

Object(s): Corn Merchants Desks

Object Number(s): STMEA:A.985 and STMEA:77.A.40/1

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Corn Merchants Desks

Have you ever wondered how farmers used to sell their crops of wheat and barley? There are two objects in our collection which will give you a clue!

Millers and Maltsters used 'Agents' (no not the James Bond variety!), often knowledgeable employees, to buy grain at a 'Corn Exchange' (or open marketplace) for them to turn into flour for bread and baking or for malt for brewing. Rather than having a free for all, the farmer was able to go from one company to another in order to negotiate the best price for the crop.

Our wooden Corn Merchants Desks would be set up at a weekly market, held in a local Corn Exchange. From here the miller or maltster's agent would negotiate the purchase of a crop with each farmer who visited his desk¹. There are two such desks in our collection, both used by different millers and in different corn exchanges.

The first (STMEA:A.985) was owned by D. Quinton and Sons and used in the Stowmarket Corn Exchange. It is 3'8" (1.1m) high. It has a wooden balustrade gallery around the edge which is 5" (13cm) high. The representative stood on a 7" (18cm) platform behind the desk which would have raised him above the farmers he traded with (probably a negotiating trick to obtain lower prices). The desk is 1'9" (53cm) wide and has a lockable lid and a seat for the representative to rest on. It has a shelf and a draw underneath the top. The drawer pulls out to the front of the desk. The drawers were used to store labelled up grain samples to return to the mill.

The second desk (STMEA:77.A40/1), was owned by Woods, Sadd and Moore & Company of Norwich. It was used in the Ipswich Corn Exchange. This is of a slightly different design and is 4'9" (145cm) high, 42½" (108cm) wide and 44" (111cm) deep. There are two small drawers on the top and a larger drawer below. The desk has a metal plate on the front depicting the companies name and what it is looking to trade (Barley, Seeds and Wool). The desk has brass handles which are both practical and ornamental, perhaps suggestive of the companies standing in the market.

A brief history of Corn Exchanges

In the 18th Century Corn Exchanges were held in an open market place but controlled by the local town or borough authorities, very much as open markets are today. Their popularity grew as demand for corn and wool increased and by the mid-18th Century richer boroughs considered erecting special 'Corn Exchanges' to allow trading to continue in all weathers. Also allowing the borough to charge a larger rent for each agent. Corn Exchanges' were not limited specifically to

¹ Field M. The Wheatlands of East Anglia [Internet]. East Anglian Film Archive. 1936 [cited 29 April 2020]. Available from: <http://www.eafa.org.uk/catalogue/163>

trading in grains. The Bristol Corn Exchange, built in 1743, was also used to trade other produce, when grain was not being traded².

Several other towns and cities took the initiative and built their own Corn Exchanges to serve the surrounding area and growth in building accelerated following the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846³, which brought about a fall in corn prices due to cheap imports of grain from America. East Anglia, as a major agricultural economy, built Corn Exchanges in most market towns. In Essex there were six, Norfolk had eight and in Suffolk there were seven, found in; Beccles (1849), Bury St Edmunds (1862), Ipswich (1812), Hadleigh (1813), Haverhill (1889), Stowmarket (1835) and Sudbury (1841).

As we have already stated Corn Exchanges were not limited to trading grain, many served as community resources, hosting meetings, political meetings and other civic or social events such as concerts and dances. This was important to their survival as farming in the years between 1846 and 1946 was in depression and many people were forced to seek work in towns and cities.

The Stowmarket Corn Exchange

Our first Corn Merchants desk was used by D Quinton and Sons in Stowmarket Corn Exchange. Double⁴ tells us that the building was erected in 1835 at a cost of £3,000. This is approximately £383,700 in today's money. The cost of the building was paid for by a subscription issue 120 shares at £25 each. The entrance to the Corn Exchange was from the Marketplace, with the doorway between the then National and Provincial Bank and Barclays Bank. The original building also housed the town's 'Assembly Rooms', although the seating capacity of 150 proved too small for large lectures. Double also informs us that the glass roof was prone to leaks in heavy rain!

Farmers trading took place on each Thursday (market day) with £4,000 to £5,000 regularly changing hands.⁵ During the Second World War, the Corn Exchange was used to house the 'British Canteen' serving cheap, hot meals to people in the town. Grain trading finally ended in 1966 and the building was unused until 1986 when it became a movie theatre⁶. It later became the town's first Snooker Hall.

Since 2009, the building has taken on a new lease of life as the 'John Peel Centre', hosting a variety of live entertainment. The Centre recently acquired access to the vacated National Westminster Bank building and it is hoped to re-open the original entrance from the Marketplace.

D. Quinton and Sons

D. Quinton and Sons, were millers, corn merchants and animal food producers. They owned one of the two watermills in Needham Market, for which they would have bought grain via the Stowmarket Corn Exchange. Their mill was located on the B1078 Coddensham Road. It can still be seen today.

² Corn exchanges in England [Internet]. En.wikipedia.org. 2020 [cited 29 April 2020]. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corn_exchanges_in_England#Early_corn_exchanges

³ Howe A. Free trade and liberal England, 1846-1946. Oxford: Clarendon press; 1997.

⁴ Double H. Stowmarket - A Book of Records. Stowmarket: Capella Publications; 1983. Page 56.

