



Stowmarket, Suffolk IP14 1DL

Tel: 01449 612229

www.eastanglianlife.org.uk

Object(s): Bobby Dresser

Object Number(s): STMEA: A.1991

Researcher details: Richard Hall, Volunteer

Bobby Dresser

"R. B. with the greatest confidence recommends this machine to all who are interested in obtaining a faultless sample of corn" boasts a catalogue from 1862¹. What a fitting introduction to another item from our collection; a Corn Dresser manufactured by Robert Bobby Engineering of Bury St Edmunds.

This particular model is claimed to be one of only six of its type to have been made of which the Museum owns two. It is a hand driven, automated riddle and was used by farmers to separate the good grains of wheat and barley from undersized grains and grit picked up during the harvest. This process was known as "Dressing".

The machine is operated by turning the handle and takes grain, from a hopper, blows in air from the front drum to separate the grains, which then drop onto a riddle screen, to remove the smallest grains and grit; leaving just the finest quality grains for milling or malting. The farmer was left with a better-quality sample of grain to take to the Corn Exchange (See also Corn Merchants Desks, STMEA:A.985 and STMEA:77.A.40.1) and thereby commanding a much better price for his crop.

This model was used at Cotton Hall, near Stowmarket, for several years before it's donation to the collection in 1968.

I have been unable to establish exactly why this particular machine was one of only six made as there seem to have been very few alterations to the basic design, beyond sieve gauges used. I might suggest that this particular model was made in a limited number for exhibition purposes as we shall see later.

Evolution of the Bobby Seed Dresser

The Bobby Seed Dresser in our collection was of a standard design, marketed as the "Bobby's Number 1 Patent Corn Screen". The 'Number 1' had different sieve sizes but, aside from the frame in which the machine was housed, only two major variants. The first evolution was the addition of a 'blower' which was a drum that could be engaged or disengaged at will to the winding mechanism. The blower enabled the grains of wheat or barley to be separated before they fell onto the riddle screens below.

¹ Illustrated Descriptive Catalogue [Internet]. 1st ed. Bury St Edmunds: Baker and Son; 1862 [cited 21 July 2020]. Available from:

http://digital.slv.vic.gov.au/view/action/singleViewer.do?dvs=1595325940140~318&locale=en_US&metadata_object_ratio=10&show_metadata=true&VIEWER_URL=/view/action/singleViewer.do?&preferred_usage_type=VIEW_MAIN&DELIVERY_RULE_ID=10&frameId=1&usePid1=true&usePid2=true

According to the 1862 catalogue. The dresser could be configured with different screen gauges, which served to vary the flow of grain and hence the volume of wheat or barley that could be processed over a given period of time. The first dresser, without blower had three screens - numbers; one, two and three, screening up to 150 Bushels of grain per hour. A Bushel is roughly 36 litres of grain.

The dresser with a blower added also had three screens - numbers; five, six, and seven (there doesn't appear to have been a number four!) screening up to 160 Bushels per hour.

The same catalogue lists another evolution, marketed as a "New Patent Double Action Corn Screen." This is an interesting variation with screens on either side of the hopper which, theoretically meant that, assuming the hopper could be filled quickly enough, it could process twice the volume of grain of the single screened version. This particular model again boasted three screens – numbers; eight, nine and ten, screening up to 300 Bushels per hour, undoubtedly with a great deal of sweat from the operator!

Robert Bobby and Company

The name Robert Bobby is closely entwined with the history of Bury St Edmunds and although you can no longer see his original factory in St Andrews Street, his name lives on in Bury St Edmunds street nomenclature, and of course, part of his factory lives on today on the Museum Site (the Bobby Building). The rest of the factory site is now occupied by the County Court.

I came across a well-researched and interesting account of Robert Bobby, written by David Addy² in 2014 and which forms the basis of this short history.

Robert Bobby was born in Norfolk in 1814, he moved to Bury St Edmunds in 1827, when he was 13 and took up work as an assistant Ironmonger to Mr Groom in the Marketplace. Robert was evidently an enterprising man and soon became a partner in the Ironmongery Business. By 1843, he had bought Mr Grooms share of the business and set out on his own account, trading in the town's marketplace. By 1851, Robert was already expanding his business and had won a contract to install gas lighting in St James Church.

In 1852, Thomas Cooper Bridgman, a Bury St Edmunds Chemist, had been granted a patent for the construction of screens, riddles, or sieves and in the same year, Robert, by time well versed in the needs of farmers and maltsters, joined with him in a patent in respect of the invention of "improvements in corn dressing and winnowing machines."

The scene was set and Robert and Thomas together improved and manufactured a series of grain dressing machines. The earliest models were made without an air-blowing drum (added in 1862) and different configurations of sieve were tried in an effort to boost the productivity of the machines.

² Addy D. Robert Bobby Engineering and the story of Bobby's Engineering, workshops and Foundry [Internet]. St Edmundsbury Chronicle. 2020 [cited 20 July 2020]. Available from: <http://www.stedmundsburychronicle.co.uk/bobys/bobystory.htm>

Demand was high and in the first year of manufacture, 600 machines were sold. By 1887, over 13,000 machines had been sold all over the world. In the process, Robert and Thomas exhibited machines, winning prizes at several agricultural shows including: Chelmsford, Lincolnshire, York, Bath and West, Royal Agricultural Show of Scotland, Essex, Norfolk and the Royal Agricultural Show.

A former employee of Bobby's, Josiah Le Butt, went on to set up in competition with Robert by making copies of the Bobby's No1 Dresser when the original patent expired. One of his models (STMEA:A.2075) can also be found on display in the Museum collection, alongside grain dressers of varying design made by several other manufacturers.



Image: Richard Hall. Le Butt's Dresser. Museum of East Anglian Life.³

Robert Bobby, certainly didn't just confine himself to making grain dressers. In fact, he made a vast range of equipment for farming and malting. You can see several examples of Robert Bobby's products in our Bobby Building today.

³ Hall R. Le Butt's Dresser. Museum of East Anglian Life. 2020.



Image: Richard Hall. Section of the Robert Bobby display. Museum of East Anglian Life.⁴

As the business and demand for his products grew, Robert needed more space to build up his business and so he bought up a redundant maltings in 1860, where the company remained.

In 1873, Robert, with his younger brother George, purchased land on Station Hill in Bury St Edmunds and set up a new factory producing a range of products for the brewing and chemical industries. The site being close to the railway station, was an ideal location for both bringing in raw materials and for transporting Roberts products throughout the country.

Robert Bobby was a pillar of the community as well as an entrepreneur and generally liked by his employees who held dinners in his honour. He was elected a Councillor in 1860 and became the Town Mayor in 1883 and elected an Alderman directly afterwards. His business interests were quite extensive and included the development of a railway line between Bury St Edmunds and Thetford with Mr Greene, of brewing fame. Robert sadly died, aged 72 in 1886.

During the First World War, the factory made shell cases and was employed on war work again in the Second World War, by which time the business had been bought by Vickers Engineering. The works finally closed in 1971.

⁴ Hall R. Section of the Robert Bobby display. Museum of East Anglian Life. 2020.