of leaf is required as the strippers in use are the Sutton Tail Stripper type. The stripping operation involves an automatic catcher by which the hanks are conveyed through the automatic washer and deposited on the delivery point. They are then loaded onto transport for the drying or bleaching process in the fields or paddocks. The stripper tow is automatically dropped on to a waiting cart or trailers and the green bark is removed by conveyor belt. Fibre at the mill is "paddocked" on a contract basis - at a given rate per ton.

There are two automatic scutchers in use. The tow is forked out automatically and either baled in the usual way or passed through a hay baler which packs it into small bales for easy internal handling. The strippers in use are the Sutton Stripper which cleans the leaves right down to the tails. This machine is capable of higher output and has the advantage of eliminating the sorting or grading stage before stripping. It is considerably more expensive than the 9A stripper used, on St. Helena. But it was felt that the 9A was

adequate for St. Helena. Mr. Moss arranged for the shipping of the essential pieces for an automatic catcher to St. Helena.

Automatic washer. The snag for these was as far as St. Helena is concerned, they used a lot more water than was normally available on the island. But Mr. Moss thought that the water supply at Bamboo Hedge might just be sufficient. He felt that a local version of the automatic washer might possibly be worked out on St. Helena. Also by using a green bark remover, the water might possibly be filtered and used again.

Stripper tow remover. The stripper tow which falls out during stripping and washing is removed by a belt fitted with spikes. (not used on St. Helena)

Automatic shaker. For shaking off the bulk of green bark from the fibre before washing. (not used on St. Helena)

Extra washing. In some instances in New Zealand water sprinklers are fixed up so that, when the fibre on the poles is ready for the field after having been through the automatic washer, a further shower of water pours down on it for a few minutes. Mr. Moss stated that while no one wants to see labour made redundant on St. Helena, the fact remains that production costs are vital and therefore there is a strong case for the consideration of installing mechanical catchers, shakers, and washers if possible. There are two main snags:-

- (1) :- Water supply.
- (2) :- Difficulty in installing the gear in existing buildings which were not designed with this in view.

As detailed in his Report, Mr. Moss was able to make very extensive comparisons in New Zealand with St. Helena's own flax industry which as can be gauged from the tables, was on a far more modest scale than the industry in New Zealand.

In 1955 the estimated production of fibre in New Zealand was between 5,000 and 6,000 tons, virtually all being for home consumption, whereas St. Helena's fibre production in the same year was only just over 900 tons including rope and twine, all exported. Therefore the difference in sizes of the industry was quite substantial, but for St. Helena it was far more vital as it represented her only export industry.

Mr. Moss was certainly able to recommend improvements to the industry on St. Helena, particularly for introducing automatic machinery, but the biggest problem at that time was whether production costs could be kept sufficiently low enough to maintain phormium as a competitive fibre on the world market.

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Production of fibre in New Zealand (tons)

1941-42	3,371
1942-43	3,961
1943-44	6,637
1944-45	4,969
1945-46	3,496
1946-47	3,655
1949-50	4,651
1950-51	4,463
1951-52	4,576
1952-55	5,492

COMPETITION FROM SISAL

The shadow of low market prices continued to hover over St. Helena's flax industry which still had, seven mills operative, but the poor export figures for 1956 showed that they were producing far below capacity, and as indicated in the annual report some of them periodically had to cease production due to lack of demand for fibre. Meantime the mill owners' brokers in London were doing their utmost to gain contracts anywhere in the world. On 21 February 1956 Solomon's shipped 300 bales of hemp to New York via London, while at the same time the price of sisal had slumped to £70 per ton, thus making it extremely difficult to interest anyone in St. Helena fibre which was being sold at a price of £62 per ton and lower in order to gain contracts.

On 8 March 1956, W.A.Thorpe & Sons shipped 5 tons of tow to Bremen via Southampton on the *Rustenburg*, followed on 10 May by 5 tons of hemp at £70 per ton C.I.F. for Hong Kong as a trial, and 5 tons to a ropeworks in Singapore. Another of their small contracts was 17 tons at £50 per ton to Marseilles on the *Umzinto*. In a further alarming trend, as the sisal market weakened so did the demand for phormium. On 16 August Thorpe's wrote to their brokers Wigglesworth & Company, noting that owing to the market being flooded with sisal there was no demand for phormium. They pointed out that after all, as there is very little difference between these hard fibres, except the colour which is not of great importance, they therefore advised their brokers not to hesitate in cutting the price below sisal if it will be of any consequence.

"Having sold only five tons of tow in the past three months, it is becoming serious. Unless there is some improvement in the near future we shall have to contemplate closing. We note your efforts to introduce the hemp on the Japanese market has been unsuccessful. Are there any prospects in South Africa who have bought our fibre in the past? Our present holding of stock is 100 tons of hemp and 40 tons of tow."

Messrs Wigglesworth advised on 17 August --

"A number of spinners who have used St. Helena hemp in the past, have been using sisal instead. We note there has been an outbreak of influenza at your Scott's Mill and that the mill has therefore been closed down."

This was the first time that the Francis Plain mill was referred to as "Scotts Mill" the name by which it was apparently henceforth known. At this time it actually closed down for a week. Of Solomon's five mills there were then only three operating. The poor demand for tow appears to have eased in September 1956 when 35 tons of tow were shipped to Bordeaux.

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In October 1956 some further improvement of conditions for workers in the flax mills was recommended by the Secretariat as a result of observations made by the Medical Officer:--

"The workers in the trough are likely to get very cold and wet, especially in the winter. No facilities exist for hot drinks at the mills. This we consider to be very important and strongly recommend some system for heating the tea which the workers bring with them. During the recent influenza epidemic it was very noticeable that the trough workers seemed to go down first. His Excellency the Governor would be pleased to learn whether some action on these lines could be arranged".

This recommendation was no doubt addressed to both the mill owners, and for their part, Messrs Thorpe's replied that at Fairyland mill means are already provided the workers place their tea bottles around the Generator and obtain hot drinks. The water in the washing trough is from the Engine and is warm. Whereas at Francis Plain mill there is no facility for a fireplace, but if it is essential and meets with the wishes of the workers, a temporary fireplace might be erected with care to avoid a fire. With reference to First Aid lectures being given to the foremen of the mills, the Inspector of Police had already been approached and the matter stood over until his return from Ascension. At the end of October 1956 a contract for 10 tons of tow at £49 per ton was considered to be good in view of the weak market, but it was doubtful if fibre would realise more than £60 a ton at this time.

On 20 December 1956 Messrs W.A. Thorpe & Sons compiled a list of key men employed at their mills and who cannot be replaced:-

Francis Plain :-	John Harris	Foreman
	Fred Crowie	Stripper
	Eric Mittens	"
	Harold Buckley	Flax cutter
	Cecil Joshua	"
	Charles Peters	"
	Basil Yon	"
	Walter Peters	Scutcher
	Harold Williams	"
	Gerald Crowie	"
Fairyland:--	Walter Williams	Foreman
	Thomas Benjamin	Engine driver
	Mervyn Benjamin	Stripper
	Alex Henry	Flax cutter
	Cecil Coleman	"
	Edward Coleman	"
	Sydney Bowers	Scutcher
	Arnold Joshua	"
	Herman Henry	"

On 8 January 1957 Mr. Edwin Thorpe the principal of W.A.Thorpe & Sons, celebrated his 82nd birthday with a dance held at his residence of Oakbank. Amongst some comments on the fibre industry at this time, the world was said to have too much sisal! As given in another version, there was an excess of hard fibre in the world, market with the exception of manila which is in short supply. Information. was received by Thorpe's from their London broker that Jacob: & Company had accumulated a total of 230 tons of hemp and 105 tons of tow in St.Helena, for which no market was available. As stated by their brokers (Wigglesworth)

"We are not surprised that hemp has piled up unsold, for we are having the greatest difficulty in securing orders in hemp for you".

On 9 January 1956 from an extract in one of Thorpe's letters to their brokers

"We have had a labour strike at one of our mills for more wages. We have considered the position and arrived at a decision, no alternative but to close down the Francis Plain mill on 18th instant".

