

The Coombe Lane Factories or Workshops, Bowlish

Coombe House Factory, Lower Coombe Lane, Bowlish (now demolished)

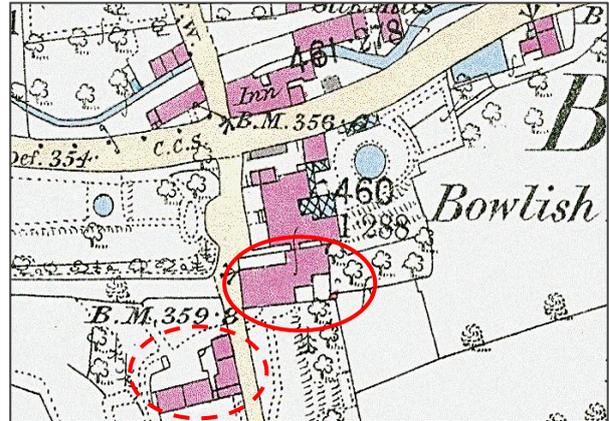
In the late 18th century until the 1820s, a woollen factory or workshops stood in lower Coombe Lane on the footprints of what is now Coombe House (see 1885 OS map right). Remnants of the factory are still present within the structure of the present house (see Coombe House history).

The first evidence for cloth manufacture on this site is contained in documents from the Morgan family of clothiers who owned the Bowlish House Estate from the middle of the 18th until the early 19th century (see Bowlish House history). The workshops themselves were built in the 1780s on land adjoining Bowlish House. Between 1785 and 1806 they were leased and then bought from the Morgans by the prominent clothier Abraham Brodribb. By 1790 he was also leasing the mill and mill house at Ham for storage (see Ham Mill).

Brodribb's background was in woollen broadcloth and it is presumed his Bowlish workshops continued producing woollen cloth. There is no evidence that silk was manufactured on the site. Water power may have been provided by the fast flowing stream now culverted that runs down the combe to the Sheppey River.

After Brodribb's death in 1806 the workshops were acquired by a colleague and friend, Alexander Tate who retained them until he left Shepton Mallet in 1820. By 1812 two old cottages on the western side of Coombe Lane opposite the workshops and owned by the Duchy of Cornwall had been developed into six cloth workers' cottages by William Richmond, a local property entrepreneur (see Coombe Cottage).

The woollen cloth industry in Shepton Mallet was well into decline by 1820 and the workshop site which was probably already redundant was bought by William Cooper a clothing and cloth manufacturer who was already working three

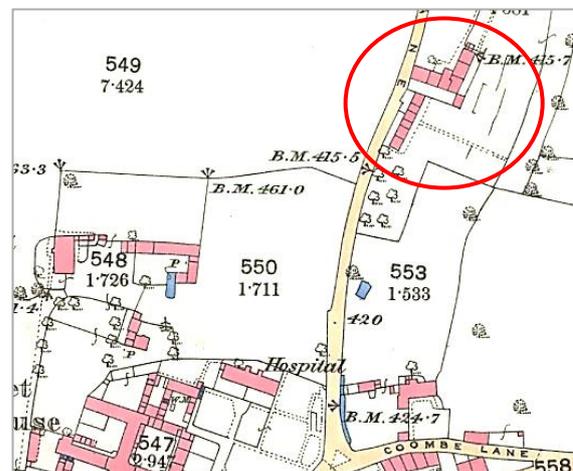


Above: 1885 OS map, Coombe House in solid red circle; Coombe Cottage (workers' cottages) hatched red circle

mills in Croscombe. The factory was demolished by Cooper during the 1820s, Coombe House was built as his family residence and additional land was bought from the Bowlish House Estate to lay out the surrounding garden.

Coombe Lane silk weaving factory (Old Silk Mill), Upper Coombe Lane, Bowlish (now 26-29 Coombe Lane)

This large listed 18th century cloth manufacturing factory lies 250 yards from Old Wells Road on Coombe Lane and is closer to West Shepton than to Bowlish (1885 OS map below). The factory was enlarged in the middle 19th century but became redundant in the 1880s and was converted to dwelling houses (HER listing next page).



