

# THE MERINO FACTORY

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## Old County Kilkenny Industry

BY W. J. PILSWORTH

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THE attention of the Society has hitherto been given to antiquities dating back many hundred years. The object of our visit to-day is to inspect an object of much more recent date: indeed if it were not for the history attached to it, it might hardly be deemed worthy of your attention.

I would ask you to turn your minds to the year 1803. The Union with England had been brought about a couple of years previously and many thought it would lead to more settled conditions in the country than ever before, and in any case it was bound to put an end to any possibility of the renewal of restrictive legislation directed against Irish manufactures. The 20 years war with Napoleon was in full swing and in consequence the agriculture of the country was in a fairly prosperous way, and money was more plentiful than ever before. The population of the country was increasing rapidly. In these circumstances members of two Kilkenny families, the Nowlans and the Shaws, determined to start a woollen factory. Both families were closely connected. Both Timothy Nowlan and George Shaw had married sisters—Miss Prims—and Thomas Shaw, junr., nephew of George Shaw, had also married a Miss Prim, a cousin of the other ladies. This Thomas Shaw had already served an apprenticeship in a Dublin woollen mill and in this year, 1803, he was sent over to England where for seven years he studied the process of manufacture in all its details in mills in the North and West of England.

On his return from England steps were immediately taken to erect and equip the mills whose remains you now see. The isolated country site was deliberately selected. It was on the lands of a Mr. John Prim, who had died a few years previously, and had left Messrs. Timothy Nowlan, his brother-in-law, and Thomas Shaw, his nephew, as trustees of his will.

The King's River provided motive power for the mill and a constant supply of water for cleansing the wool. Much trouble

had been caused in the existing Irish woollen industry, mostly centred in Dublin, but also in Kilkenny and Carrick-on-Suir, by what was considered to be the turbulent actions of the workers and their tendency to combine for higher wages. Messrs. Nowlan and Shaw were determined to avoid these troubles by employing only country people and by training them themselves from childhood in the path they should tread. It is in this training that the principal interest of the factory lies. Messrs. Nowlan and Shaw seem to have been men of very enlightened ideas, far in advance of their age. Whether they evolved them themselves, or whether they were indebted to Robert Owen, who about the same time was running a woollen factory in Scotland on similar lines is not known. But we have very detailed descriptions of the system adopted in the Merino factory. Although sometimes taken on at more tender years, in the ordinary way boys and girls were entered as apprentices for seven years at the age of 14. The hours of work were in summer from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m., with three-quarter hour off for breakfast at 8 and one hour off for dinner at 2, and in the winter somewhat less. The wages paid were from 3s. to 10s. per week. So far there does not appear to be anything startlingly novel. The hours were long (but not much longer than were normally worked in industry previous to 1914), and the pay seems small, though in an agricultural community where the general wage was 1s. per day, it was not ungenerous. But it was in the other arrangements that the big experiments were made.

First of all, the boys and girls were kept apart in the work-rooms, and the girls were sent home under respectable matrons an hour before the boys. Thus all improper intercourse was prevented, and parents who were unwilling at first to send their girls to work alongside the boys were soon convinced that no harm could come to them, and became eager to get them employed. The proprietors were firmly convinced of the truth of the old proverb that Satan finds mischief for idle hands to do, and organised schools for their apprentices to attend after working hours in summer and previous to them in winter. Attendance for an hour a day (and three hours on Sunday) was compulsory. No charge was made for schooling and books were also provided free. There were separate schools for boys and girls. The subjects taught were reading, writing and arithmetic. In addition, the girls were taught to sew and spin, and the boys the rudiments of agriculture and gardening. Occupation of a different kind was also provided. On Saturday afternoons work ceased at 4 p.m. An hour afterwards a fiddler struck up for a dance and the young people were encouraged to disport themselves until it was time for the girls to go home. The boys stayed on longer and practised

their instruments in a brass band in which they received instruction and attained a high level of performance.