On 22 January 1957 when His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh visited St.Helena from the Royal yacht *Britannia* he included a visit to Bamboo Hedge flax mill where he was greeted by Mr.George Moss the Mills Manager for Solomon & Company, and Councillor Kenneth Legg, the Mill foreman, together with some of the mill staff and many spectators. With great interest he watched. the whole flax-milling process from the unloading of the donkeys to the baling of the hemp. A painting of the Mill which had been done by one of the staff, Mr. Percy Williams, was presented to the Duke who accepted it with admiration.

On 25 March 1957 as advised by Wigglesworth & Company to Thorpe's "80 bales (10 tons) of fibre rejected by a spinning mill in northern England much dark and strippy fibre also with an excessive amount of dirt and towy ends. Certainly below the standard of other deliveries made by you"

With operations at Francis Plain and one or two other mills having come to a halt, it was apparent that St.Helena's struggling flax industry was approaching a crisis, which led to a special meeting being held at the Imperial Institute building in London on 22 May 1957 and attended by the Colonial Products laboratory and the Consultative Committee on Vegetable Fibres. The following is extracted. from the minutes of this meeting--

In addition to Dr. R.H. Kirby of the Colonial Products Laboratory, there were three representatives from the Colonial Office, and many representatives of those with interests in the flax industry, including Mr. E.A. Thorpe of W.A. Thorpe & Sons, and Mr. H.R. Kennedy of Solomon & Company (St. Helena) Limited. Real difficulties in the slump of phormium fibre is due to

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the price of fibre being dropped, and now that spinners can get sisal for almost half the price of phormium tenax they prefer to use sisal.

Mr. Willis thought that judging by New Zealand standards, the organisation of the St. Helena industry, was bad. Twice as many men were employed in some operations on St. Helena as in New Zealand. The numbers of factories should be cut down, and more overhead conveyors should be used in place of donkeys. Mr. Thorpe said his firm had tried out an automatic machine which worked well and would produce cheaper fibre but it would cause unemployment.

Phormium tenax was used for wire rope cores, but owing to the relatively unattractive price, sisal was now used instead. In 1957 the Government mill had closed completely, and Solomon & Company had only three mills out of five working. The wages paid to workers were low, and Mr. Humphrey the Agricultural and Forestry Officer on St. Helena, thought they should be raised. The total area under phormium on St. Helena was then about 3,000 acres.

Several suggestions for the use of phormium were put forward including for oakum, padding in upholstery, weaving into bags and sacks.

The bleak market for St. Helena fibre is mentioned amongst other aspects in a letter of 27 June 1957 from Mr. Edwin Thorpe in London to his brother Harold on St. Helena:-

"No sign of life on the London market for phormium, day after day, no enquiries, the position is becoming serious. Solomons fortunate to sell 100 tons of tow, must have reduced the price to do so. Sisal commands the supply of the market. If any offer comes along we shall have to make a sacrifice in greatly reduced prices. The present economic position of trade on the Island - Solomon & Company must be feeling the draft, having spent such vast expenditure on both Farm Lodge and Longwood, I am not surprised. I will find out if they are surrendering the lease at Longwood, it seems a shame to let that 130 acres go back to weeds after such extensive cultivation. There is a suggestion to grow Castor oil seed, the price today is £150 a ton. If there is no improvement in the market by the end of the year, I am afraid we shall have no alternative but to close down and live on our capital."

During 1957 there were several suggestions for substituting a new industry on St. Helena, such as the possibility of growing Vanilla beans and considered worth while giving a try. Information from the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew was obtained by Messrs Wigglesworth concerning Mexican brush fibre

* Footnote:- The Government mill at Longwood was mentioned as permanently closed in the Annual Report for 1954-55.

as a substitute crop on St. Helena. It was used for brushes and said to be in demand.

While he was still in London during July 1957, Mr. Edwin Thorpe received a report from the Colonial Office that the Government had given priority to St. Helena hemp supplied to the Post Office, some 300 tons per year, but no alternative industry was suggested. In the same month a conference of all the London spinners was being held at Harrogate, but Mr. Thorpe was not very hopeful while sisal was still plentiful and selling at a low price. In a reference to the current wage demands he stated that -

"The world seems to have gone mad with high wages and cannot be justified"

The only order received by Thorpe's this month was for 5 tons of hemp at £56 a ton for Port Elizabeth, this being a repeat order. Meantime Solomon & Company had 400 tons of hemp and 100 tons of tow in storage, while Thorpe's storage was 140 tons of hemp and 25 tons of tow. The depressing situation of the flax industry for 1956-57 is reflected in the Annual Report for these two years:-

"Two firms own the bulk of the leaf-growing area and all the mills, of which there are seven. Five of these were in operation at the beginning of 1956, but only four at the end of 1957. Throughout the period, the industry has remained depressed under the shadow of continuing low prices. Exports for 1957 were 629 tons of fibre, 178 tons of tow, and 45 tons of rope and twine. Total exports of flax products was £44,500."

Sir James Harford finished his term of office and left the island on 1 January 1958. His name is perpetuated by the Harford Middle School which was built in 1957 and the Harford Social Centre, the site of the school being on land that was part of the Longwood flax mill, while the social centre was formed by converting the former mill buildings. The new Governor designate, Mr. Robert Alford, arrived at St. Helena on the *Rhodesia Castle* on 26 January 1958.

On 3 January 1958 it was announced that 250 men were being withdrawn from Ascension Island where they had been employed by the Americans. While the slump continued in the flax industry they would be returning to St. Helena with no outlook for the future. In a letter to Thorpe's of 29 January 1958, their brokers Wigglesworth & Company advised that because of the bad slump in the flax industry, they had made the following suggestions to the Colonial Office:-

- (a) The Admiralty, Post Office, and Stationery Office should be induced to insist on their twine being made from St. Helena phormium, and
- (b) - That the Government subsidise the St. Helena industry sufficiently to

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enable us to sell phormium, if need be as low as £45 per ton CIF without loss to the growers.

In February 1958 Thorpe's were prepared to reduce the hemp price to £50 a ton CIF, providing the Government gave a subsidy of £5 a ton of the exported hemp. They also asked the Chairman of the Union-Castle Line whether they could get a reduction in freight to help clear the accumulated stocks and also enter the competitive market with sisal, but they only received a non-committal reply by the shipping line that their returns are barely economic in relation to their substantial rise in operating costs.

Mr. Edwin Thorpe had proposed the growing of castor beans as a new industry, but the Government Secretary said that they were extremely susceptible to insect pests and he did not think they would be suitable for St. Helena. Regarding the suggestion of Government providing funds for establishing an industry to manufacture woolpacks on St. Helena, the Governor advised on 24 March that the cost of machinery - £200,000 - was prohibitive, and in the absence of a protected market for St. Helena sacks (of which there appears no likelihood), their manufacture would be uneconomic.

At this time on St. Helena the bales of fibre were being bound either with rope or hoop iron. They were pressed in both 3 cwt. and 5 cwt. bales, but the 5 cwt. was preferred. As the market was in such a hopeless position, Thorpe's said they had no alternative but to close down Fairyland mill which they did on 28 March 1958 and it did not reopen until 11 May. This was confirmed in their letter to Wigglesworth's :-

"We can understand your disappointment at the closing of the mills, but to my mind there was no alternative, especially as the crops of green leaf in the vicinity of Fairyland. would soon become exhausted; we were mostly concerned with the displacement of labour and have retained the key men in other employment cutting timber etc."

