

## Local History: Thomas Reay, Agricultural Engineers, Abbeytown

Research by: Thomas Williamson, Abbeytown and by Ronnie Markley

This is the story of Thomas Reay, a brilliant engineer and businessman, who was able to harness the advances of the Industrial Revolution to establish an agricultural machinery manufacturing base at the village of Abbeytown in Cumbria.

The firm became so much part of the agricultural scene that the machines it produced were affectionately known as "Tommy Reays", in much the same way that binder twine became colloquially known as "John Robert", referring to John Robert Holliday, the local steam thrasher man.

Thomas Reay was born in 1830 in Holme Cultram parish. His parents were John and Sarah Reay. John Reay was a mason. On their headstone, John is designated "John Reay of Raby" and he died aged 76 years, while Sarah lived another 9 years dying in 1881 aged 85 years. Thomas was married at the parish church in 1858 to Rachel Parkin who had been born at Ireby but, at the time of her marriage, was living at Abbeytown. Thomas was living at Raby at this time, and described as a "wheelwright".

Thomas Reay had a brother, John, who was living at Abbeytown in 1871 although by 1881 he was at Railway Terrace, Aspatria and described as millwright employing 4 men and 2 boys - so in a substantial way of business. His (and Thomas's) mother is recorded as living with him. John had a son Isaac Reay, and Ronnie Markley remembers that the farm machinery business carried on at Aspatria was run by a Isaac Reay - almost certainly Thomas Reay's nephew. This later became the Hillary Agricultural Machinery Firm.

The exact date the business was established is not known but is probably about 1858. There is a date stone above Thomas Reay's residence ("Laurel House") and adjoining the works site, dated 1860, so building work probably started



shortly before this. It is known that the land was bought from the railway company. The Silloth to Carlisle line was opened in 1856 and there is a dedicated siding that ran directly to the works. Thomas Reay had exercised considerable foresight in selecting this site that gave him access to the newly expanding rail network. At that time the use of rail was the only economic way in which raw materials, and finished goods could be transported.

There are a number of local records with references to the works. The OS map of 1865 describes the site as "Oilcake Mills" and the Methodist Chapel next door is also shown. The chapel was built in 1859 at the cost of £300 and it is thought that Thomas Reay may have donated the site on which it was built. The main building is three story and to the west of the site. There was no water power available here and so the mill would be driven by a steam engine. On early photographs taken from the roof of the church a substantial chimney can be seen, and Ronnie Markley can remember seeing an old bill from a steeplejack covering maintenance work done on the chimney, so this would be the steam engine chimney. There was a joiner's shop where the patterns and moulds were made, a smithy including a lathe, together with a stable used to accommodate horses that had been used to transport corn that had been brought for milling.

Some of the advertising material produced by Thomas Reay has survived and gives an insight into his main lines of production and how they developed. It is interesting to note that there is a reference to the "Lion" brand on the title page and that Bamford also produced a

"Lion" horse rake in 1897. While the use of the same name may be coincidence, it seems more likely that the design and pattern would be produced by an inventor and then licensed or sold to others.

The mainstay of production was the Mowing Machine and we see from the description that the model depicted supersedes an earlier "Lion" model as Mr Reay extols the virtues of the improved version. This machine could also be adapted so that it would cut cereals as well as hay and collect the material into bundles to facilitate tying into sheaves. Mr Reay makes much of the fact that the cost of raw materials has reduced and that there is further mechanisation within the works to enable the item to be offered at "the low price of £15 10s as a mower and £17 as a reaper and mower combined".

A corn crusher (£9 10s) and hay rake were also produced. The advent of a corn crusher would eventually sound the death toll for Reay's corn milling business as farmers became able to crush their own corn using these (originally) horse driven machines.

Thomas and Rachel Reay had one daughter Sarah Ann Reay who had been born at Ireby in 1864. She married Thomas Rudd Creighton and so became Sarah Ann Creighton. The marriage took place in 1890 when she was 26. She lived to the age of 42 years and died in 1905.

Thomas Reay died aged 65 years and Thomas Rudd and his daughter Sarah Ann Creighton and son-in-law Thomas Rudd Creighton installed a church window in the Abbey in his memory. There are two other windows in the Abbey dedicated to, and provided by, the Reay family - one dedicated to Sarah Ann Creighton and the other to Sarah's

mother Rachel.

The business was taken over by Ronnie Markley's Grandfather, William Wilson around 1919 and continued by Ronnie's father, James (Jim around 1919 and then continued into a third generation by Ronnie Markley and his brother Dick Markley who joined the firm In the 1950's, after war service. The Markley family originated from Crew. Ronnie and Dick's grandfather was a millwright, running the water driven mill at Waverbridge and a mill at Greenspot, near Kirkbride. Their father was an engineer by profession. William Wilson retired about 1926 and Jim Markley about 1960.