Above: 1885 OS map, Coombe Lane Factory and weaver's cottages circled in red

The factory was built on land owned by the Duchy of Cornwall¹ and let to a series of clothiers from the late 1780s. By the early 19th century, it was known primarily for weaving silk crape but may have originally worked with woollen cloth. The site was described in the 1790 Duchy survey as “newbuilt clothier’s workshops and paddock” with further annotations listing a “house with a clothing factory, extensive buildings in tolerable repair, with no mill and no water valued at £23-10s-0”¹. The factory continued to use hand looms for production until its demise. By 1812 a row of six weaver’s cottages had been built on the south side of the factory (map previous page, bottom right).

c1790-1821: John and William Serle

The first clothier identified with the Coombe Lane factory was Mr John Serle (1758-1803) who was listed as the leaseholder in 1790¹ and in the 1793 Universal Trade Directory as a clothier with his son William. The Serle family also owned the Kilver Street cloth mill and factory² and other real estate in Charlton, Stoke St Michael and Devon. They were personally connected with the Broughton family of Old Bowlish House (see Old Bowlish House, OBH).

John Serle was bankrupt by 1802² and died in 1803/1804. The lease of the Coombe Lane factory was taken up by his son William (c1776-1845) who was listed as the proprietor of the mill and dwelling house in the 1811 Parish survey of Shepton Mallet³. William was a long term tenant of OBH from 1811 until 1821 and a friend of its owners Elizabeth and Phebe Broughton. In 1821 he left Bowlish with his wife Mary and settled in Bath.

1820s: Tenants of Coombe Lane Factory

There are no silk manufacturers who can be definitely shown as tenants of the factory during this period. Both the Rossiter family and Joseph West have been suggested anecdotally although Joseph West is most associated with Town Mill in the Trade Directories.

1830-1838: Messrs Frank Nalder and William Hardisty

In 1830 the Coombe Lane Factory was leased by the

HER LISTING for 26-29, Coombe Lane

20011: HER number:1345224; Grade II Workshops now houses. Circa 1700, rebuilt and enlarged c1850. Rendered, dressed quoins, pantile roof, brick stacks, coped verges. Oblong on plan, of industrial appearance. 3-storeys, 6-bays, 2- and 3-light stone mullioned windows in plain stone surrounds, first and second bays to ground floor having ovolo mouldings with angled labels over. 4-door openings, square head stone surrounds to Nos. 26 and 27, the latter ovolo moulded, brick arched surrounds to Nos. 28 and 29.



Above and below: Coombe Lane Factory in 1982 and after renovation



newly formed partnership of Nalder and Hardisty formed by Isaac Nalder (1778-1834), his nephew Francis Nalder (1794-?) and William Hardisty (1783-1855). The Nalder and Hardisty families had been silk manufacturers in Darshill from 1812 and the early 1820s respectively.

By 1833 at the time of the Factory Commission Enquiry, the partnership held the Coombe Lane and the four Darshill mills and factories. The Enquiry provided information about the working practices at all the Nalder and Hardisty run factories⁴. In the 1841 census there were 40 silk workers living in close proximity to the factory as well as the ready labour provided by the Shepton Mallet Union Workhouse which opened in 1836.

The Nalder-Hardisty partnership changed in 1834 with the death of Isaac Nalder and by 1838 the lease on the Coombe Lane Mill was either sold or surrendered to the Duchy. In 1841 the Nalder-Hardisty partnership was dissolved although William Hardisty's involvement with the Darshill mills continued until the late 1840s (see Lower, Middle and Upper Darshill Mills).

1838-1860: William Pippet and William Richardson

William Pippet (1806-1890) the eldest son of Joseph and Avis Pippet of Darsel (Darshill) is listed in the 1841 Tithe survey as the proprietor of the Coombe Lane Factory. The Pippet family were prosperous clothiers and landowners (see Upper Darshill Mills and Factory) but had suffered setbacks in the late 1820s due to Joseph Pippet's bankruptcy and gaol sentence⁵, his unexpected death and then the sudden death of John Pippet⁶, William's younger brother within weeks of his father. Whether William bought the freehold or leasehold of the Coombe Lane property from the Duchy is not known but by 1841 he had let the property to William Richardson, a silk manufacturer from Shepton Mallet.

