

The Story of Engineering at No 12 Pilton Street

In the early nineteenth century No 12 Pilton Street was the site of a malthouse, four houses and a garden, but by the 1840s Joseph Laramy from South Molton was in occupation, having married the daughter of John Lakeman, a Pilton woolstapler. He established a woolstapling business at No 12, and soon ran a thriving business, employing twenty-five men, six women and three boys.

Next to the Laramy house was the Ring of Bells, now Nos 13 and 14 Pilton Street, where the ancient festival of Bishop Blaize, the patron saint of woolcombers, was commemorated in a dinner held once every four years on his feast day, 3rd February, just as it had been from medieval times by the ancient woolcombing trade guilds.

Thirty years later, when Joseph Laramy died, woolcombing was a dying industry due to the use of mechanical combers, the property was sold to Romeo Berry, a local businessman, and in 1880 he leased the site to John Rock Lemon and Philip Garnish, who founded a millwrights business known as Garnish & Lemon. Later, in 1913 the property and the business was sold to Thomas Bushen, who continued in the same trade, except for during the First World War, when the works concentrated on manufacturing shell cases, employing fifty men and boys.

After the war the business returned to millwrighting, but with water mills in decline, the demand for their products was on the wane, so the firm turned to repairing steam engines as well as mill machinery, and by this means Garnish & Lemon managed to stay in business into the 1930s.

Meanwhile, at Metcombe Farm, Marwood, Percy Brailey was working on his father's farm, where there was a new piece of machinery called a tractor. Percy became very interested in mechanised farm machinery, and in 1935 he went to Exeter as an employee at Norrington's, and sold the first tractor ever handled by the firm, for whom he was their demonstrator and salesman. As a member of a well-known farming family he had a rapport with local farmers, so he came back to North Devon and developed a contract ploughing and harvesting business. After two years he bought the Garnish & Lemon business and property, retaining the ten men who worked there. Trading under the name of Pilton Engineering Works, he continued to repair mill machinery when required, and also ran the contract ploughing and harvesting business. A new venture was selling tractors, trailers and farm implements generally. In the Second War, when the big manufacturers were engaged in essential war work, he started making farm trailers, but had difficulty in obtaining the materials. In the early 1950s, due to his skill at selling tractors and other farm machinery, he killed off his contracting business as his customers bought their own tractors from him and he held thirteen main agencies and many subsidiary ones. The business was too big to handle, became a limited company in 1946, and was later taken over by North Devon Farmers, although until 1968 Percy Brailey was still a director and the name Braileys Engineering Limited was still in use until the parent company built large new premises on the Braunton Road.

Following the closing of the Pilton Street side of the business, the District Council bought No 12 Pilton Street, turning the yard at the rear into garages for local residents and car parking, while the house in the street was turned over for residential use.

The above information was given to me by Percy [always known as Curly] Brailey on 20th July 1971.

Margaret Reed.