A letter of 18 July 1958 by Messrs Wigglesworth & Company stated that Mr. Alford (the Governor) had made representations to the shipping lines to reduce freight rates, and thereby assist the sale of St. Helena fibre, but this had produced no results. Sir James Harford had referred in an article in the **Times** to the difficulties of the St. Helena phormium industry and how St. Helena producers were hard put to keep their mills open. The writer of this letter stated that in respect of W.A. Thorpe for whom his company were agents, it had regrettably not been possible to continue and their mills had to close owing to the inability to avoid making losses at current prices and consequent accumulation of stocks. A letter of 4 September 1958 from Mr. Edwin Thorpe to Wigglesworth's emphasised the unsettled situation of the flax industry:-

"The labour position is giving rise to grave anxiety. Solomon & Company have had a strike at their mill for higher wages demanding 25 per cent rise, which is impossible under the present situation, on the level the Government pays. It is now postponed for a month to be reviewed again. Our mill is at present working satisfactory and have been given to understand that if any further demand is made the mill will close."

He also advised that Fairyland mill was reopened on 11 August 1958.

On 25 August 1958 Jacobs were recommending Solomon's to start one or two of their idle mills, since at present they were only operating one out of four. They also suggested Solomon's should consult with Thorpe's to make a joint effort for a subsidy from the Government.

1959 proved to be one of the bleakest years for the flax industry, but the workers received a small boost, as wages were increased from 1 May to a minimum of 45/- for men and 30/- for women. The following is a summary of the Annual Report for 1958-59 during the term of Governor Robert Alford:-

"There were 185 flax workers in 1959. They are usually employed between 7 a.m. to 5-00 pm and work a 5½ day week. Except for public holidays, no paid holidays are granted, but one of the flax-milling firms granted a bonus to wage earners in the form of an extra week's pay at Christmas. Flax-mill workers received overtime rates of 1/- an hour. The largest flax mills work an average of 8 hours overtime a week during the busy season. There are 5 square miles (3,200 acres) under New Zealand flax.

In 1959, 589 tons of fibre, 299 tons of tow, and 41 tons of rope and twine were exported to a total value of £46,756. The prices rose sharply in April 1959 - in fact by 36 per cent - after several small falls again reached £90 a ton for hemp by December. The crop was produced almost entirely by two local firms operating four mills. As a result of severe drought for most of 1958 and 1959, water shortage reduced yields and temporarily closed several mills.

Strenuous efforts were made in 1960 to improve the industry's performance and the following indicates the wide range of ports to which cargoes of fibre and tow were shipped from St. Helena :-- Dublin, London, Port Elizabeth, Havre, Genoa, Bordeaux, Naples, Hull, Dunkirk, New York, and Amsterdam.

On 30 October 1960 when Mr. Homfray Solomon died in hospital at the age of 83, this signified the passing of another one of the *big three* original mill owners on St. Helena, and also marked the end of a long historic era in which the presence of a Solomon had always been maintained on the island to represent their business. A summary of his obituary was obtained from the monthly **Wirebird** magazine of November 1960-

"Homfray Welby Solomon was born in St. Helena on 3 April 1877. A grandson

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of Bishop Welby who was the Bishop of this Diocese, Mr. Solomon gave his life-long service to St. Helena in business administration and sport. For these and many other reasons he will long be remembered here as well as by many friends abroad. After his early childhood on St. Helena, he went overseas to be educated in both England and Belgium. In 1903 he returned to the place of his birth to take over the management of his family's business which had for many years past become the well established firm of Solomon & Company Limited which he managed for the remainder of his active life.

The firm was founded by Mr. Solomon's great-grandfather towards the end of the 18th century. In 1929 he was appointed an Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, and later in 1952 a Commander of the same order (CBE). He was Honorary Consul for Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands. In 1934 he served as Consular Agent for France during the absence of the French Consul, M. Colin. He was a great sportsman and founded the St. Helena Cricket League in 1903. Also a great swimmer, he regularly took an early morning swim, and was known to have swum from Jamestown to Lemon Valley Bay. He imported the first motor car in 1929, and is given as the Father of motor transport on St. Helena. He lived at Essex House and Wellington House in Jamestown and later at Prince's Lodge now called Bishopsholme. He was a cheerful and generous giver, his largest donation being the founding of the Solomon Trust Fund with a gift of £10,000. Mr. Solomon was buried at St. Paul's Cemetery, and leaves his widow Mrs. Cynthia Solomon.

According to the Annual Report for 1960-61 the average C.I.F price for 1960 was £90 per ton for superior fibre, but this fell to an average of £77 during 1961. Of the seven mills there were only 4 or 5 in operation. The total value for exports of flax products rose to a creditable £84,769 in 1960, but fell to £57,370 in 1961.

Annual Production & Export Values (1956 to 1961 inclusive)

Year	Fibre & Tow Total (combined tonnage)	Export Values (fibre & tow)
1956	852	£45,457
1957	807	£40,047
1958	1,190½	£48,747
1959	888	£42,625
1960	1,222	£78,237
1961	876	£52,106

Annual Production & Export Values (1956 to 1961 inclusive)

Year	Rope & Twine (tonnage)	Total Export Values
1956	68	£6,852

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1957	45	£4,560
1958	57¼	£5,582
1959	40¾	£4,131
1960	58	£6,532
1961	50	£5,264

THE LAST YEARS OF THE FLAX INDUSTRY

A considerable improvement in production during 1962 together with increased exports, gave a small degree of optimism, but the price of superior fibre on the London market was only £67 a ton at the beginning of the year. There were 276 flax workers whose rate of pay remained unchanged from the previous year at 45/- per week for men and from 29/- to 35/- per week for women. Sir John Field became the new Governor on 15 May 1962 in succession to Governor Alford.

Another one whose passing must be recorded is Captain Thomas Cecil Mainwaring who died on 4 August 1962 and was buried at St. Paul's Cemetery. Captain Mainwaring devoted much of his life to activities connected with the flax industry on St. Helena, and most particularly to rope-making, as he established the first rope works at Longwood in 1920. Born on 8 April 1888, he served with the Royal Engineers during the Great War, and was a qualified mechanical engineer. In 1921 he was appointed Aide-de-camp to Governor Robert Peel. Following the first motor vehicle being imported to St. Helena in 1929 Captain Mainwaring imported a Morris Cowley car which received Registration No.6 in March 1930. Subsequently he established the St. Helena Motor Company, being a motor repair business in premises off Back Way in Jamestown, and also undertook a great many mechanical repair jobs on flax engines and vehicles for all the mill owners for a long period. During the Second World War he was in command of the St. Helena Home Guard. Amongst several well known residences he lived at was Longwood New House in 1936, and which had been specially built for Napoleon who never occupied it. He also lived at Apple Cottage and Longwood Villa. His wife Maud, the only daughter of Mr & Mrs. F. Deason, died on 20 March 1958.

Of the seven mills, five were in production during 1963 when the London price for superior fibre rose sharply to reach £125 per ton and the industry was said to be in a flourishing condition although the tonnage exported was lower than the previous year. Although there were increased exports of fibre and tow in 1964, an alarming situation had developed due to a big drop in market prices for superior fibre, down to £58 a ton. Another increase in wages pushed these up to 50/- a week for males and up to 44/6 for females. There were 299 flax workers at that time.

Of those who devoted their lives to the well-being of St. Helena's flax industry, none could have achieved more than Mr. Edwin Thorpe who died on 4 February 1964 aged 89. His endeavours to promote the industry on his many visits to England including those during the Second World War, and his

vigorous efforts on St. Helena are almost legendary. Without his concise and down-to-earth style of correspondence frequently despatched to his firm W.A. Thorpe & Sons on St. Helena, this work of history would have been very much the poorer. Edwin Alfred Thorpe who was born on St. Helena on 8 January 1875 always put his native island as first priority. After the death of his father, William Thorpe, who founded the firm of W.A. Thorpe & Sons, he was one of four sons who formed the board of directors of which he was the managing director. At the time of his death he was the only survivor of that board as Frederick had died in 1947, Randolph in 1955, and Harold in 1959.

He was appointed a Justice of the Peace on 8 July 1949, and had particularly strong views in support of human rights. His generous support for worthy causes was also well known. He is known to have regularly taken a swim from the Jamestown wharf. When he was buried at St. Pauls Cemetery there could have been no more appropriate epitaph than that inscribed on the tombstone :-

“He walked with God and feared no man”.