⁵ Double H. Stowmarket - The March of Time. Stowmarket: Five Star Printing Ltd; 1991. Page 36.

⁶ 1. Durrant M. Stowmarket - Then and Now. Ipswich: Fuller Davies; 2003. Page 278.

This Grade Two listed watermill was built in the late 18th or early 19th Centuries. It is four storeys high with timber frame and weatherboard cladding⁷. It is driven by a large 'undershot' (that is to say the water flowed underneath) water wheel. This type of arrangement was quite common in East Anglia, where the land is reasonably flat with little rise to aid water flow. An image of this mill, taken by Peter Dolman can be found on the Mills Archive website.⁸

Quinton's continued to trade in Needham Market until 1991 when the company was bought out by Muntons⁹.

The Ipswich Corn Exchange

The following is an extract of John Norman's excellent short history of Ipswich Corn Exchange, which appeared in the Ipswich Evening Star in May 2017.¹⁰

'For centuries, trading in corn had been carried out on the Cornhill, in the open and under the shelter provided by the Market Cross. Various buildings were built, demolished and rebuilt, but none met the exacting requirements of the corn merchants.

By the late 1870s the complaints were loud and clear, and to ensure the corn merchants didn't leave town to use better facilities in Bury St Edmunds, Colchester or Sudbury, the council relented and held a competition to design a new building. It attracted 15 entries and was won by local architect Brightwen Binyon.

Brightwen was born in Manchester in 1846, the son of a Quaker sugar refiner and tea dealer. (His mother's maiden name was Brightwen.) He married Rachael in 1879 and they had four children, one of whom was the mother of (Sir) Bernard Feilden, who with David Mawson created the Norwich-based practice of Feilden & Mawson. F&M were architects for the conversion of a warehouse into Contship on Ipswich Waterfront. (Oh! and they worked on the Great Wall of China and the Taj Mahal.)

Ipswich Corporation had built the new town hall (1868) and decided the new Corn Exchange would best be accommodated immediately adjacent. They purchased property opposite the Swan pub in Little King Street, buildings which incorporated both the Sickie public house on the corner and the King's Head, opposite Barclays Bank. The proposed new Corn Exchange was to be a separate

⁷ 1. BOSMERE MILL, Needham Market - 1231764 | Historic England [Internet]. [historicengland.org.uk](https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1231764). 2020 [cited 29 April 2020]. Available from: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1231764>

⁸ Quinton's Mill, Needham Market, amid countryside - Images & Documents [Internet]. [Catalogue.millsarchive.org](https://catalogue.millsarchive.org/quintons-mill-needham-market-amid-countryside). 2020 [cited 29 April 2020]. Available from: <https://catalogue.millsarchive.org/quintons-mill-needham-market-amid-countryside>

⁹ 1. MUNTONS PLC, STOWMARKET | The National Archives [Internet]. [discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk](https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/0659938c-4479-43b5-915a-fe033f098ee3). 2020 [cited 30 April 2020]. Available from: <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/0659938c-4479-43b5-915a-fe033f098ee3>

¹⁰ 1. Norman J. Ipswich Icons - The History of the Corn Exchange [Internet]. Ipswich Star. 2017 [cited 30 April 2020]. Available from: <https://www.ipswichstar.co.uk/news/ipswich-icons-the-history-of-the-corn-exchange-1-5005830>

building, detached from but very close to the town hall – a gap that has given difficulty of access from one to the other ever since.

The foundations of the new Corn Exchange were dug in 1880 and the building opened on July 26, 1882.

The corn merchants were there for business every Tuesday and the building was used on a couple of other days of the week as the provisions market.

There are two key features of the building not seen today. The trading floor was on the same level as the floor in Waitrose with a vast space above, up into the rafters – the roof of the current Corn Exchange. Second, natural light flooded down from above: there were large skylights in the roof that have since been replaced with solid roof coverings.'

Woods, Sadd and Moore & Co

Were a company of maltsters, and seed merchants based at Loddon in Norfolk. The company was first registered in 1886. They operated the watermill at Loddon and, according to the Norfolk Mills history of Loddon Mill,¹¹ by the late 1880's had installed a coal fired steam engine and a roller mill. It seems that the water flow, from the diverted river Chet, was insufficient to provide a reliable source of power to the mill.

The company appears to have invested considerable sums of money in trying to improve the efficiency of the milling operation. The record shows that they supported dredging works, invested in wherry barges to transport grain by the river and mechanised the movement of grain between their granaries (grain stores) and the mill itself.

All of this proved too much and the company first went into liquidation in 1898. It seems however, that the firm was rescued as the record shows that they were later reprimanded in 1900, by the local council, for breaching the Factories (Steam Whistles) Act of 1872.

By 1928, the mill had a full electricity supply installed. The company grew and had offices at Thorpe near Norwich, which fell victim to German bombing in WW2. In order to survive the company appeared to have diversified into cultivational seeds but the mill continued to produce a small amount of flour up until its closure in 1968.

¹¹ 2. Neville J. Loddon Mill - River Chet [Internet]. Norfolk Mills Group. 2003 [cited 30 April 2020]. Available from: <http://www.norfolk Mills.co.uk/Watermills/loddon.html>