On Sundays, after attending church or chapel, they were encouraged to play hurling, cricket or football. Out of the weekly wages, stoppages were made as contributions to sickness, infancy, widowhood and old age funds, to which the proprietors also contributed, and these must have been among the first schemes of health insurance funds in existence anywhere. Health insurance is, of course, compulsory now, but it has only been so for about 35 years, and the proprietors had their scheme going just 100 years before this. A doctor used to call regularly to attend the sick and those who met with accidents. The young people were all dressed in a simple neat uniform, paid for by stoppages from their wages, and could obtain simple but substantial meals at a low cost on the premises if they desired. Accommodation on the premises was provided for those whose homes were at a distance. To encourage the well-doer, rewards were given.

A system of points was established for such things as skill in working, punctuality and general good conduct, and medals were awarded every three months to those with most points. On the other hand there was a regular system of punishment. Fines were inflicted for unpunctuality. Another punishment was deprivation of attending the dance and instead the privilege of drawing a rolling-stone up and down the yard in view and hearing of the dancers. Occasionally, too, the offender was dressed in a yellow jacket with a label indicating his crime. Corporal punishment was also occasionally inflicted, but only on the most juvenile apprentices.

We hear very little about the foremen and other skilled hands. Such there must have been. With the best will in the world, Mr. T. Shaw could not possibly train and superintend from 300 to 400 hands. We find two incidental references to their existence. In 1814 the proprietors petitioned to have a church erected for the benefit of their Protestant workmen. Their request was acceded to with unusual promptitude and the neat little church at Ennisnag, which was consecrated in 1816, was the result. The other reference to adults is the fact that fines were inflicted on them by the management for entering pubs. The amount was 2s. 6d. for a weekday visit or 5s. for a Sunday one. Apprentices were dismissed for this offence. Wages were paid on Tuesday and this, too, obviated the "weekly hang-over," and attendance was as good on a Monday morning as on any other day.

These regulations, which would hardly be tolerated by the modern apprentice or workman, seem to have worked remarkably well. At first, some of the apprentices, mostly the town-bred ones, were dismissed for breaches of the rules, but after three years from the start of the mills, such dismissals were almost

unknown and later on those apprentices who served their full term of seven years, were employed as adults (or journeymen as they were called).

The only labour trouble recorded was caused by some journeymen who had lost their jobs in a neighbouring city and were taken on in charity. For their ill-conduct they had to be dismissed, and they caused a certain amount of bother by claiming a refund of their contributions to the pension funds. This was not granted.

It is safe to assume that no "combination of workers" as trades unionism was then called, was permitted.

So far our remarks have been confined to the labour question. We will now speak of the factory itself. The idea of the partners, and one which they carried out, was to make the concern self-supporting from raw material to finished article. To secure wool of first quality they imported Merino sheep direct from Spain in 1810. These were sent as a present, and although the donor's name is not stated, it is reasonable to assume that he came from that branch of the Prim family that had settled in that country and that was to produce in the next generation Marshal Prim (and in modern times General Primo de Rivera).

It is from the Merino sheep that the factory got its name. These Merino sheep had been tried by others in Ireland at about this period, but in general they had proved unsuited to the climate and were in particular very susceptible to foot-rot. However, Messrs. Nowlan and Shaw seem to have made a good job of them; in a few years their flock amounted to 600 head, and they were selling rams in order to improve the quality of the wool in the country generally. Merino sheep when exported to Australia thrived marvelously and gave the excellent wool on which much of Australia's agricultural prosperity was founded. But to return to the factory itself.

As we have already remarked, building operations began in 1810. As soon as possible the actual manufacture of woollen materials was commenced. At first it was only to be expected, much inferior cloth was turned out and material wasted owing to the want of skill and inexperience of the operatives, and heavy losses were incurred. But by 1814 things got going smoothly. In that year the firm obtained no fewer than five first prizes at the exhibition of the Irish Farming Society—a body which at that period was performing some of the functions carried out by the R.D.S. both previously and subsequently.

The sequel was rather unfortunate for our firm. The Society announced that it had only intended to give these premiums for fine woollens until such time as they were manufactured in Ireland of a quality equal to the English. So Nowlan and Shaw got a certain amount of kudos but no more premiums.

Up to this period nearly £30,000 had been spent on the premises and subsequently another £10,000 was spent. These were very large sums, especially in those days.