Subsequently the firm of W.A. Thorpe & Sons including their flax mills was managed by Mr. Donald Thorpe, who was Harold's son.

The South African interests who had been purchasing St. Helena fibre from Thorpe's, began using a very low grade manila hemp which was only £92 per ton compared to the then current price of £125 per ton for phormium. At this time Thorpe's had just secured a 2-year contract with London and Hull for 560 tons of hemp at £101 per ton. They had been compelled to accept this as their Durban customer would not pay the price and went instead for the cheaper low grade manila hemp. It was to be this last alarming trend that would soon spell doom for St. Helena's flax industry, as they were unable to reduce production costs sufficiently to compete with cheaper types of fibre such as the afore-mentioned manila and sisal. Meantime Mr. Donald Thorpe had recently obtained 6,000 suckers of a different variety of flax imported from New Zealand, but this planting will not be ready for milling until 1967. The newly introduced variety of New Zealand flax must have been *Phormium Colensoi* which is the other of the two species belonging to the genus *Phormium*, the one originally planted on St. Helena up to this time, being *Phormium Tenax*. Unfortunately *Phormium Colensoi* was not given the opportunity to prove itself as the industry was destined to end before it matured, but today it can still be seen growing in the locality near Cason's Gate and the Arboretum.

Of great concern in respect of the labour situation for the flax industry at this time, several large projects which were either under way or about to begin on Ascension Island were tempting many hundreds of St. Helenians to

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engage in contracts for up to two years and sometimes longer. Since 1921 St. Helena has been given special priority to supply the labour needs on Ascension Island, although apart from a phase during the Second. World War, there had not been very great demand. Unfortunately for the flax industry all that had now changed on Ascension, with big schemes for a new power station, BBC relay station, and the NASA programme. Consequently there was great difficulty for the flax mills in retaining key men, and at this stage in 1964 they were relying chiefly on teenage labour, but even this was being lost to Ascension Island when they turned 18, at which age they could get permission to leave the island.

In Durban, Messrs Ropes and Mattings were making good progress in manufacturing grain bags from phormium fibre which was proving to be as good. as bags made from jute, but as events were to prove, the South Africans were hoping to rely almost entirely on their own locally grown phormium fibre, and no reliance could be placed on South Africa as a long term market for St. Helena fibre. Moreover the Boer minority regime which had gained power in 1948 and embarked on the world's most inhuman racist policy of apartheid, were anxious to establish a large extent of local industry as a buffer against the effects of possible world sanctions.

About 1962 Francis Plain had been the first mill to receive an electrical supply when a transmission line was extended from Jamestown after the Government took over the power station from Solomon's in 1959. During 1964 a valuation of machinery at Thorpe's two mills listed several electric motors at their Francis Plain mill:--

Main machinery at Francis Plain Mill -- 4 February 1964

1 Flax stripper complete	£100	
1 Scutcher	£ 25	
2 15 H.P. Electric motors & starters		
1 10 H.P.		}£300
1 5 HP		
1 3 HP		
1 38 HP Diesel engine	£ 45	
1 Hydraulic pump	£ 75	
1 Press	£150	
1 Lorry (running)	£100	
1 Lorry (condemned)	£ 5	

It can be noted that the diesel engine had been retained, probably for standby duty.

Main machinery at Fairyland Mill - 4 February 1964

1 Flax stripper	£100
1 Scutcher	£ 25
1 National gas engine	£ 50
1 Bijou press baler	£500
2 Scales	£ 15
1 Diesel lorry	£500

As stated by Mr Donald Thorpe, he believed that a regular market of 160 tons a year would enable his firm to keep milling and at least maintain their skilled and semi-skilled labour force. Once it was lost to Ascension Island it would be extremely difficult to get them back again. Some of their tow had been so long in storage the white ants had caused considerable damage. The leases on flax lands at Woody Ridge and Taglate that had been taken over by Thorpe's from the St. Helena Corporation in 1930 were terminated as from 30 September 1964.

During 1965 the rather parlous situation of the flax industry is conveyed in a letter by Mr. Donald Thorpe dated 30 July:--

"Since work started erecting the Diplomatic Wireless Station at Longwood, combined with increasing demand for labour on Ascension Island, our mill labour force is down to 68 per cent of the normal strength. This has seriously affected production - and very concerned about being able to maintain the London and Hull contracts. Three flax cutters left to join the D.W.S. and labour at Francis Plain has dwindled from 50 to 28 within two months. If difficulties affect chance of renewal of the contracts, a small quantity could be purchased from Solomon & Company to complete the contracts before May 1966. Mr. E.A.Thorpe had died, and with distribution of assets, may not acquire Francis Plain Mill, and any future contract would have to be based on the maximum output of 4 tons per week from one mill.

I received a letter from John I. Jacobs & Company proposing a merger of the hemp milling interests of our two firms. I am not inclined to come under the control of Jacobs & Company. After discussions with Mr. Kennedy of Solomon & Company I am convinced there are other reasons behind the proposed merger. Much discussion is going on regarding the future of the flax industry and the proposed increase in wages. It is generally agreed that the mills will now have to give serious thought to some kind of mechanisation. Two members of Parliament are presently visiting here from England. They are accompanied by Mr. John Tegan of the Colonial Office. I look forward to obtaining some information regarding the method of producing phormium hemp in Durban which Mr. G. Moss should be able to provide on his return on 3 August."

The proposed increase in wages as mentioned in the foregoing letter, finally came to a head late in 1965 when the Salaries Commissioner, Mr. West

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recommended that the wages of Government labourers be doubled to £5 a week with six months back pay. This of course placed the mill owners in a tenuous situation as they would be compelled to raise the wages of their employees to match.

The slender margin (if any) above production costs in the market price which had only averaged £82 a ton for superior fibre in 1965, was suddenly slashed off in increased wages, and the mill owners decided to close their mills. Francis Plain mill closed on 28 December 1965, and early in 1966 all the mills of Solomon & Company had followed suit.

Thorpe's had accepted a 2 year contract with London and Hull from September 1964 for 560 tons of hemp at £100 a ton, and were obliged to keep their Fairyland mill in operation, but by the time they completed the contract and closed Fairyland mill on 10 October 1966 their losses amounted to £4,000.

Although it does not specifically mention the increase in wages, the Annual Report for 1966-67 gives considerable reference to the demise of the flax industry:--

"Apart from New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*) yielding hemp and tow, the island does not produce any exportable agricultural commodity. This product has for the past half century been the main agricultural industry. Now this industry is dead, killed by a combination of falling world prices and demand, and increased costs of production. In its heyday it employed between 250 and 400 people, and this was a major source of employment.

The last mill closed down on 14 September 1966, the others having closed early in that year. The Government had for a number of years guaranteed a price of £78 a ton, and, since the market price was for the most of that time below the guaranteed price, the subsidies involved cost the Government a large sum of money. The cost of production at the end of 1967 was about £100 per ton, and not until the world price rises to over that figure, is there any hope of reviving the industry. The progress being made by synthetic fibres renders such a rise unlikely.

Annual Production & Export Values (1962 to 1966 inclusive)

Year	Fibre & Tow	Total Export Values
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* Footnote:- According to the record book for Fairyland Mill which was the last to cease working, it closed down on 10 October 1966

THE LAST YEARS

	(combined tonnage)	(Fibre & tow)
1962	1,254	£69,956
1965	975	£70,256
1964	1,411	£92,415
1965	1,055	£68,377
1966	736	£39,276
Year	Rope & Twine (tonnage)	Total Export Values
1962	51	£5,308
1963	41	£4,500
1964	2	£ 221
1965	39	(value not listed)
1966	15	£ 905

Approximately 75 per cent of St. Helena's exports of flax products went to the United Kingdom, while most of the remainder went to Europe, and a very small quantity to South Africa.

