

## THE PICKERINGS OF FRODSHAM BRIDGE

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Keen-eyed visitors to St Laurence Church may have noted that there is an inscription at the base of the large east window. It is difficult to read because most of it is obscured by the reredos screen installed in 1916, some 25 years after the stained glass window was restored. The window was given by Mrs Ellen Pickering in memory of her late husband, John Rigby Pickering and her brother, Robert Wainwright Ashley.

By the 1880s four generations of the Pickering family had dominated the industrial sector of Frodsham Bridge in corn milling, salt manufacture and trade in coal, lime and tiles. Through marriage they were connected to the cream of Frodsham society and also to wealthy corn merchants in Prussia. Two Pickering brothers, William and Peter, married two sisters, Carolina and Emilia Steffens, daughters of Danzig merchant Carl Steffens.

Pickering is an old Cheshire family based mainly round the Daresbury area. Robert Pickering, a barrister of Gray's Inn, London, who was born in Daresbury in 1619, bought estates at Northwood Park and Crowley near Arley and the manors of Hatton and Thelwall in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. He made Thelwall the family seat and the family crest can be seen at the Pickering Arms in the village.

The Pickerings of Frodsham hail from Crowton, where their name is still connected with the ancient ford on the River Weaver known as Pickering's Lock by Pickering's O The Boat. This was the place where, before the advent of canals, salt was loaded from packhorses onto barges for transportation to Frodsham, Liverpool and beyond. Just how the Crowton Pickerings are related to those at Thelwall is not clear.

John Pickering, born in Crowton in 1744, married Mary Harrison in 1765. Their first two children were born in Crowton, but by the time their daughter Nancy was born in 1768, John had taken the tenancy of Beech (or Beach) Mill, in Bradley, Frodsham. In addition, in 1784, he took the lease of a new mill under construction at Sutton, then part of the Arley Estate.

### **Corn Millers**

There already was a small mill at Sutton, rented by Sutton Hall Farm, but in the early 1780s the Arley Estate decided to build a new high-powered corn mill on the site of an old cheese warehouse on the banks of the River Weaver. The warehouse was no longer required as most cheese was being distributed along the canal network. John oversaw the construction of the new mill (one of the largest in Cheshire) and a new home for the family (presumably Mill House, listed Grade II and now in a sad state of repair). The Arley Estate records contain an invoice dated July 1782 from Henry Gardner to Sir Peter Warburton for 'drawing a plan of the intended mills'. Invoices from 1786/7 refer to stonework undertaken at the mill and the paving of new roads.

Before the house was completed the family lived in a warehouse at the mill and it was there that John's youngest son, Peter, was born in 1785. The house was presumably finished by 1790, as Peter, in his memoirs *The Diary of Peter Pickering*, describes a visit by his aunt and uncle, who were obviously part of the "Cheshire Set" of the time and unlikely to visit a warehouse.



FDX0141 Mill House, Sutton Mills c.1900

The old, smaller mill was retained. A newspaper report In November 1804 described a fire that *destroyed the extensive water corn-mills and thousands of measures of corn belonging to different persons and that these mills were the property of Sir Peter Warburton of Arley Hall*. Fortunately the mills were insured and were rebuilt.



FDN 1749 Sutton Mills c. 1940

The story of local mills and the trade in corn at the end of the 18th century is important because by then Britain's agriculture could no longer meet the demand for grain. The country depended on imported corn to provide bread for its growing population. The unpopular Corn Laws controlled trade in wheat from abroad and resulted in high prices at home. This meant that when English grain was in short supply because of bad harvests, it was still expensive to import from abroad. The bad harvests of the 1790s, coupled with the strict blockade on continental wheat during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15) resulted in desperate poverty in the countryside and led to bread riots in many parts of the country. It was a period when new mills were built and corn merchants were permanently looking for new sources of grain.

In Frodsham, John Pickering's sons, Thomas 1765-1814, and Samuel 1766-1811, took over the management of Sutton Mills from their father, who returned to live at Beech Mill where he died in May 1814.

In 1794 Samuel married Alice Rigby, whose brother George was also a corn dealer in Frodsham. They had two sons, Samuel 1805-1820, and John Rigby Pickering 1799-1880, as well as two daughters, all of whom were christened in Frodsham. At the time of his death in 1811, Samuel Pickering was not only in partnership with his brother Thomas, but also with Samuel Chadwick, corn dealer of Sutton, who eventually owned Daresbury Hall. Samuel Pickering probably dealt with the day-to-day running of Sutton Mill. He left his estate to his wife Alice and after her death to his surviving children. Alice died in 1844.

