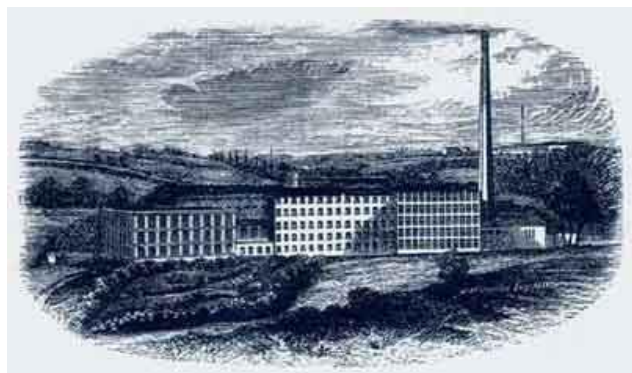


Lavenham 1818: the third most impoverished parish in Suffolk.

by Christopher Bornett

Betterton and Dymond in their book, *Lavenham - industrial town*, outline the depressed state of Lavenham and the surrounding area during the years following the Napoleonic Wars. Using poor relief returns made to Parliament they reveal the extent of local poverty. In 1786 the town spent £916 on poor relief, and in 1803 the figure jumped to £1,508. A major peak came in 1813 when no less than £2,736 had been spent. The worst year of all was 1818 when it cost Lavenham £2,986 to relieve its poor. When the costs of relief are compared to levels of population, we see that Lavenham was in 1818 the third most impoverished parish in Suffolk; only neighbouring Long Melford and Glemsford, where the economic problems were much the same, was the situation actually worse. Although Lavenham's annual expenditure on poor relief declined after that dreadful year, it still remained at over £2,000 until 1833. The worsening economic situation induced a number of people to migrate to other areas in search of work.

In 1836 a government scheme actively encouraged parishes to send families to the north of England where there was shortage of workers in the coal mines and cotton mills.



Betterton and Dymond provide a local example from Lavenham:

William Mills... in 1836, took his wife and six children [to work in a cotton mill] for Henry Sidebottom Bros. of Haughton Green near Manchester. (p.77)

A considerable enticement for the Mills family would have been the wages that they could expect which in the 1st year would have been more than double that which they could have earned in Lavenham at this time.

Name of Family	Ages	Date of Arrival	To	Address	Wages 1st Year	Wages 2nd Year
MILLS, William	40	March 1836	Henry Sidebottom Brothers	Haughton, Hyde	13s	15s
MILLS, wife		..	-	-	-	
MILLS, Elizabeth	16	..	..	..	5s	7s 6d
MILLS, Mary Ann	12	..	..	..	4s	6s 6d
MILLS, William	14	..	..	..	3s	5s 6d
MILLS, Susan	12	..	..	..	-
and two others						

(Returns of the number of persons who were removed from their parishes in the agricultural districts into the manufacturing districts, British Parliamentary Papers, 1843, XLV)

The relatively large size of the Mills family would have made them particularly eligible for selection under the government scheme. Peter Park, in his paper [Between a rock and a hard place: the Poor Law Commission's migration scheme 1835-37](#), explains the situation:

The large size of the families generated the pressure to move, particularly from those areas where there was little opportunity for the children to contribute to the family income, since large families were a serious drain on the purses of the poor-rate payers of their parishes. Size also selected the families, as small families, with necessarily younger children, were not acceptable to the employers, who needed workers above the age of 12, because of the age restrictions imposed by the 1833 Factory Act. However, younger children in a family provided a potential pool of labour for the future. (p.39)

The Mills family are recorded as arriving at Haughton Green in March 1836. The problem is that there is no evidence from the Census Returns of 1841 and 1851 that they stayed.

Once they leave Lavenham they disappear from the official records. Did they move on to somewhere else in Lancashire? Did they return home to Suffolk disillusioned with life working in a cotton mill?