THE AFTERMATH TO THE END OF THE FLAX INDUSTRY

During 1966 while the flax industry was letting out its last dying gasps, a meeting of the Advisory Committee for Land Settlement and Government Pasturages, together with the Forestry Advisory Committee, was held on 28 July to discuss the aftermath and what if any measures could be taken to revive the industry. The Committee included Major the Honourable E.J. Moss C.B.E., MC, JP, Mr. D.H. Thorpe JP, Mr. G. Moss, and others. The following is a summary relevant to the flax industry:--

Mr. Lynn favoured the industry with his views. It seemed apparent that with difficult struggles in the past 10 years, the recent wage award and difficulties in mechanisation, the future of the industry is doomed, unless alternative means of production and a market is found. Small growers have also become affected. Major Moss asked what is to be done with the large areas of flax if the industry can not be revived. Mr. Lynn knew of no economy crop to replace flax. Perhaps grass or forest but each would have to be considered on its merits. On the other hand flax is a good conservation crop. It would prove an expensive operation to remove flax. Mr. G. Moss said the millers have been investigating the possibility of producing the new style jute type Phormium with an eye on the Dundee jute market, but the introduction of the recent wage increase and withdrawal of the subsidy has brought this possibility to a standstill. It was his personal opinion that he could only see the flax lands re-established as either pasture or forest. He said he does not know the situation regarding a market for wood pulp or whether we are likely to have a sufficient quantity for such an industry. There would be a case for Government assistance in removing the flax crops and establishing a grass cover on these lands together with the cost of fencing.

It soon became obvious that the collapse of the flax industry also meant the collapse of the economy, as there was no other export to compensate for it. At the same time unemployment became a serious problem on St. Helena, although fortunately the projects on Ascension Island were still running, but added to by the mill workers who had lost their jobs there was now much more competition for recruitment, as aided by free accommodation and meals on Ascension the men could, save far more money than on St. Helena where even those who had a job were lucky to save anything. It is easy to be wise after the event, but what other options did the St. Helena flax industry have in order to survive? Very little if any it would appear. Progress in the manufacture of rope, twine, and string, from synthetic nylon fibre had been made during the 1950's, but at the time the mills were closed on St. Helena,

there does not seem to be any evidence that it had already displaced the natural fibres which particularly for phormium were beset by high production costs. Manila and sisal had an advantage as they were both grown where labour costs were very cheap.

Of course nylon fibre could be produced cheaper than natural fibres, and due to this and its superior strength it finally became the dominant fibre. In the same way as with plastic bags today, the fact that nylon is not biodegradable and in effect is one of the many pollutants manufactured by man, does not seem to have been considered. In this respect, animals and marine life will not suffer if they happen to swallow fragments of natural fibre which contains no such noxious elements as the synthetic fibre. However sooner or later St. Helena's fibre was certain to be displaced by nylon, and no amount of reducing production costs or introducing automatic machinery could have saved it from that.

The New Zealand phormium fibre grown on St. Helena had many other uses that could have been tried, and it does seem that most of these were considered, but eventually dismissed as not being commercially viable. Of all its uses the one that does not appear to have been mentioned anywhere at the time, is paper-making which in New Zealand last century was specifically exported for that purpose to England and America. Even earlier this century an exceedingly strong brown wrapping-paper was being made by a firm in New Zealand, but the development of the wood paper pulp industry put paid to that. What the St. Helena fibre industry really needed was a reliable product made from the island's own fibre on the island. The rope industry established in 1920 by Captain Mainwaring was a step in that direction, but it was too small to have ever been of any consequence, and in any case it would also have eventually been ousted by nylon rope.

St. Helena had lost its only industry, and despite all the intelligence brought to bear on the possibility of a revival, it all came to naught, and the island was left with some 3,350 acres of living flax of which there appeared to be no use. Apart from unemployment they were also left with seven fully equipped mills which were -- Bamboo Hedge, Rock Rose, Woody Ridge, Hutts Gate, Broadbottom, Francis Plain (known as Scott's), and Fairyland. The fibre stores at Jamestown could soon be put to other use, while any surplus oxen which had been widely used for transport right up until the mills were closed, could eventually be disposed of for slaughter. A certain number of horses no doubt were given other duties.

After some 60 years noble duty in the flax industry the future of surplus donkeys posed more of a problem, as this rather lovable animal is definitely

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not for the dinner plate. In 1966 the donkey population was given as 907, and it was known that a large number were never used even while the flax mills had been working. The Donkey Board recommended that as a measure to reduce the large number of useless donkeys there should be a system whereby donkeys were only kept under payment of a licence or annual fee.

In 1967 the number of donkeys had dropped to 848 of which 232 were working:-

Registered stallions	5
Mares	352
Geldings	402
female foals	66
Male foals	<u>23</u>
Total =	<u>848</u>

Concern was expressed on the large number of roaming donkeys on Crown waste lands. Very little control can be exercised on roaming donkeys and ways and means will have to be sought to control the donkey population.

Another problem that needed urgent attention in the aftermath was the rats which had found a perfect haven in the flax plantations. While the flax industry existed, this was emphasised in an excerpt from the

Report on rodent control on St. Helena 1965 by Mr. R.A. Davis:--

"Since flax workers are exposed to damp conditions, must handle wet flax, and habitually walk barefoot, and since both species of rats occur in growing flax, there is an obvious possibility of infection from rodent borne disease."

A network of tracks through the flax plantations around and below the mountain peaks where they had been formed to provide access for flax cutters and donkeys to collect the bundles, were also left in the aftermath, and would serve as useful short cuts or for scenic walks long into the future. One of the most serious effects created. by concentrating the island's resources on the flax industry was the neglect of other forms of agriculture, thus almost eliminating any hope for the island obtaining food self-sufficiency.

THE DIM PROSPECTS FOR REVIVAL

During the ensuing years while most of the mills were allowed to simply rust away, there were various enquiries from overseas on the possibility of using St. Helena's fibre for an assortment of products. On 29 May 1969 the Southern Paper Industries at Bellville, C.P. South Africa, wrote to Messrs W.A. Thorpe & Sons with a view to trying St. Helena fibre for the paper industry, for which it would have to be cut into one inch lengths of fibre. There did not appear to be any further communication on this, but Thorpe's had maintained Fairyland mill and were able to strip fibre if required, as occurred when flax was milled to provide green bark for cattle feed during the drought of 1970.

Also in 1970 the Agricultural and Forestry Department were making efforts to try and revive the flax industry by exporting to South Africa. The advice they received. was that a better type of flax was being grown in South Africa, but the industry there was in a very bad way and they would never be allowed to import St. Helena flax which in any case could not be produced as cheaply as the local flax in South Africa where the governing Boer regime maintained a system that ensured very cheap labour under their apartheid laws.

In September 1972 a company in West Germany asked for a quotation of first quality fibre in ½ ton, 2 tons, and 5 tons quantity, but they required a small fibre sample beforehand. For the purpose of costing, Thorpe's advised that the price per metric ton would be in the region. of £130 F.O.B. This prospect did not appear to have been proceeded with.

Another enquiry in November 1972 was made by the Tropical Products Institute in Oxfordshire, England, for experiments in making fibre board from flax. Messrs Thorpe's were asked to send 60 kg. samples of dried fibre.

In 1977 a Portuguese company became interested in St. Helena fibre with a view to resuscitating the industry, but it did not come to anything. The Portuguese at that time were using about 30,000 tons of raw hemp. They asked for samples and also offered to purchase any flax-milling machinery which St. Helena had no further use for. However by then most of the machinery in the mills on St. Helena had deteriorated too much for any further use.

A few years later on 30 June 1981 the Colonial Treasurer and Development; Secretary of the St. Helena Government wrote to Bradbury Wilkinson of New Malden, Surrey, England, who make bank notes, asking them if it was possible to use St. Helena flax in quality paper production, but nothing developed on this. All the foregoing are just a selection of many that

DIM PROSPECTS

offered a forlorn hope of the great quantity of living flax on St. Helena being put to productive use. Meantime in general terms, by 1976 the Government had accepted that there was no hope for a revival of the flax industry, and therefore a decision had to be made on a policy concerning the disposal of the plantations. The Government of St. Helena then consisted of the Governor and an elected Legislative Council which was first formed in 1967 after a long period in which an Advisory Council had functioned.