Thomas married Margaret Horabin, daughter of William Horabin, maltster and innkeeper of Frodsham Bridge. Nine of his eleven children were christened in Liverpool where according to his will he owned another mill. The two younger children were Lydia, christened in Runcorn in 1811 and Edmund 1813-1814, christened in Frodsham, suggesting that Thomas returned to run the mill at Sutton after his brother Samuel's death in 1811.

Thomas died in January 1814, a few months before his father. As well as his interest in Sutton Mill, he left mills, malt kilns, land and houses in Liverpool, Runcorn and Frodsham. At the time of his death his estate was the subject of a law suit, probably concerning ownership of the various properties. The outcome of that suit is not known but by 1829 the management of Sutton Mill was in the hands of Thomas's sons, William and John.

The mills were advertised for let in August 1829, perhaps due to the failing health of William, who sadly died on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1829 aged only 31. He was described in an obituary in the Chester Courant, as *a young gentleman of the most elegant demeanour and amiable disposition, whose benevolence and humanity excited the general esteem of an extensive circle of friends*. His brother John died in 1834 aged 33.

By 1831 the mills, then owned by the Aston Estate, were rented by Samuel's son John Rigby Pickering, who was in partnership with his cousin, James Rigby. John married Ellen, the sister of Robert Wainwright Ashley of Ashley House, Main Street, in 1841. They had no children and for many years lived at Ashley House with Robert and another sister, Elizabeth Ashley. James Rigby resided at Mill House, Sutton.



FDN1946 c.1990 Ashley House, Main Street, Frodsham

The partnership of John Rigby Pickering and James Rigby was dissolved in 1852 and James, after spending a few years as manager of the Neston Colliery, returned to Frodsham and established the Bellemonte Pleasure grounds at Overton.

John Rigby Pickering died in October 1880, but when he gave up his interest in Sutton Mills is uncertain. The number of millers listed in the census returns indicate that the mills were being worked in 1861 and 1871, but in 1871 Mill House was occupied by James Lowe, a retired farmer, son of Henry Lowe of Sutton Hall.

John Rigby Pickering's death was recorded in the Parish Magazine of November 1880:

*... we have to mourn the loss of a man whom we could ill spare - a man within whom burned a most fervid desire for the parochial good. The event which has deprived us of the familiar face and venerable form of one so highly respected as Mr John Rigby Pickering is too recent and too deeply sorrowful for merely a passing allusion. ... Incapable of a sordid or ignoble thought, no man ever went to his rest leaving behind him a golden memory more pure from dross, or having devoted himself to the parochial offices which he held with a truer sense of duty.*

The Vicar's sermon of 17<sup>th</sup> October also referred to Mr Pickering: *I feel that God has taken one who had identified himself with the well-being and the prosperity of Frodsham, one who had endeared himself to us all ... we shall miss his kindly smile, his genial greeting.*

John Rigby Pickering had given generously to the funding of the restoration of St Laurence Church by Messrs Bodley and Garner. After his death, his widow gave the stained glass for the large east window which, according to the Restoration Accounts of 1880-82, cost £413. 17s.0d. The window was designed by Burlison and Grylls, one of the most well-known stained glass firms in the country that were also responsible for the rose window in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey.



The east window, St Laurence Church, given by Mrs Ellen Rigby in memory of her husband and her late brother as part of the restoration of the church in 1880-82

Sutton Mills had been unoccupied for a number of years when in 1879 Thomas Rigby and Sons (no relationship to previous Rigbys can be established) took them on. They were probably converted to steam and later to electricity by Thomas Rigby. It again became one of the largest in Cheshire, and was taken over by J Rank, millers of Liverpool in 1926, which in turn merged with Hovis MacDougal in the 1960s.



There were other family interests in corn milling. John Pickering 1774-1814, the third son of John and Mary, was also a miller. He owned a wind corn mill, warehouse, stone quarry and two houses in Runcorn which had to be sold in 1804 when he was declared bankrupt. The property was probably purchased by his brothers William and Samuel as a mill in Runcorn was mentioned in Thomas's will. The lease of this wind mill was up for tender in 1819, applications to Mrs Alice Pickering. A copy of a painting of the windmill at Runcorn can be seen in Starkey's book *Old Runcorn*.

As a result of the bankruptcy, John decided to emigrate to Philadelphia to try to establish himself as a corn merchant there. John was married to Hannah Farrall daughter of Thomas Farrall of the Bear's Paw and his first wife Margaret. John and Hannah's first two children died young and are buried in Frodsham. Hannah and their remaining four children joined John in America in 1808. A further child, John, was born in America but there the story ends.

### **Slate, Coal and Timber Merchants and Brick Manufacturers**

Joseph, the fifth son of John and Mary, was also originally a corn merchant. He was declared bankrupt in 1807. He married Ann Hayes, daughter of William Hayes Snr, shipbuilder and slate merchant in 1802. Perhaps influenced by his wife's family, Joseph changed his profession. Pigot's Directory of 1834 lists Hayes (William jnr) and Pickering (Joseph), slate and timber merchants, Frodsham Bridge. Joseph died in 1839.

