

Southwold's Rope and Twine Industry

HENRY OLDRING

Rope and Twine making was one of the key trades that evolved in Southwold to serve the maritime and fishing industries, alongside sailmaking and boatbuilding. Twine spinning and net-making were closely associated and at least one of Southwold's three main rope grounds did both. This was Oldrings Ground. The heyday of local craftsmen ropemakers was before the 1880s when industrial-scale methods began to supersede them.

Since at least 1823 Henry Oldring had run his rope spinning works at the north end of what we now know as Cumberland Road but which was, at the time, essentially a pathway skirting the Church green. He had two 'rope walks', roughly indicated in red on the 1914 map below - the short walk stretched from a point close to where St Edmund's Hall is now, northwards to Field Stile Road, close to Baggott's Mill. The second, his 'long walk' ran at right angles across the green, past the Church, all the way to North Green. The length of the walk determined the length of the rope.

Henry had sight in only one eye, having been accidentally shot in the other by a careless gamekeeper back in 1823 (M). In 1841 Henry Oldring, who was then 42, lived in the High Street with his wife, Eleanor, his daughters Eleanor and Mary, and his two sons, Henry and Joseph. Henry junior joined the business. Henry senior died in 1850 and it seems that Henry Junior chose not to continue trading on the Cumberland Road rope ground for, in March that year, James Maggs notes in his diary that he auctioned the twine and rope ground together with Henry Oldring's stock-in-trade and household furniture. The winning bidder was John Leverett a gentleman farmer, ship owner and entrepreneur with 62 acres in Walberswick who paid £56 for it. (M, C1851). It is not clear what he did with his investment in Cumberland Road but, by about 1880,

the works buildings had been converted into homes.

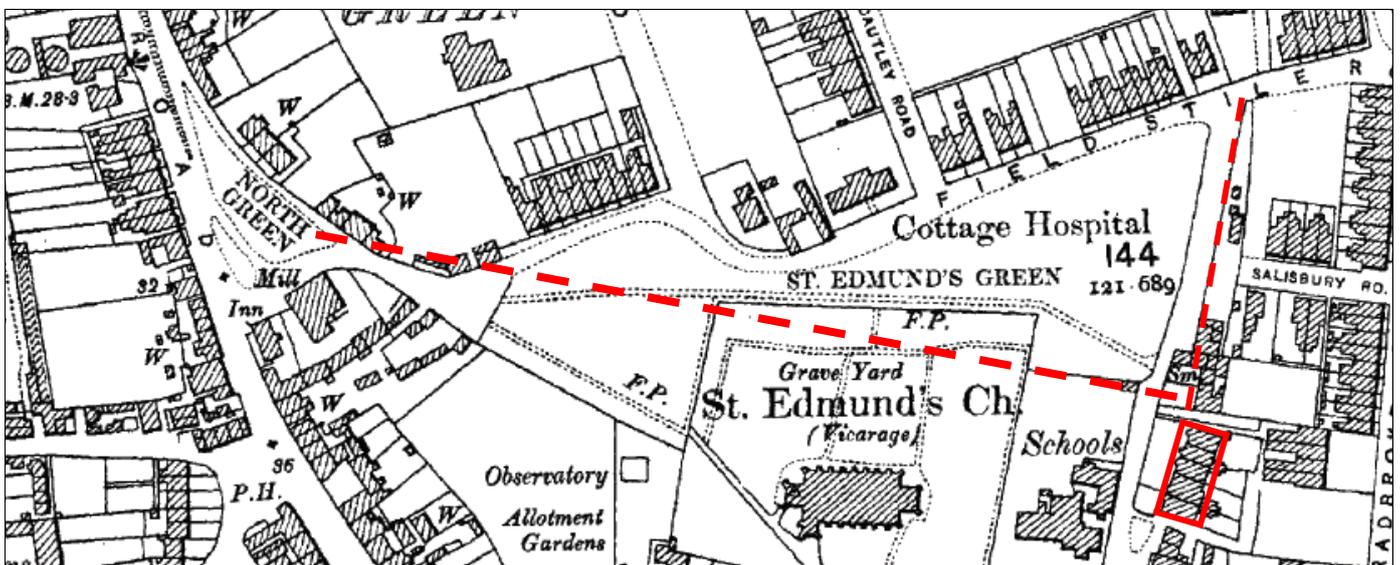
Henry Oldring Junior continued making rope and twine in Southwold although we haven't been able to identify where his new ground was. By the 1881 census he was describing himself as a 'Master Rope Maker' employing two men and four boys. By that time he was a widower sharing his No 10 Station Road house with four daughters and three sons. The eldest, William Oldring, took up the rope-making trade himself. However, the firm closed down for good a few years later.