At a meeting of the Legislative Council on 20 July 1977 the proceedings referred to flax clearance which had been carried out in 1976-77:-

"Flax clearance for the development of arable and pasture land was brought to a conclusion at the end of March 1977. Between October 1976 and that time, 36½ acres were cleared, creating 3,736 man hours of employment, a considerable amount of burning was also carried out."

During 1980 Messrs W.A. Thorpe & Sons carried out extensive flax clearing and planting grass on their own lands. This was undertaken by contract workers on the basis of flax clearance at £100 an acre and planting grass at £50 an acre on the properties including Fairyland, Oakbank, Mount Pleasant, Barren Hill, Alcock's at Sandy Bay, Woodlands, Beale's and Brown's Hill. It was estimated that about 1,000 acres of flax had been cleared by 1980 this seeming to represent nearly one third of the 3,350 acres which was the total given in the Annual Report for 1964. In the 5-year Development Plan prepared in 1980 for the period 1980-85, £80,000 was allocated for further flax clearing. Even so, when one takes a view of the great areas of mountain peaks and valleys still lathered with dense flax today, it seems obvious that the surface area of remaining flax is grossly under-estimated.

The death in England on 31 May 1978, of Major Edward James Moss C.B.E., M.C., J.P. at the age of 86, marked the passing of another participant who had been closely associated with the flax industry during most of the long period it had existed, and together with his many other activities he was one of the island's most respected sons. On Tuesday 6 June 1978 when he was buried in England, on the same day on St. Helena his many friends including His Excellency, Governor Geoffrey Guy, assembled at St. Paul's Cathedral to pay tribute to his memory. A memoir from a correspondent in the *St. Helena News Review* at the time, provided his obituary. He was born at Woodlands in the west of the Island into a family which had farmed on St. Helena since 1810, and which was connected with Solomon, Moss, Gideon, & Company. Thus with his passing, an island era has closed. His long, active, and useful life included a very considerable important public service to the island where he was Sheriff and Senior Magistrate for some 27 years, and a member of the Advisory, Council from May 1949 and was an Unofficial Member of the

Executive Council from 1956 to 1966. He represented the Island at the Queen's Silver Jubilee Celebrations in London last year (1977). His unique and extensive experience of so many aspects of the Island's life, added to his natural wisdom, made his advice invaluable to countless people including the Governors of St. Helena.

Major Moss served in the army in both world wars - in the Near East and Greece in the first during which he rose to the rank of Captain and was awarded the Military Cross for bravery on the battlefield, and on the Island during the second when he was in command of the St. Helena Rifles and was promoted Major. He became Country Manager of Solomons in 1925 and General Manager in 1948, retiring in 1965. He had a keen interest in outdoor pursuits, notably farming and game shooting, and in his earlier years cricket and horsemanship, at both of which he excelled. A memorial and headstone which was placed for him at St. Paul's Cemetery is adjacent to the one for his wife, Leslie Winifred Moss, who died on 28 March 1977.

THE FLAX INDUSTRY

RELICS OF THE FLAX INDUSTRY

Apart from the living symbol of the great swathes of flax that still exist on St. Helena, nearly 30 years after the industry died there are still many relics to be seen at the various mill sites, most of which exhibit the buildings that were erected when the mills were rebuilt after 1948.

Dealing with the mill sites in their order of origins as such, the first one is certainly the Government mill at Longwood which was opened by the Governor, Lieutenant-Colonel Gallwey, in a wave of optimism on 30 November 1907 and followed by a function at Golf Club House. Subsequently it was burnt down in 1946 and the new mill built nearby in 1948 only lasted a few years before closing down and converted in 1957 to become the Harford Social Centre which it still is today. Very few relics survive at the former Longwood mill, but a large one that has survived is an old concrete reservoir built in 1907 to hold 30,000 gallons of water for serving the mill. This was later intended to be used as a swimming pool alongside the Harford Middle School, but the idea did not come to fruit and it remains as a kind of memorial to the mill era, although very few people seem to know of its origin. The other relic to be seen on the site of the first mill is an old iron cylinder half buried in the ground on the lane-way running past the Millfields reservoir. This was part of the generating plant for an early gas engine.

After going down Longwood Avenue and the road skirting Napoleon's old residence of Longwood House, this leads around the golf course to Ropery Field where one may see the old iron-roofed shed where Captain Mainwaring established his rope works in 1920. Set in between houses and against a view of the great scenic feature known as The Barn, this old shed with vertical boarding does not display any evidence of what it was used for, and is now merely a storage shed for animals' food, but as the site of the first and only works established to make rope from flax grown on St. Helena, the site will always be of historic significance for the island.

The second, mill to be established and also the first private mill was Bamboo Hedge mill which was often referred to as Sandy Bay mill. It was set up in 1913 and ran until about 1949 in the original wood and iron-roofed buildings which were rebuilt in 1949-50 under the Rehabilitation Scheme. It remained in service until the flax industry came to an end in 1966, from which time the buildings have been modified for farm use, more particularly as a piggery. In August 1992 when I visited this mill (owned by Solomon & Company) the last of the machinery had only, just been removed and the engine room was being converted to a slaughter room. The stripping room had long ago been converted to prepare carcasses, while the flax sorting room was

used for hanging the carcasses. I also saw a lot of well fed pigs. Apart from the various buildings and an assortment of dismembered machinery, there were few other meaningful relics.

The third mill to join the industry was Hutts Gate mill, built for Deason Brothers in 1916, the same type iron-roofed and wood structures, and equipped with a gas engine driving the machinery. At this old mill there are considerable relics including the gas generating plant together with foundations for the engine. A few old sheds including one used by the blacksmith and another that was the donkeys' stable still exist. About 100 yards up the slope to the main road, the new mill buildings erected about 1950 under the rehabilitation scheme, are still largely intact, although some have been modified, as initially after the industry was abandoned it was used for a slaughter-house, and a later activity was stone-crushing, but today some of the rooms are not used whilst others are serving to facilitate the manufacture of concrete blocks by Solomon & Company.

There are still some relics of machinery from flax-milling, including two Lister diesel engines, a water pump for the hydraulic press, and arrangements of pulleys and shafts. One of the engines has been remounted to provide power for the stone-crushing plant which has been given up. Lower down the slope from Hutts Gate mill, a large grass-covered mound of earth signifies the burial site for an extensive collection of machinery both for flax-milling and twine manufacture. The latter was installed in a separate twine works that was situated either on or near the above-mentioned mound and began production during 1925 and a proportion of the twine was supplied to the Longwood Rope Works. In one of the sheds belonging to the old mill, there is a bag-making machine which arrived just before the flax industry ceased and has never been removed from its packing case.

The fourth mill at Broadbottom was built in 1916 and began production in 1917. There is now no sign of this original mill, and the new Broadbottom mill was built in 1950 on an adjacent site. The machinery that still survives at this mill includes a complete engine room with Lister diesel engine, Tangye Birmingham water pump for the hydraulic press, with some shafting and pulleys to the adjacent room where an old Wakely stripping machine is in poor condition. The relics of an old scutcher are in an adjacent room. After the mills closed in 1966 the Hollongs & Gust hydraulic press was used to press bales of wool during the period when Broadbottom was run as a farm for grazing sheep. Today it is serving as farm buildings for the cattle grazing enterprise of Solomon & Company.

THE FLAX INDUSTRY

The earliest mill named Woody Ridge which was established in 1923, was phased out about 1938-39 and although all the mill buildings disappeared a long time ago, some relics to be seen on the site today, include the concrete base and foundation bolts for a gas engine, sunken foundation walls, and pieces of old ironwork. The site is now part of cattle grazing land owned by Solomon & Company. A new mill also named Woody Ridge was built more than half a mile away on another ridge during the rehabilitation period of 1952-53. This was erected for Solomon & Company at a time when it was believed the industry still had some future. All the mill buildings were retained after the industry collapsed in 1966 and today being used as farm buildings, but not all the rooms are used.

