

A MILLER'S TALE – THE LIFE OF THOMAS BURTON (1859 – 1938)

Thomas Burton was a true scion of Sawbridgeworth. His grandfather John was born here in 1800, and in the 1841 census was living in Cock Street (now Bell Street) in the centre of the town, with his wife Sophia (née Waller) and family. Thomas' father had the same name, being called Thomas Waller Burton. This Thomas was born in Sawbridgeworth in 1827. In the 1841 census he is shown as serving with the Royal Navy, but by 1851 has returned to Sawbridgeworth and is also living in Cock Street. He was married to Fanny Groves in 1857 and was a builder.

Thomas was born in Cock Street on 5 April 1859. He was the second eldest of six children, having two brothers and three sisters. His very early life is obscure. Presumably he intended to follow his father into the building trade, but on 30 September 1885, Thomas married Clara Littler. This is important, because, although her father was a butcher, she was also a member of a long-established family of millers.

As long ago as the early 1700s (between 1720 and 1737), an Andrew and Nathaniel Littler are recorded as the millers at both Sawbridgeworth Mill and Sheering Mill. Furthermore, in 1911 a Fanny Littler of Lower Sheering, is recorded as a mortgagee in respect of Sawbridgeworth Mill. Presumably, Thomas' marriage to Clara made him think seriously about becoming a miller. Accordingly, in 1891, probably (given the 1911 Stort Deeds document) with financial help from the Littler family, he purchased Sawbridgeworth Mill from the local politician Edmund Broughton Barnard.



Figure 1 Burton's Mill in 1955

From 1891 until it was sold to Garfield Weston (Allied Mills) in 1962, the mill remained in the ownership of the Burton family (Messrs Thomas Burton Ltd.). Indeed, it was still known as Burton's Mill when it eventually closed in 1970, finally being destroyed in a fire in 1975 (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 2 Millstone from Burton's Mill

Thomas and his wife Clara move into the Mill House just off Mill Lane (now Station Road, see Figure 3). Here they raised their family of two sons and two daughters. In the census of 1901, they also are recorded as having two residential servants. Thomas was recorded as being a 'Corn Miller, Corn Merchant and Coal Merchant'.



Figure 3 The Mill House in 2017

In 1926, Thomas decided to expand his milling business. He purchased a holding in South Mill, Bishop's Stortford. This he and his family retained until its closure in 1955. An interesting story about this mill comes from the year 1932. On a dark and foggy night in January that year, thieves broke into the building, but had to leave empty handed, as they could not force open the safe.

Thomas Burton had many other interests apart from milling. He was also both a farmer and a local politician. Thomas was the owner of both Clay Lane and Crumps' Farms in Clay Lane (now West Road). He was a Justice of the Peace for Hertfordshire, and would often sit on the Stortford Petty Sessions. He was a Parish Councillor and later became the Chairman of the Urban District Council. He was the Chairman of the Managers of Fawbert and Barnard School, and was a member of the Bishop's Stortford Guardians Committee.

Given the previous list, it may come as a surprise that Thomas also had time for hobbies. Thomas was very interested in shire horses, and would often judge at County Shows. (In the 1930s, the Essex County Show was held at Harlow). There was also the 'Burton Challenge Cup' which was awarded by his company for milk production for herds of between 8 and 24 cows at these events.

Thomas Burton was a very religious man. He was however, non-conformist, attending Sawbridgeworth Congregational Church, where he was both a life Deacon and its Treasurer.

On 16 September 1938, Thomas passed away aged 79, still living at the Mill House. His funeral was held at Great St. Mary's church in Sawbridgeworth, but with a Congregationalist Minister present. His obituary published on 23 September in the *Chelmsford Chronicle* is an interesting recounting of his life, and a 'who's who' of important local people attending as mourners.

Afterword

There may be absolutely no connection whatsoever, and I certainly cannot find one. However, in the early 18th century there was a well-known milling family from Norfolk with the surname Burton. Probably a coincidence, but interesting and worth a mention.

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