One of Oldring's employees was William Button who would later take over part of the Goodwin rope works on the Common. He became Southwold's last practising rope maker.

The Ropemaking process

as described by Thomas Button, son of Southwold's last ropemaker, William Button. Excerpt from a chapter in 'Story of Southwold' edited by Janet Becker and published in 1948 by F Jenkins.

The yarns which had previously been drawn through a copper of Stockholm tar, were bound on 'bobbins' like large cotton reels, and placed in a large frame where they could revolve freely, and were then drawn through a board in which was a number of small holes circularly spaced and then through a heated iron tube and fixed to a revolving pinion of the 'jack', a piece of mechanism suited for the purpose containing at one end a cogged iron wheel to which cogged pinions could be engaged, and at the other a tapered, grooved capstan cogged at top and connected to the cogwheel. A strong rope (fastened at the other end of the 'walk') would then be placed round the capstan in a groove, a horse hitched on and, as the horse was led down the 'walk', the 'jack' (on wheels) would be drawn along, causing the cogwheel to turn and thereby giving the right number of 'turns' to the 'strand'. When the three or four strands were made they would be 'laced' together, ie formed into a rope.



THE BUTTON BROTHERS

Twine spinners and rope makers

Reputedly England's last hand rope maker, William Button, was born in 1846 to George (a 40-year-old rope maker himself) and Mary-Ann Button who lived in South End, near the bottom of what is now called Constitution Hill. William was the younger of two boys; his brother (George, named after his father) was six years older. Father George died while William was still a schoolboy and Mary-Ann remarried Jonathan Newson, an agricultural labourer. In 1861 George and William (22 and 16 respectively) were still living at home—which was now somewhere in Southwold High Street—with their mother and stepfather.

By now George was a working man. He had taken up his late father's trade and had a job as a twine spinner with one of the local rope makers. 16-year-old William had a first job as a farm labourer but he was soon to settle into an



A scene at Goodwin's rope ground on the Common near Spinner's Lane. At the time this photograph was taken at about the turn of the century, Goodwin's closure was imminent. The 'walker' is unidentified in this faded photograph but may well have been William Button who was Goodwin's foreman before taking over the ground himself. (Southwold Museum P1351)

apprenticeship with a rope and twine maker himself.

Both young men married—George in his early 20s to Caroline King (They went on to have nine children.) William to Susannah Naunton. In 1877 they had their only son, Thomas William George.

William and probably George learned their trades in the same 'big two' rope grounds run by Henry Oldring, in Cumberland Road, and Jasper Goodwin, off Spinner's Lane. William eventually became foreman at Goodwin's whose business was in decline. William's garden behind his High Street home actually backed onto the rope walk and William started spinning twine on his own account, using his garden

path as a 'walk'. When Goodwin's finally closed down in about 1900, William took it over at the age of 54, setting up



The picture above is thought to be of George Button, paying out hemp fibre wrapped in a hank round his waist while a boy turns the wheel that creates the twist. Although the picture below is captioned as of George Button in Barrett Jenkins' book 'Curios and Local Characters of Southwold' it would seem to be more likely that it is his brother William, who invented this wind-controlled spinner.



his own 'Rope, Twine and Norsel Works'. (norsels are short lengths of rope for connecting a fishing net to its floats). He was evidently an inventive and canny operator, determined to cut his overheads and maintain his margins in the face of a declining market. Traditionally, twine spinners had employed a young lad to turn the wheel while the rope maker walked backwards, paying out the hemp fibre as he went. William invented a wind-controlled wheel which, it is said, allowed him to dispense with services of a boy!

As far as we can tell, George never traded on his own account and may well have worked for his younger brother. His 'long walk' was the path between the rear of the row of houses and the Common. Before the building of Southwold's Railway Station in 1879, the long walk had extended from the Common end of Spinners Lane, northward to the marshes near Buss Creek. As you can see from the 1884 map, below, this had to be truncated by the railway line and, by the time William Button took it over, it had been shortened still further. The 1904 map in the next column shows it ending at

William's garden entrance.

When not walking backwards in pursuance of his trade, William was a dedicated itinerant Wesleyan preacher walking—forwards—many miles every Sunday to deliver the word of God to outlying villages.

By the 1911 census, William was a widower and living alone. His Son, Thomas William George, now in his thirties, had wisely chosen not to enter the moribund hand rope-spinning industry and was boarding in Leiston and working as a carpenter and engineer at the Garrett agricultural machinery works. William, now 65, continued spinning twine by hand and he was helped by his nephew, brother George's eldest son, William John Button who was 38. He and his wife, Anna Eugenie (nee Aldred), lived in a house located behind Uncle William's—numbered 5-7 High Street—which was also William John's place of work. He described himself as a twine spinner and norsel maker.

William died in 1936. He was 90.