In 1815 Waterloo was fought and the 20 years of Napoleonic wars came to an end. The depression that always seems to follow in the wake of wars held prolonged sway for a number of years. This was most unfortunate for our firm. In these circumstances, they deemed it advisable to do some advertising. In 1816 a statement was sent to the R.D.S. concerning the objects and successes of the mills. This statement is not signed, but bears evidence of its having been written by one of the partners—probably Mr. Timothy Nowlan. In 1817 an "English Traveller" wrote a description of the mills in the form of a very long letter to the "Freeman's Journal." In 1818 a Scotchman whose initials were "K. W." who had a good knowledge of the woollen trade, also reported most favourably on a visit he paid to the mills. He goes more at length into the system than either of the others and considers it to be better than any other he had come across, not excepting that of McOwen in his mills at Falkirk, in Scotland. These three articles appear to have been published in pamphlet form and it is mainly from them that the description of the factory we have given is taken.

The process of manufacture is described thus: Picking the wool, scouring, breaking, dyeing, carding, rolling, spinning, twisting, reeling, warping, weaving, pulling, tucking, tinting, drying, shearing, in fact every process from raw wool to the finished article, were all carried out on the premises in a most efficient manner. No less than 40 power-driven shears were in use. Among those who were dressed in material manufactured at the Merino Mills was no less a person than the Prince Regent—who shortly afterwards became King George IV.

In 1819, at the request of the owners, an inquiry was held by the R.D.S. into the running of the factory. Numerous witnesses—among them Rev. Richard Butler—gave evidence as to the excellence of the products and the benefit the mills had been to the locality—both morally and financially. As an instance of the latter it was stated that in the hard winter of 1817, £40 had been collected in the parish for the benefit of the poor, but there had been no claimants on the fund, which had been handed over to the Bank intact. As a result of the inquiry the R.D.S. passed a unanimous resolution to the effect that the Merino Factory was a most meritorious institution highly deserving of public support and encouragement. For a number of years the employees of the R.D.S. were clothed in material purchased direct from Messrs. Nowlan and Shaw. So far all has been plain sailing. It is true that the succession of reports and the references in them to the badness of the times suggest that everything is not going as well

as appears on the surface but do little to prepare us for the sad sequel. In 1819 the Factory was inspected by a large number of those taking part in the Kilkenny theatricals and is thus referred to in the prologue on the first night.

. . . the Factory ;

There sports and toil the alternate hours beguile  
And man, poor labouring man, is taught to smile.

In 1822 the firm went bankrupt and out of business. I have nowhere been able to discover the immediate cause of this failure. The only fact I have been able to glean is that two young Prims, who presumably held a mortgage on the premises, carried off the remaining stock of manufactured goods on hands and sold them in a shop in Kilkenny which they hired for the purpose.

According to Lewis's Topographical Directory, published in 1837, a Scotch firm started up the factory again, but gave it up three or four years later as they were unable to obtain a satisfactory lease.

There is a notice in Finn's Leinster Journal, dated 8th March, 1823, to the effect that the machinery at the Merino Mills, together with about 40 acres of land, and the tithes of same were to be set for a term of three years by the Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer (whose office, I presume, corresponded to that of the Official Assignee). A detailed list of the machinery is given. It contains about 30 items including such things as "scribblers," "carders," "billys," "jennies," shears, by Mills, and a machine described as a "teazer" or "divil."

Of the subsequent history of the premises, there is little to relate. Apparently they lay derelict for nearly 30 years. In the 1850's the speaker's grandfather took a lease of them from the Briscoe family for a term of years, one of the conditions being that £500 was to be spent on the premises—a big come-down from £30,000. He turned them into a flour mill and they were used as such until his death in 1870, when the trustees wisely decided to concentrate the firm's interests in Thomastown. The premises, with about 80 acres of land still remain in the possession of my firm, and the once proud Merino Mills provide shelter for cattle and horses.

The Shaws were of the same family as George Bernard Shaw. I believe that Thomas Shaw, junr., was his great uncle and lived subsequently at Kilree House, near Bennettsbridge. Members of the Nowlan family continued to reside in Ennisnag House as late as the 1880's. They were apparently fairly well off, so probably something was saved from the wreck.