

The Flax Industry on St Helena.

The Captain of an American whaler introduced New Zealand Flax to St Helena in the 1850's, and planted it at "Walbro" estate.

New Zealand flax, **Phormium Tenax**, is native to New Zealand and Norfolk Island. Although it is often called hemp, phormium does not belong to the flax group of plants, but to the leaf fibre group of the family agave (Agavaceae). The leaves are the raw material for St Helena's flax industry

W. Erridge established the first mill in Jamestown in 1874 in what is now the Leisure Park behind Donny's at the sea front. This failed, as it was uneconomic to transport the flax from the country for processing. The Government built the second mill in Longwood in 1908, which also failed. Success came with the demand for raw materials created by the First World War, and the cultivation and processing of flax was the Island's major industry for the next fifty years.

Flax leaves were cut by hand, and tied into 56lb bundles.

The first processing stage was the Stripper. The operator, standing on the platform, fed a few leaves at a time into the small stripper mouth. Two different sized wheels removed the green leaf covering.

Beneath the stripper sat the catcher who caught the stripped leaf and passed it on to one of four shakers.

The shakers tried to remove as many bits from the fibre as possible. The floor around their feet would be covered in what is known here as green bark. The fibre is then bundled, washed and taken away to the drying fields. Workers on the drying fields laid the fibre out and periodically turned it. The hillside above the mill would be covered in yellow drying fibre. The dried fibre is returned to the mill and scutched, which decreased the volume by at least half. The end products, tow and fibre were baled and shipped.

The process was primitive, but is looked back on with nostalgia. Mills elsewhere in the world had automated the process by 1930; however the St Helena Government imposed financial penalties on any mill owner who employed labour saving techniques. The machinery in use when the industry collapsed in 1965 was designed in New Zealand in 1900.

The industry collapsed in 1964 when the St Helena Government withdrew the £5 a ton subsidy and doubled the wages of their own employees.

Photographs Tom Jackson and Bob Johnson

Text Sophy Thorpe

LEAF TO ROPE

FAIRYLAND MILL



In good weather fibre would take about two weeks to dry and bleach during which time it would be frequently turned.

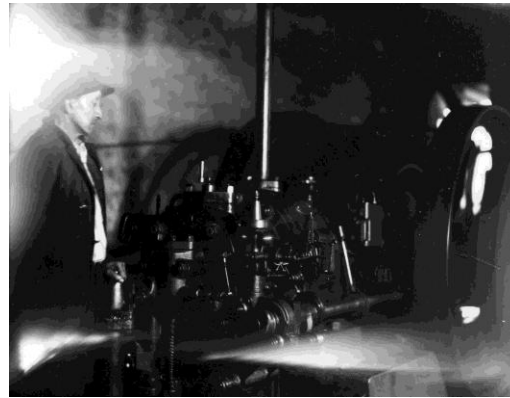




Transport was by donkey and bullock cart. This fibre has been stripped, washed and is on its way to the fibre drying fields.



Flax, stripped of its outer layer, is shaken to free the “green bark” washed, and loaded onto the dray to be taken to the drying fields.



Mill Foreman and Engineer, “Pa” Benjamin, with the National Gas Engine, which powered the mill until 1960. The remains of the engine are outside the mill. The engine was replaced by a Lister diesel engine salvaged from the wartime Munden’s searchlight installation.



The operator fed three or four leaves, butt end first into the stripper. The leaves were crushed between a revolving drum and a bar whilst being held tightly by two slow moving grooved rollers. This removed most of the “green bark” which was shaken loose before washing. The stripper made a loud whining noise, rather like an electric plane.



On its return from the drying fields the fibre was “scutched”. Each man held a hank of fibre which was beaten by a revolving paddle wheel. About half of the hank would be blown out of the back as “tow”, the remaining long fibre baled for export or used for local rope production.

The machinery, designed by Booth Macdonald of New Zealand in 1900, was still in use in 1963. Labour saving, and safer, machinery was discouraged by St Helena Government. Wages were low and there was no other employment, particularly for women. A typical flax mill employed 40 men and women



560lb bales of fibre or hemp as it was sometimes called, being loaded for export.