Joseph and Ann had three sons, William 1804-1845, James 1805-1860 and Edward 1807-1848. From 1842-1845, James and Edward owned 2/3rds of Horns Mill in Helsby. Edward died in 1848 and James, by 1850, was a merchant dealing with salt, timber, coal, bricks and tiles. He died in 1860 and both of them were unmarried.



Pickering family grave, Parish Church of St Laurence

The eldest son, William, started his career as a brick maker in Frodsham Bridge and was listed as such in Pigot's Directory of 1834. When the Salt Works, founded in 1773, was put up for sale in 1832 following the death of Thomas Urmson, William Pickering changed his career to become the proprietor of the Salt Works. He built a new house for himself there in 1836. His brothers, James and Edward, were also involved in the business. William died in 1845. Although the Salt Works was advertised for sale the following year, James was still listed as proprietor in Bagshaw's Directory of 1850 and he sold it in 1856 to the Chancellorsville Freehold Gold Mining Company.

William Hayes Pickering, William's only child, was just 12 years old when his father died and had only just reached 21 when his mother, Elizabeth, died too. He lived with his grandmother, Ann Pickering by the Salt Works. In 1861 Ann farmed 54 acres. William Hayes Pickering became a coal and lime agent, working from a depot at Frodsham railway yard. He lived at Rock View, High Street and died unmarried in 1906.

### **Marriages**

John and Mary Pickering also had four daughters. The eldest Nancy, born in 1768 married Samuel Mouldsdale, a wealthy merchant of Frodsham in 1789. She died in 1790 soon after giving birth to a daughter, Mary, who died in infancy. Samuel then married Nancy's younger sister, Elizabeth, but she too died in 1797 following childbirth. Samuel married for a third time in 1809 but had no further children. In 1813 Samuel sold a cotton factory in Frodsham and at the time of his death in 1834, he owned a steam corn mill in Runcorn, the purchase no doubt influenced by the Pickering family.

Mary 1772-1837, John and Mary's third daughter, married William Yarwood, a druggist from Witton, Northwich in 1793. They had two sons but only John, lived to adulthood. Mary is buried in Frodsham.

Sarah (Sally) born in 1776, John and Mary's youngest daughter, married Peter Rigby in Yarmouth, Norfolk, in 1803. Little is known about her life other than two of her children were born in Deal, Kent, but christened in Frodsham. It is possible that Peter Rigby was Lieutenant Peter Rigby of the Royal Navy who commanded the gun brig "Urgent". Both Yarmouth and Deal had naval bases at that time. This could explain why Sarah was married in Yarmouth rather than her home parish.

John and Mary's last three children were all boys. James born in 1778 was taken ill at home in Sutton in 1794. Despite treatment from the local doctor, Dr Hulley, James died weeks before his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. Their youngest child Peter 1785-1865 was once betrothed to the daughter of Dr Hulley but the engagement was broken off.

We have already seen that there was a constant search for new markets in grain and for the Pickerings, this led to family links with Europe. The majority of wheat imported into Britain came from Prussia at the turn of the 18th century. The two youngest sons of John Pickering were, perhaps, the most adventurous. When William 1782-1855 was sent to Danzig to purchase grain in 1799, he took with him his 14 year old youngest brother, Peter. The idea was that Peter would learn 'Germanic languages' as well as something about the world of trade. They were well-received in wealthy merchant circles and became acquainted not only with the Baltic merchants, but also with the Gladstones, merchants from Liverpool and the family of future Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone. Peter Pickering was taken into the merchant house of John and Robert Gladstone to learn accounting on his return. William Pickering married Frederika Steffens of Danzig in 1813 and five years later, Peter married her sister Emelie. Their father, Carl Steffens was one of the richest corn merchants in Danzig and owned a large house on the Lange Market. The house still stands and is one of the tourist attractions of the city.



The Steffens House, now called the Golden House, in  
The Lange Market, Danzig



Peter and Emelie Steffens

William Pickering brought his wife to England and they settled in Liverpool, where he became a well-known merchant and Consul to Mecklenburg. Peter and Emilie bought an estate outside Danzig which had once belonged to Emilie's grandparents and brought up a large family of 10 children there.

As a family with long-standing connections to Frodsham and its surrounding area, the Pickerings had made and lost fortunes in the corn trade for more than 100 years. Their ventures into other trades were, perhaps, more successful and contributed to the economic prosperity of Frodsham and Frodsham Bridge. Though the mills have long since ceased to exist, the East Window at St Laurence is a fitting tribute to their role in Frodsham life and reflects the esteem in which the family was held.

### Sources

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