

Fleece Shed, Bradley Mill, Bradley Lane



The Fleece Shed, one time “Launa Windows” building



Detail of J V & S 1883 date stone

Description

This large rectangular, gabled, brick building forms part of an extensive complex of 19th and 20th century industrial buildings, known as Bradley Mill. The complex is the remains of “Newton Abbots’ Wool and Leather Works”. These structures include the Felmongery where the first stage of preparing the fleeces and hides took place. The associated large Tannery complex, now demolished, stood a short distance away, to

the eastern end of Bradley Lane. Both of these complexes were owned for many decades by the locally important Vicary family.

The Felmongery complex was on the western fringe of the town, north of the River Lemon, and the buildings are on both sides of the Bradley/ Mill Leat. Much of the site is level but at the southwest end of Bradley Lane, the ground rises steeply and the buildings here reflect this topography.

This substantial structure, the Fleece Shed, represents the start of the process where the, newly arrived, large bales of raw hides/fleeces were stored. It is built of red brick but with local, Kingsteignton, buff/cream, bricks used for the dressings including the door and window surrounds, plinth, string courses, plat bands and stepped eaves decoration. The principal elevation, facing east, is a wide, three-storey gable, set out as a regular façade, though a number of the “openings” are intentionally “blind” recesses. This was to give the architecture of this elevation a balanced appearance even if, within the building, a glazed window was unnecessary. The overall sense of scale is increased by the architectural devise of making the gable wall taller than the roof ridge.

Above the central, wide doorway is a date stone, framed in moulded buff brick, recording its rebuilding in 1883 and the ownership - J V & S – standing for John Vicary and Sons. This rebuilding followed a serious fire and was just one of a number to hit the complex over the years. A round, ocular, window in the gable apex is currently hidden behind the modern signage. The present windows (on the gable end) have modern fenestration.



Fleece Shed looking east

The long axis of the Shed extends westward and is built into the rising ground. The building is divided into two sections, with the far west end, a later addition, having a

slightly higher ridge line. Its earlier, lower, single storey eaves line and gable can be identified by a change in brickwork. The remainder of the building's roof is level, though the structure diminishes in height from three storeys to single storey as the ground level rises. Dividing this level section is a rendered upstand. In the current, middle section of the range, are two large vent structures. The coverings to all three sections of the roof are, 20th century, corrugated, sheeting.

The fenestration of the north wall is arranged with a long series of windows to the ground floor, as the ground rises the lower part of the windows is cut off. All of these openings are now infilled with blockwork. The first floor has a long matching series of "windows," though a significant number of these were clearly always intended to be blind recesses. Two of the window openings retain their 19th century, painted, multi-paned, timber windows. These have, inward opening, hoppers with 4 panes to the upper third and 8 fixed panes below. The remaining two openings have modern casements. The ground and first floor door openings are all later alterations. At the east end of the long north wall there is a small, lean-to, canopy roof over one of these first floor doorway/loading hatches. Formerly, this was an elevated link/bridge, spanning the road and joining the Fleece Shed to the building standing to the north and running parallel to it. This was a later modification. The opposed building, where washing of the fleeces took place, retains a projecting gablet – a remnant of this former link. A heavy steel girder still links the two buildings. This allowed for the easy movement of large, wool bales between the two.

The west gable end wall and far western end of the south facing wall clearly show how this part of the building has been enlarged by raising the walls.



West gable of Fleece Shed range

Much of the south wall has a series of buildings attached at right angles, which then are attached to further buildings and together they infill the triangle of land here. However, at the east end, the upper levels of the south wall are exposed and appear similar in style to the north wall, with a row of evenly spaced, first floor openings. Many of these are intentionally blind recesses. There is also a long row of shorter, second floor “windows” all of which are blind recesses.



Rear/South wall at eastern end

NB:

The historic use(s) described here, are based on personal communications by Mr Robert Cooper, a volunteer of Newton Abbot Museum. He remembers the building in use, during the 1950's, when his father was employed in the boiler house. As a boy, Robert would regularly deliver lunch refreshments to his father and got to know the complex well. However, it is likely that the use of the various buildings changed through time as the complex continued to grow and develop.

Today this area incorporates a mix of uses, including an industrial estate and residential housing, although some structures appear to be redundant.

Reasons for recommendation:

Architectural interest:

The design of the Fleece Shed (and adjoining structures) maximised the impression of a substantial and important industrial building, especially when approached via Bradley Lane – the only vehicle access route.