Most of the machinery has been dismantled, but one compartment contains a complete scutcher with shafting and pulleys to the engine room, and there are also some remains of the stripping machine. In the detached office shed I was shown two loose relics that were used in the flax industry. One was an old lantern of a type that were home-made by the flax workers. It consisted of a bottle that had the top cut off by soaking string in oil and setting it alight while tied around the bottle. The tin base contained the candle holder, and a weather cowl was fitted to the top combined with a handle. In total it was a splendid creation for the purpose intended of illuminating the rough foot tracks as they proceeded to work in the dark and came home in the dark. Today these lanterns are beautifully made in glass and copper as souvenirs and are often bought by visitors from the handicraft shop at Jamestown. The other loose relic was a small metal sheave block used as a traveller or runner on the aerial cableways which carried bundles of flax from peaks and hills that were too steep for donkey transport. This runner is believed to have been made on St. Helena.

Francis Vale mill was established by Messrs W.A. Thorpe & Sons in 1925 about the same time as the earliest Woody Ridge mill. It was often called Francis Plain mill and later known as Scott's mill. On being rebuilt during the rehabilitation period of 1948-52 it remained operational until closed in 1965. After eventually being sold, a brewery enterprise * that was established in the mill buildings has not survived, but the buildings still exist today.

The first mill at Rock Rose was set up in 1925 as a stripper mill, and originally sited a few hundred yards along the Levelwood road from the historic old residence of Rock Rose. It was hampered by shortage of water and apparently did not operate in the early 1930's but was back in production

*Footnote:- The brew was labelled "Atlantic Ale"

in 1935. It also operated during the Second World War until during the rehabilitation era it was rebuilt on another site on land between the old Rock Rose residence and the main road. This new mill continued to operate intermittently until the flax industry was closed in 1966. Thereafter it was let to the Salvation Army as a hostel named Glenmore, but this amenity was closed about 1986 and today the buildings are empty and disused. There are no relics of machinery to be seen at this mill.

Fairyland mill built in 1932 by Messrs W.A. Thorpe & Sons was the next mill to be set up, but due to the economic depression it did not actually start producing until 1935 and then only for a year as it closed in 1936. However it was listed as producing during 1938-39 and certainly had been operating at the time it was destroyed by fire in 1941. Rebuilt in the same year it continued producing until 1945 when it was closed until 1949 due to shortage of green leaf in the plantations. During the rehabilitation period about 1953 it underwent further reconstruction until when the flax industry closed in early 1966 it was kept producing until October for enabling Messrs Thorpe's to complete a contract. Thereafter it was maintained as the only mill on the island kept in working order to mill fibre, and remains with that status today as a credit to its owners for ensuring that future generations are able to see the complete process of flax milling. Many are the interests at Fairyland mill, including all the pressing equipment for baling fibre. There are also earlier relics from the past. Such as pieces of an old gas engine, Avery Scales for Weighing the flax bundles, and an old spin drier manufactured by Fred Townsend & Company who were laundry engineers at Albion Works, Bollo Lane, London. It was intended as an aid to drying the fibre, but is known to have not been successful. The office in the main Fairyland mill building has a few relics from the productive era, firstly an old Calendar for 1965 hanging on the wall, is also signifying the last full year of the flax industry. There is also the stamping frame or stencil for marking bales -**Produce of St. Helena - Tiger Prime** - the latter being Thorpe's label for superior fibre.

An old notice on the board is of interest, and is dated 14 February 1963

Notice to Mill Employees

The Company advises that they have given full consideration to the request by mill employees for a bonus payment for the year 1962, and we regret to advise that it will not be possible to grant your request. The whole of last year's production was sold at a very low price in order to keep both mills open and maintain full employment. This was made possible by the St. Helena Government who agreed to increase the guaranteed price in order to cover the cost of production.

THE FLAX INDUSTRY

The market price has now risen and the only way in which we can take advantage of this is to increase our production. We have therefore decided to introduce a weekly bonus production bonus scheme to enable you and us to take advantage of the higher prices while they last. We propose to pay a weekly bonus to all mill employees based on weekly production in accordance with the following scale. The bonus scheme to commence on 2 March 1963.

Weekly production of hemp	Bonus
3 tons 10 cwts. and over	2½ % of weekly wage
3 tons 15 cwts. and over	5 % of weekly wage
4 tons 0 cwts. and over	10 % of weekly wage

The stripper mill started at Oaklands in 1933 is one of the only mills of which the exact site cannot be established, but it is known to have been at the rear of the historic residence of Oaklands. Obviously there are no relics to be seen at this mill which was dismantled about 1945.

About the same time as Oaklands mill another stripper mill had been set up at Warrall's Gut (now termed Warren's Gut), but due to the economic depression in the early 1930's it remained largely inactive during the remainder of that decade until in 1943 it was purchased by Deason Brothers and operated as a stripping mill in conjunction with their Hutts Gate mill. As far as can be determined it ceased production about 1952 and was abandoned as a mill. It did not appear to have been rebuilt as with most of the mills. There are some very interesting old relics of machinery lying on the site of Warren's Gut mill. The old Ruston-Hornsby gas engine made at Lincoln, England, is still bolted to its foundation block, and is the only complete gas engine situated at a mill on St. Helena. Nearby is the gas generator and scrubber. A shed, now a donkey's stable, was pointed out as having been the office, and there is some extent of other old foundations. The Ruston engine which is believed to have originally been used at Mr. Jack Thorpe's aloe treatment works at Cleugh's Plain, was sold to Major Jecks, and later installed at Warrall's Gut mill where it was infrequently used until that mill was acquired by Deason Brothers in 1943.

There is a record of the St. Helena Motor Company (Captain Mainwaring) having overhauled a "Ruston-Hornsby Plant and Generator" at Warrall's Gut mill in March 1945. This is certainly the same engine that is now a relic at Warren's Gut mill site and probably at least 60 years old.

In respect of relics from the flax industry elsewhere on the island, there are very few, but some that do exist are included here. The first by virtue of its age is the steam engine known as the "Improved Robey Engine,"

manufactured by Robey & Company at Lincoln, England, and presently mounted in the P.W.D. pipe store in an ancient building that adjoins the prison at Jamestown. This engine was imported from England to drive machinery for the flax works erected on the fortified lines at the Jamestown seafront in the first attempt to establish a flax industry on St. Helena in 1874, but after great difficulties in costs and production problems the works was closed down in 1881. There are no records of what purpose this engine was used for in its present position where a short rail track can be seen as having had some function for its use. An engine mentioned in the records of the flax works was 25 h.p. and may have been this engine. Certainly it is known that the steam engine was fuelled with firewood cut from the property of Prospect.

Another relic of a later era is the National Gas Engine which has been mounted in recent years near the Jamestown swimming pool, and much more is known about this engine, as it is surely the 36 h.p. National Gas Engine installed in the Francis Vale * (Scotts) mill in 1923. In June 1949 there is a record of it having broken down, and repairs carried out by Captain Mainwaring at a cost of 10-18/-. It was phased out when this mill was changed over to electric motors in 1961 and subsequently donated by Messrs W.A. Thorpe & Sons to become a historic exhibit.

Some further relics can be seen at the property of Mr. G.A.D. Thornton near Willowbank in the Hutts Gate district. These include a 38 h.p. National gas engine and a 30 h.p. Crossley gas engine, both of which gave long service at Hutts Gate mill up until the time this mill was rebuilt in 1950. There must be a considerable quantity of handicraft and other items made from St. Helena's flax fibre on the island, but one of the few I had sight of was the fibre seat of a wooden chair which has been in service for a long time at the Castle Archives. Also at Longwood House there are two splendid old wooden chairs with seating made from St. Helena flax fibre.

*Footnote:-- The original hand baling press installed in 1923 at Francis Vale mill can be seen today as a relic alongside the access road leading from the mill site to Harper's new dam.

