

The Era of Samuel Ramson Whitty's Stewardship

Introduction

The carpet-making business which was started in Axminster by Thomas Whitty in 1755 lasted for 80 years, the final 25 years, from 1810 to 1835, being under the stewardship of one of his grandsons, Samuel Ramson Whitty. On 1 June 1810 he (Samuel) placed a notice in several newspapers¹ under the heading 'Axminster carpet manufactory' which began as follows. "*Samuel R Whitty begs to inform the nobility, gentry, his friends and the public at large, that he has succeeded his late brother Mr Thomas Whitty in the above well-known and established business ...*".

Samuel was 26 years old at the time, and his brother Thomas had died earlier that year aged 35, having run the business for 11 years (he having succeeded their father when he was just 24).

Their father (also Thomas) had died in 1799 having run the business for just 7 years, whilst their grandfather (also Thomas) had run it for 37 years, from 1755 until his death in 1792. The era of Samuel Ramson Whitty's stewardship was therefore much more than a postscript to the efforts of his predecessors, representing almost a third of the lifespan of the business.

The era through which Samuel Ramson Whitty held the reins was very challenging in its own right, and contained both opportunities and difficulties through which he had to negotiate a path.

The background against which Samuel Ramson Whitty was working

The Regency, and Royal Patronage

King George III had visited the carpet factory in Axminster towards the end of the life of the original Thomas Whitty, and had been a significant patron of the business. However, in 1810 he fell into a long-term state which was viewed by his Government as a form of madness, and in February 1811 his eldest son George was officially appointed as the Prince Regent by Act of Parliament. Technically the Regency ended when George III died (on 29 January 1820), and was succeeded by the Prince Regent as George IV. In practice the 10-year reign of George IV is often treated as a continuation of the Regency, ending with his death on 26 June 1830.

It is fair to say that George IV loved the whole process of commissioning, designing, constructing and furnishing new buildings, and the Regency is known for the flourishing of fashion, led by him. It is equally true to say that he appreciated the sheer quality of Axminster carpets, and ordered them for various buildings which were built or refurbished during this period, including the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, and Windsor Castle, which was in the middle of a major refurbishment at the time of his death.

The 'real world' of 1810 to 1835

It is easy to lose sight of the backdrop to the Regency and its aftermath. While George (as Prince Regent and then as King) spent money like water, until the battle of Waterloo in 1815

¹ E.g. The Salisbury & Winchester Journal of 18 June 1810.

the country was at war with Napoleon, and was almost continuously subject to wrenching political and financial strains.

There was an economic crisis in 1810/11, followed shortly by a spike in the number of bankruptcies. The years 1811/12 also saw the rise of the Luddites, whose violent opposition to industrialisation created uncertainty at home while Napoleon threatened the very existence of the country from over the Channel.

From 1815 to 1822 prices of crops fell, and with them the rents which rich landowners could expect to receive. These were the same people whose grand houses Samuel Ramson Whitty would generally have expected to furnish with carpets.

In 1824/25, after almost 10 years of peace, the economy went through a mini-boom, and the industrial revolution really took hold (with the Stockton-to-Darlington railway being opened in 1825, and ushering in an age of railway expansion).

Royal debts

As a relatively young man the future George IV had been bailed out by his father on at least one occasion, and he seldom saw any reason to skimp on cost and quality where his own projects were concerned. As a consequence, when he died the Government found a series of unfunded commitments. A surprisingly detailed contemporary account can be found in 'The Black Book: An exposition of abuses of Church and State, Courts of Law, Municipal Corporations, and Public Companies'² for an idea of the scope and cost of the works, which exceeded the agreed budgets and left unpaid debts when George IV died.

It is possible that Samuel Ramson Whitty's subsequent financial difficulties may have been exacerbated by being paid late, or not paid in full, but this is no more than speculation.

Personal Life

As well as external factors, Samuel Ramson Whitty will have been influenced in what he did by his personal circumstances.

