

**London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
Local Studies Information Sheet No. 18**

THE BARKING JUTE WORKS



The jute warehouse to the left, reused as the William Warne rubber factory

Jute is a fibrous plant material grown in India that has been processed on a domestic scale to make rope and coarse canvas material for many thousands of years. The fibres were brittle and processing them in an industrial situation rather than by hand was difficult. The first breakthrough in the industrial processing of the plant came in the Scottish town of Dundee in 1833. The town had previously been famous for the production of flax, the raw material of which was imported through the Baltic ports. Problems with supply during the Napoleonic Wars had led the local manufacturers to begin experimentation with other plant materials. The Dundonians discovered that raw jute could be made stronger and more pliable if it was soaked in oil and water. The whole town took advantage of the new discovery and soon every flax manufactory had converted to jute. Dundee became the world centre for jute production and most of the finished material was exported back to India.

The production got an enormous boost from 1841 when Rowland Hill introduced his penny post. Letters were stored and delivered in mail sacks made of jute, and as the postal service grew enormously year by year so too did the demand for mail sacks.

In 1866 a jute works was established at the southern end of Fisher Street in Barking by a Mr Thomas Duff. As the manufacturing process was alien to southerners a new workforce was imported from Dundee. Men, usually married with families came as engineers and supervisors; women, usually single, came as weavers. The workforce was reinforced periodically by new Scottish workers, mostly women, who were brought in as strike breakers during the industrial disputes of the 1880s. The Scots formed a distinct community in Barking which still maintained some of its Northern traditions as late as the 1940s. The majority of the jute workers were young females, usually single and often away from the control of their families. Determined to enjoy themselves they developed a reputation for drunken brawling at weekends and bank holidays which made the town notorious in the 1880s and 1890s.

Outwork was provided for local Barking women and children in the form of sack sewing. The cloth was cut to size in the factory and carried home along with hanks of tarred twine. The sacks were sewn at home and then returned to the factory for payment.

The Barking factory was reputed to be the largest manufactory in the United Kingdom and contained modern facilities such as dining halls and, after 1875, a library. The 1881 census records that there were 621 people in Barking working on jute, 156 of them men and 465 of them women. 107 people were occupied making sacks. The youngest person employed by the industry was only 10 years old. The factory, however, had come into existence at the end of the boom period. In 1854 the first jute manufactory had been opened in West Bengal in India. The new Indian industries poached skilled workers and engineers from the United Kingdom and opened up the industry in their country in direct competition. Unable to fight against the cheap local labour and the cost of importation the British businesses gradually collapsed.

The Barking factory first closed in 1886 after a slump in the industry, laying off a reputed 1200 factory workers and innumerable home workers. It reopened in 1888, but suffered several strikes and a general lock out in 1889 when it was closed for a period. In 1891 it was offered for sale and, although the workforce petitioned to be able to work for a 10% pay cut, the directors felt that they could not keep the business going and it finally closed that April.

Field stations were opened by churches, particularly the Congregationalist Church, to help look after the destitute workers and to return some of the more recent immigrants to their home.

In 1896 the building was purchased by Messrs William Warne & Co. of Tottenham who moved their rubber manufacturing business into the former jute factory.

Sources

No original records are known to survive for the jute works.

This information sheet has been produced from two main sources, both available in the **Local Studies Library** at **Valence House Museum**:

Tony Clifford and Herbert Hope Lockwood: *Mr Frogley's Barking, a first selection* (2002)

This is a selective reprint of the *History of Barking* by Joseph Holmes Frogley, a generally anecdotal history of the town made in the early 20th century by a long-standing resident. This reprint includes the only detailed history of the manufactory on pages 58 to 60, including information on some of the workers and the jute-making process. There is also a plan of the mills in 1891 on page 47.

Fred. J. Brand: *Barking in 1866 and all what?*

Some pen sketches privately printed (undated) which contain a short section on sack-making in the town.

A further secondary source available in the Local Studies Library is:-
Howe, William: *A paper on jute and its manufacture* (1891)