The Fleece Shed forms part of an interesting and important complex of industrial buildings constructed in a mixture of limestone and brick. Those built solely of limestone are probably the oldest. Map evidence suggests that the complex in the triangular plot, which includes the Fleece Shed, are the next oldest, though these are the 1883 re-build of the earlier structures destroyed by fire in 1882.

Function and Historical Interest:

The processing of hides or skins is one of the oldest “professions” in the world dating back to prehistoric times. The process of fellmongering has to be done quickly after the animal is slaughtered to prevent the hides from decaying before tanning can begin. First, the unwanted pieces like the legs, neck and tail of the fleece were trimmed off. They were then soaked in water, to allow the skin tissues to distend. Next, a sodium sulfide solution was applied to the skin side of the fleece. The sodium sulphide soaks through the skin and destroys the follicles of the wool roots so that the fellmonger can then separate the wool from the skins. The wool is washed and dried. The skins are then soaked in a stronger solution, of sodium sulphide and lime, for 21 hours to remove small clumps of wool missed by the puller and to break down internal proteins within the skin. The next process is called de-liming: the skins are soaked in a solution of water and ammonium sulphate. This is to remove all the sodium sulphide from the skin and degraded proteins. The next process is the bating which is to remove any remaining protein from the surface.

The steps in the production of leather between curing and tanning are collectively referred to as beamhouse operations. These took place in the, now demolished, large Tanning complex to the north eastern end of Bradley Lane.

The Tithe Map of 1847 records that the buildings, at the west end of Bradley Lane, were known as “Little Bradley,” and included a paper mill and three cottages. William Bickford, who lived in one of the cottages, owned these buildings.

In 1859, a serious fire caused significant damage to the buildings and William sold the remains to John Vicary. It was he that developed and enlarged this site into a fellmonger complex. It is possible that some of the present structures retain elements of these earlier buildings but, given the various extensions and rebuilding following subsequent fires, this is not clear.

The Vicary connection with Newton Bushel/Newton Abbot dates back to 1747, when Robert Vicary founded a wool business in the town – though at that time he was a resident of Crediton. After his death, in 1786, his wife and young son, Moses, moved to Newton Bushel. Moses grew to become prosperous and a leading citizen. He and his decedents were very active in the towns’ development in the first half of the 19th century and beyond.

He, and later his son, also called Moses, continued to expand the tannery business during the first half of the 19th century. In 1839, D. M Stirling recorded that Mr Vicary

owned one of the three, extensive, tan-yards "*Behind the western range of ... (Highweek) street*". A town map, dated 1843, records that the tannery owned by Mr Vicary was indeed large and set back from Highweek Street behind the tan-yard owned by the Branscombe family.

Moses junior went on to have five sons and it is his son, John Vicary, who purchased the burnt remains of Mr Bickford's paper mill and developed the fellmongers.

The 1st ed. OS map (surveyed 1886-1887) records "*Bradley Mil (Felmongery)*" and shows the, 1883, Fleece Shed and adjoining structures filling the whole of the triangular plot of land, along with two other buildings to the east of the lane. The other buildings in the complex are absent and so are clearly later. However, the leat is clearly marked as an open feature, as is the associated row of workers housing to the north east, called Bradley Lane Cottages.

The Vicary's business continued to expand in the second half of the 19th century and was one of the largest employers in the town. By 1920, it is said to have employed 700 hands, with 300 of those working in the tannery. The complex suffered a number of serious fires over the years, so frequent repairing and wholesale rebuilding of areas took place.

In 1939, the firm was taken over and became a subsidiary of Sanderson, Murray and Elder Ltd of Bradford. The Wool and Leather Works finally closed for business in 1972.

Although a number of the buildings in the complex are in an unloved condition, the importance of this group to the town's history is significant. The Leather and Wool Works represented a significant employer within the town – only beaten by the GWR. It represents an industrial heritage within Newton Abbot, dating back centuries. Its importance has increased by the total loss of its larger, sister complex– the Tannery - to the northeast.

Landmark and Street Scape quality:

The Fleece Shed has a striking principal elevation when approached along Bradley Lane and the whole structure makes a significant and positive contribution to the Bradley Lane street scene. The condition of this building and others within the historic complex however, is of concern.

Map

National Grid Reference

SX 85282 71102

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