Within 2 years of taking over the family business he married Sarah Luck Conder at St John's, Hackney on 16 April 1812. She was the eldest daughter of Samuel Conder of Clapton, Middlesex and his wife Sarah (née Luck). Their son Thomas Ramson Whitty was born on 27 December 1813.

By 1830 at the latest Sarah's parents had moved to Axminster to live closer to her, possibly with her and Samuel. Her mother died in Axminster that year, followed by her father died in 1835. Sarah Luck Whitty herself died on 2 February 1839. All three of these deaths occurred at periods of great stress for Samuel (notably the aftermath of the fire of 1828 and his bankruptcy in 1835).

Milestones in the business

1822: The Royal Pavilion at Brighton

In 1822 three carpets made in Axminster were supplied to the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, for the Saloon, the Banqueting Room and the Music Room.

² This book was written by John Wade and published by E Wilson in 1835. It is accessible in full on-line.

1826: The famous 'Turkey carpet'

This two paragraphs immediately below this one provide a direct quote from 'Axminster Past and Present', a relatively slim volume written by Rev Herbert C Watts. For about 4 years until about 1901 he was the minister of the Congregational Church on Chard Street, and his book was published by Edwin Snell, the Axminster printer and book-seller, in 1902. Herbert Watts was a serious historian, and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, and he drew on the memories of residents of the town when compiling his book. The most interesting passage comes from pages 26 to 28, and deals with the former carpet factory, by then only remembered by the oldest residents of the town, the factory having closed over 60 years earlier. The only changes that have been made are to correct the spelling of the name 'Ramson', and to take some sentences out of the direct quotation marks which were used in the printed book, given that some of the words thus marked were manifestly not direct quotes. Herbert Watts' text should be treated as a report based closely on what was said to him by real persons who he regarded as credible witnesses, rather than verbatim reportage.

The first passage reads as follows. "*Mrs Mary Ann Hoare, living on the top of Castle Hill, who is now in her 90th year³, recalls with lively interest the excitement throughout the town when a carpet was finished. She says it was counted a grand event, bells were rung, carriages came from a distance on this gay day. All the work (she continued) was done by means of needles and the hand, and the whole work, as well as the dying of the materials was done in the town. A very large number of persons assembled at one time in the Congregational Church, when thanks were given for the completion of a fine carpet to be sent abroad. Messrs James Bradford and John Welch tell me they remember this occasion, and that this carpet was sold to the Sultan of Turkey, and took between 20 and 30 men to carry from the factory to the Congregational Church.*

"It was of very great size, and its pattern represented the sun, moon and stars. It covered the entire area of the above building, except one aisle, which was left that visitors might view this remarkable piece of work."

Although some other authors have stated that the famous Turkey carpet was made in 1800 or even earlier, it was almost certainly made during the latter part of 1826, because there was a flurry of publicity about it right at the end of 1826 and in early 1827.

The Bath Chronicle & Western Gazette of 28 December 1826 stated that "... *Mr Whitty, of Axminster, has lately manufactured a splendid carpet, to be sent to the Grand Seignior⁴, as a present from his Majesty⁵. It measures more than 400 square yards, and the cost is two guineas per yard*". Several other papers carried very similarly-worded reports, and the Examiner of 31 December (for example) identifies the client more fully as "... *the Grand Seignior of Turkey*".

A few days later, the Bath Chronicle & Western Gazette of 4 January 1827 provided a follow-up report, stating that "... *its actual dimensions are, length 74 feet, breadth 52. It is perhaps the largest ever made in this or any other country: its weight was upwards of 23 cwt. It was not, however, more admired for its size than for its quality, design, and brilliant colours.*" Again, other papers carried similar items.

Almost 2 weeks later, the Bury & Norwich Post of 17 January 1827 (along with several other papers) provided some further clarifications and corrections, as follows. "*It has been stated*

³ It can be confirmed that Mary Ann Hoare died in 1906 aged 93, and was therefore born in 1813 or 1814.

⁴ This term was often used as an alternative to Sultan.