EPILOGUE

After a fairly thorough study on the history of St. Helena's flax industry right through from the very first attempt to establish it in 1874, one conclusion stands out above all others, in that the island ultimately did succeed in developing a long-term flax industry which did for several years result in the island's budget being balanced from its export earnings, while for a great number of other years it made a vital contribution. Despite their hardships and low wages which kept them only marginally above the poverty line, those employed in the industry during some harsh times, at least did have employment, whereas without the flax industry there would have been none. In better times the industry employed from 250 to 400 people, and probably there were as many again on the island who indirectly gained from it.

Today the island possesses no industry of any substance, unless off-shore employment on Ascension Island, Falkland Islands, and the United Kingdom could be called an *industry*. Certainly at the time of writing this, there are over 1,000 islanders employed there on contract, this being a rather high percentage of the island's approximate population of 6,000. One would assume that if they could all get employment on St. Helena they would prefer to remain there, although the wages would, almost certainly not be nearly so lucrative as the off-shore contract work. There is no guarantee that the offshore *industry* will always be available, and therefore another conclusion is that the island is again urgently in need of an industry, just as it was in 1874 and 1907.

At such a vast distance from overseas markets, there is an almost insurmountable problem to develop any export industry that would be viable. But what about an industry based on flax fibre, the same material that did survive successfully as an export for so long a period, and for which the raw material is still plentiful on the island. Not in the same form as bales of fibre, but from products made on St. Helena from its own fibre. To promote such an idea it is firstly necessary to give some reference to the world's increasing problem of pollution.

Nylon and other synthetic material which completely replaced natural fibres in ropes, cord, string, etcetera, because they were cheaper and having marginally greater strength, have been in use for over 30 years, and, whether on land or in the sea, that which has been discarded as waste is insoluble litter which also cannot safely be disposed of by burning as it emits harmful gases, which add to the ever increasing atmospheric pollution. Not that it can be expected the synthetics will in turn be displaced by the original natural rope making fibres, as commercial interests are too powerful for that to occur, but

the pollution will continue, in the same way as plastic bags continue to litter the world. Even so, there is an increasing awareness in the world today that measures should be taken now on reducing the use of some man-made materials that are so unfriendly to the world's environment.

St. Helena's bountiful stands of flax could be used to produce the fibre for a range of products that would fit in perfectly with environmental desirableness. Apart from mats, bags, and other handicraft items, an array of casual type footwear using natural fibre uppers and rope-type soles would no doubt find a market overseas, and they could justifiably be labelled as environmentally perfect. When worn out these products can be disposed of either by natural decay or by burning without any harmful emission as they would have no synthetic rubber, no plastic, and no nylon. Phormium fibre has also been proven to make high grade paper, thus indicating further potential for its use.

The present policy of clearing patches of flax and planting trees has been ongoing for many years, but all the central peaks and valleys which are lathered with flax have scarcely been touched, and it is almost certain that the total remaining area of flax estimated at about 2,000 acres is more like double that amount if based on the true surface area.

St. Helena was once a viable and strategic island that serviced the great fleets of the East India Company which withdrew in 1834. Since that time there has been numerous attempts to establish an industry that would enable the island to pay its way, but all failed except the flax industry which is now symbolised by the strong living relics that offer the opportunity for it to again become the industrial mainstay of St. Helena's economy.

APPENDIX 1

The following is a list of ships known to have called at St.Helena to take on cargoes of flax fibre and tow exports during the period 1908 to 1967. The year given is as taken at random mainly from consignment notes, but each ship may also have called at St. Helena in earlier or later years

1908	Goth	1940	Windsor Castle
	Goorkha		Athlone Castle
	Gaika		Llandory Castle
1909	Avondale Castle		Empire Success
1910	Tintagel Castle		Arundel Castle
	Galician	1941	Sandown Castle
1914	Gloucester Castle		Rochester Castle
1915	Balmoral Castle		Rowallan Castle
	Walmer Castle		Richmond
	Dover Castle		Roslin Castle
1918	Warrior		Orient City
	Clan MacArthur		Riley
	Galway Castle		Trevalgan
1919	Berwick Castle		Manchester Port
	Gordon Castle	1942	Melskerk
	Umvuma		Clan Alpine
1920	Saxon		Ocean Vestal
	Armadale Castle		Capo Olmo
	Cawdor Castle	1943	Manchester Division
	Carisbrook Castle		Strasbourg
	Briton	1944	Bellerophon
	Dunvegan Castle	1945	Empire Rawlingson
1921	Braemer Castle		Empire Kitchener
1922	Grantilly Castle		Arabstan
	Guildford Castle		Antilochus
	Cluny Castle	1946	Sampan
	Comrie Castle		Defender
1923	Garth Castle		Kenilworth Castle
	Dunluce Castle		Umtata
	Durham Castle		Umgeni
	Gascon	1948	Empire Duchess
	Norman		Fort Carillon
1928	Llandovery Castle		Llangibby Castle
	Llanstephen Castle		

1950	Roxburgh Castle	1962	Clan MacTaggart
	Kingsborough		Clan Malcolm
	Riebeck Castle		Kinnaird Castle
1956	Capetown Castle		Tantallon Castle
1958	Umzinto		Clan Forbes
1960	Clan McKenzie		Argyllshire
	Clan Brodie		Pretoria Castle
1961	Clan Davidson	1963	Clan MacLaren
	Warwick Castle		Tiber
	Kenya Castle		Clan Maclachlan
	Rustenburg Castle		Clan Menzies
	Rotherwick Castle		Edinburgh Castle
	Rooibok	1964	Clan MacIntyre
	Durban Castle		Southern Prince
	Rotherwick Castle		Clan MacDougall
	Clan MacIver		Karaghistan
	Clan Chattan		King City
		1967	Clan MacTavish

Note:-- Records of ships for the years omitted were not found, and this does not mean there were no exports of flax fibre in those years. The first shipment of flax fibre left St. Helena by the "Goth" on 5 January 1908, and the last shipment was despatched by the "Clan MacTavish" on 24 February 1967.

THE FLAX INDUSTRY

APPENDIX 2

The Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture and Forestry for the year 1964.-

"The economy of the island is based largely on agriculture. There is one main agricultural industry the growing, processing, and export of New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*). There is but a handful of smallholders who make a living from their holdings, and by far the larger proportion of the population cultivated fairly large vegetable gardens of up to one acre as a part time occupation, selling any surplus crops but consuming the bulk of the produce in their homes. In addition to their gardens they keep a few goats, poultry on open range, perhaps a pig or two, and some have one, or more head of cattle. Most of the land is in the hands of the Government and of two private owners. The Government farms approximately half of the arable area and either farms or controls some four fifths of the grazing areas.

The Phormium Fibre Industry:- The New Zealand flax crop remains the main agricultural industry and is the only export crop. Two local private firms own most of the leaf growing areas, some 3,350 acres. The same firms own the seven processing mills of which five worked throughout the year. There are however a number of small growers with plots of $\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 acres, either on their own land or on land leased to them by the Government.

The majority of the flax plantations were established some half a century ago. They are situated for the most part on precipitous hillsides where any form of cultivation is out of the question and where even cutting of the mature leaf is hazardous. They receive no cultivation beyond the periodic grubbing out of encroaching gorse, and bramble etc. Cutting of the mature flax takes place every 4 to 6 years - four years on the richer and deeper soils, and six years on the shallow and poorer soils where growth is much slower. Yields vary between ten and forty tons of green leaf per acre. Its value at the present time and depending on accessibility is from 20/- to 30/- per ton in the field as a standing crop. It can readily be seen that a crop which gives a return of between £1.6 and £15 per acre per annum has no margin for expenditure on either fertilisers or labour to improve cultural methods. Consequently it receives neither.

There are no data on the point, but it is doubtful whether a crop which is harvested only once in 4 to 6 years can make much demand on soil fertility. The main growers state that yields are very slowly declining and it would appear that this is solely due to lack of cultural methods, to the fact that over the years the plant gradually extrudes from the ground as new suckers form on top of the cut portion, and it is possible that if the older plantations were uprooted and replanted, yields would be as good as ever. Unfortunately labour costs for such an operation which would have to be done entirely by hand, would be so high as

to be uneconomic at present day prices.