William Richardson (1789-1846) was born in the silk working community of Bethnal Green, London son of James Richardson and his wife Elizabeth Horten, both weavers. William entered the weaving trade, married his wife Elizabeth in c1818 and their two children William Jnr and Ann were baptised in Bethnal Green in 1819 and 1820 respectively. It is not clear when the family came to Shepton Mallet but by the late 1830s both William

and his son had gone into business as silk manufacturers. In 1841 William Snr was living in the Coombe Lane Factory while the newly married William Jnr was living a short distance away in Coombe Lane. In 1846 William Snr died and William Jnr took over the Factory which was by now producing velvet. He remained the proprietor for the next 14 years at which time the Factory was acquired by Thomas Kemp and Sons of London.

1860-1880s: Thomas Kemp and Sons of Spitalfields and Somerset

The firm of Thomas Kemp and Sons was part of the wave of silk manufacturers from London who were relocating to the country because of labour costs. They acquired the Coombe Lane Factory and the silk mills at Bowlish, Upper Darshill and Draycott between 1860 and 1863.

Unfortunately, the unrest over weavers' wages followed the Kemps from London and was stirred up by a deputation from the London Silk Velvet Weavers' Society. Eventually this led to an increase in local wages for which the weavers at the Coombe Factory were almost pitifully grateful (see news extract below). However, by the 1880s silk work had dried up at the factory as the Kemps diverted resources to its other factories in particular the Bowlish Mills close by.

AT a MEETING of the Velvet Weavers of this town in the employ of Messrs. KEMP & SONS, held on the 8th inst., it was resolved by those present thus publicly to come forward and do justice to their Employers by returning them our most sincere and hearty thanks for the great benefits we have already received from them, unasked for, for we acknowledge to the credit of our employers, that on two occasions they have made advances in our wages without being called on to do so, to the bettering our circumstances, and in raising us from the lowest state of degradation and poverty, through oppression, and to the placing us on a more equal footing with our brethren and fellow-workmen in other parts of the kingdom. Neither do we overlook the meeting we had with our Master on the 7th inst., for we believe that he said what he meant, and meant what he said, and we assure him that by so doing he gained our esteem and won our confidence, and we hope it will be the constant endeavour of every weaver to do credit to him or her self, by making such goods as will give satisfaction to their employers. And we further consider that in doing as they have done our masters have not only benefitted us as weavers, but the town of Shepton Mallet at large.

SAMUEL BROCK.
WILLIAM CARPENTER.
JAMES HIGGINS.
RICHARD WEBB.

Coombe Lane, Shepton Mallet, February 13, 1860.

Above: 1860, letter from Coombe Lane silk workers, SMJ

This impacted particularly on the number of women employed in silk manufacture in Coombe Lane. Fortunately, the Anglo Bavarian Brewery now provided a welcome employment boost for men in the West Shepton/Coombe Lane area.

The "Old Silk Factory" as it was now called continued to be used for accommodation. The Kemps would certainly have sold the property including its attached cottages by 1900 when they left the Bowlish site and there is a possibility that the Coombe Lane factory and cottages could have been part of the 1901 sale which included the Bowlish mill and factory site.

References for Coombe Lane Silk Factory:

1. Survey Manor Shepton Mallet, Duchy of Cornwall, 1790-1812, SHT T/PH/dcl/9
2. Sale of assets of John Serle bankrupt, 1903, 1st Feb, The Sun, London
3. Survey of the Shepton Mallet Town, 1811, courtesy Mr E. Oram
4. Factory Commission Enquiry, Parliamentary Papers, Reports of the Inspectors of Factories, 1835-78, extracts held at SHT D/U/sm 38/68-71
5. London Gazette, Sept 21, 1826
6. Bath Chronicle, Feb 21, 1829
7. Sale of Bowlish Mill and Factory, Shepton Mallet Gazette, 14th May 1901