Ronnie remembers the plant being run by a Ruston Hornsby Gas Engine (later replaced with a twin cylinder Lister Diesel Engine). This would drive machinery by means of shafts and belt drives, and also produced electricity for lighting. There must have been a line extending as far as the town corner where there was an electric lamp that was switched on (there were two switches) to light up the road to the station for the convenience of early morning and late evening travellers. There was a facility to store electricity in a battery room full of glass jars filled with distilled water and acid, and into which the electric cells were lowered.

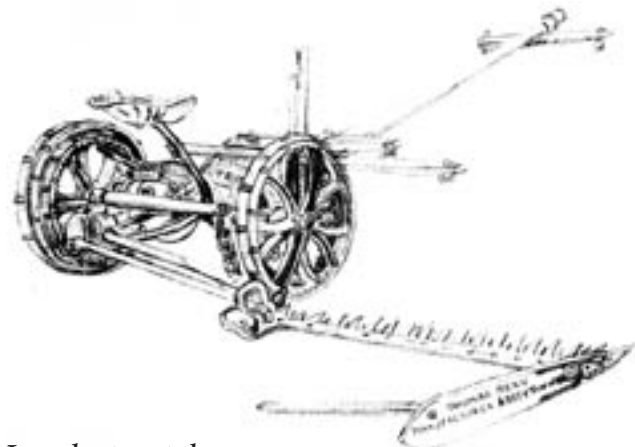
Around this time the stables were replaced with houses, this row being now known as Western Terrace.

While casting moulds continued to be made at Abbeytown the actual casting was undertaken by Porters of Denton Holme, Carlisle (later Porter Engineering) and sent to Abbeytown by rail where they were planed and dressed. All the making of the brass bushes and assembly was completed at the works. At one time the works were so busy that apprentices would be still finishing the painting when the implements would be standing on rail wagons ready to be sent off.

As time moved on it became difficult to manufacture in

competition with national makers and this side of the business was wound down with the last mowing machine being delivered to a Mr Forsyth, Hallburn, Longtown in 1939. Bob Mattinson remembers an old Singer car with a small trailer being used for delivery. This would be done in the evening so there was a better chance of the farmer being at home, together with his chequebook!

The milling part of the plant was dispensed with early in the war years and this was replaced with extra workshop space. This was badly needed because the works became officially War Agricultural (War-ag) designated and, with new machinery being largely unavailable, repair work flooded in. Some Fordston Tractors were available during the War years and these came with steel "spade lugs" instead of tyres (there being a great rubber shortage during the war).



In order to get them transported without too much damage to the roads they were equipped with a metal rim on the outside of the wheels. Ronnie remembers one being delivered to Mr Todd of The Close, Silloth.

As more money and materials became available after the war, and farming became more mechanised, additional work became available, including the installation of stationery engines to run power plants, in-barn threshers, crushers and milking machines. The Company also installed milking machines having the agency for Gascoigne and another firm Melott where the milking machine was suspended from the cow's back.

Reays also sold a Hornsby Binder which was a rather smaller version of the McCormick binder.

The company

obtained a number of dealerships and sold on behalf of Bamfords; David Brown, Massey Harris and Ferguson - the latter two covering Cumberland and Westmorland. Also sold were pike cages and pike boggies, "Selopian" muck spreaders and hay making equipment. While Cumbrian fields were originally rather small for the use of Combine Harvesters eventually Ronnie was able to buy second hand ones from Hampshire that Cumbrian farmers were able to afford, and these would be transported by Billy Dockery.

At one stage the business employed between 18 and 20 staff. This included three salesmen. Office staff included Lillian Bell, Muriel Davison and Ann Proudlock, and "near lifetime" mechanics were John Watson, Chatsworth Square, and brothers Johnny and Albert Watson from

Seaville.

As well as selling from Abbeytown the company also had depots at Crosby Street, Carlisle, the Auction Mart at Longtown, and the Crown and Mitre yard at Wigton.

In 1958 a new workshop was built on the east side of the site and in 1960 the whole of the yard was covered in to form a car and agricultural equipment showroom with a dealership being obtained from The British Motor Corporation (BMC), now Rover Group.

When Ronnie and Dick retired, and Ronnie's son Tony decided to expand his haulage business, the premises were sold to Roland Hill, Parsonby, Aspatria, with planning permission for development, although they still stand undeveloped and empty today.