



Museum of Saint Helena

Fact sheet: Flax

Flax covered over 3000 acres of land on St Helena Island.

New Zealand flax has been grown here for over 150 years and copes well with St Helena's acidic soil and steep slopes. Between 1907 and 1966 flax production and processing was one of the island's most successful industries. As its peak, covered over 3000 acres of the island.

Flax fibre was shipped to England or South Africa to be further processed into rope, string, twine, mats and sandal soles.

Three families owned the land and almost all the industry's profits went to them. The flax industry directly employed 300 to 400 people who worked 50 hours per week for low wages. Work in the fields and mill was hard, repetitive, noisy and dirty. Workers were often injured in the machines used to process the fibre.

The flax industry boomed during WWI, WWII and the Korean War. However, the Island's over-dependence on one industry created problems. The use of synthetic fibres greatly reduced demand for flax. Even with government subsidies during the down times, St Helena flax could not compete in the world market. The last mill closed in 1966.

How was flax processed?

- The green leaves were cut by hand, bundled and transported by donkey from the fields to the mill.
- They were weighed and fed through a 'Stripper' to separate the fibre from the 'Green Bark', which was used as animal feed.
- The raw fibre was washed and taken by bullock dray to fields where it dried and bleached in the sun.
- The dry fibre was taken back to the mill and beaten in a machine called a 'scutcher' to separate the long (1.5-1.8 metre) high quality fibres from the waste 'tow'.
- The fibre was then pressed, baled and transported by dray to a warehouse in Jamestown for shipping.