

Village Echoes

Described by the Oxford English Dictionary as a “length of strong thick cord, made by twisting together strands of hemp and sisal”, rope was in considerable demand in the era of the sailing ship during the 18th and early 19th centuries when it was used to form the rigging, as well as in industries such as mining.

Before the industrial revolution, which mechanised the process, rope was traditionally made by hand in roperies, the main feature of which was the rope walk. This was either a long shed or an open path along which the rope-makers walked backwards whilst paying out rope fibres from a supply wound around their waist. The other ends of the fibres were attached to a machine which rotated and twisted the fibres into strands, and the resulting strands into rope.

Goudhurst has its own rope walk - situated on the bend beside Lamberts in Church Road. Nowadays, of course, this is a residential area but maps from the 1840s show a “Rope Walk Field” and three cottages in the same area. At the time the cottages and the field were owned by James Bonnick, who occupied one of them, implying that he may have been a rope maker, although no evidence has so far been found to confirm this.

However, in 1851 the census for that year lists a 25 year old bachelor, Thomas Henry Baker, who describes himself as a “sail maker, employing five persons”. While this may seem an unlikely occupation for a rural parish such as Goudhurst, sail-making was often associated with rope-making, and a trade directory published in 1858 confirms this when it lists him as a “rope and sail cloth maker”. Baker, by now describing himself as a “Master Sail Maker”, left the parish about 1860 to move to Tonbridge and so passes out of Goudhurst local history. It is probable that rope-making in Goudhurst ceased at the same time, if not earlier.

By 1861, the rope walk had become a residential area where, in recognition that there was a shortage of low cost housing in the parish, local farmer Thomas Wickham built eleven brick and slate cottages for labourers along the walk which he let at a low rent. The timber-framed cottages, previously owned by Bonnick, were also rented out until they were condemned and demolished in about 1890.

During the next 100 years or so this row of eleven cottages was variously referred to as Wickham’s Row, Town Row or Rope Walk. Entries in the parish registers show that, confusingly, all three names were sometimes in use at the same time until, eventually, the two earlier names ceased to be used and the area became simply Rope Walk. In 1897 ownership of the cottages passed to the Mendham family and subsequently to Father George Mendham, Goudhurst’s Catholic Priest, who owned them until his death in 1935. According to a description of the cottages written in 1914, each cottage had four rooms (two up and two down) and they were in “fair repair”. However, by today’s standards the facilities were very basic as there were only two outside water taps (between numbers 4 and 7) for the use of all the houses and one outside toilet was situated between each pair of houses.

Eventually these houses too were condemned and demolished in 1960. It was another four years before the flats known as Churchills, named after Sir Winston Churchill, were built and ready for occupancy.

Local History Society