⁵ i.e. King George IV.

that it was designed as a present from his Majesty to the Grand Seignior of Turkey. This is not the fact; the order having been given to the manufacturer, Mr Whitty of Axminster, in the regular way of business, from one of his principal correspondents, Mr Henry Watson, of Old Bond-street, London, under whose direction the pattern was drawn and prepared. All who have seen this very beautiful exhibition of operative skill, pronounce it to be unequalled by any preceeding efforts of the loom."

This evidence ties up very closely to the memories of Mrs Hoare as told to Herbert Watts some 75 years later.

What none of the contemporary reports mention is the political upheaval in Turkey at the time. Although Mahmud II, the ruler of Turkey, had pursued a consistent policy of active westernisation, the 1820s were years when Russia was pressing territorial claims against Turkey, and when serious pressure for Greek independence was being exerted, not least by Lord Byron, who died in Greece in 1824. Although Britain had generally supported Turkey, during negotiations over Greek independence, in 1827 the Turkish navy was destroyed at Navarino by an international force which included the British Navy, effectively securing Greek independence but ending good relations between Britain and Turkey. It is to be hoped that the carpet had been paid for by then.

The fire of 30 January 1828

The two accounts below, which give slightly different impressions of the fire that badly damaged the carpet factory on 30 January 1828, are taken from contemporary newspaper reports, both dated 2 February 1828. The first is from the Western Times; the second is from the Exeter & Plymouth Gazette.

"A fire broke out in the malt-house belonging to Miss Bragge, at Axminster, on Wednesday evening last, which extended to the extensive carpet manufactory of Mr Whitty. The surrounding buildings being chiefly covered with thatch, at one period the greatest fears prevailed lest the whole of the premises should be destroyed; but the active exertions of the inhabitants succeeded in extinguishing the flames in a short period, and with less injury than could have been anticipated. We are happy to hear that Mr Whitty's insurance will cover the loss he has sustained. The business of the manufactory is already resumed, and we are glad to find that the numerous persons who depend upon it for subsistence will speedily be restored to full employment. One man was severely hurt and a child broke its leg. The fire is supposed to have originated from some wool drying over a malt kiln having ignited.

"On Wednesday se'ennight, an alarming fire broke out in a Malthouse adjoining the Carpet Manufactory of Mr Whitley, at Axminster, which raged with violence, and soon communicated with the Factory, a considerable part of which was destroyed, but not until all the books, cash and nearly all the valuables, including the magnificent carpet now in progress of manufacture for his Majesty, were removed to a place of safety. No lives were lost and the premises were insured. We hear that arrangements have been made by Mr Whitley, for carrying on the business in other premises."

In 'Notes on Axminster', Major W H Wilkins quotes James Davidson's 'History of Axminster' as reporting that the fire led to the loss of four small houses adjoining the factory as well as the factory itself, and the Malthouse which was the source of the fire.

1828: The refurbishment of Windsor Castle

Between 1824 and 1828 George IV oversaw a substantial programme of refurbishment of Windsor Castle, and the reference above to "... *the magnificent carpet now in progress of*

manufacture for his Majesty ...” is almost certainly a reference to a carpet commissioned for that process.

On 20 December 1828 the Exeter & Plymouth Gazette reported as follows. “*We are rejoiced in observing that His Majesty, in the plenitude of his truly British spirit, has on the completion of the embellishments of Windsor Castle, ordered that all the carpets of the principal rooms of that splendid edifice should be from the manufactories of Axminster. The skilful texture and brilliant design of these beautiful carpets, powerfully and proverbially attest the superiority of that town in this branch of manufacture.*”

This is not entirely consistent (in terms of timing) with a report in the Western Times on 3 January 1829, which simply stated that “*All the carpets of the principal rooms in Windsor Castle have been manufactured at Axminster.*”

The new factory, and the effects of foreign competition

The factory was re-built relatively quickly on a slightly different plot⁶, allowing Silver Street to be widened. One of the chimneys is understood to have the date 1828 on it, and on 1 April 1829 a dinner was held to celebrate the opening of the new premises, with the builders, carpet workers and some businessmen being invited⁷.

A copy of a letter written at around this time by Samuel Ramson Whitty to selected actual and potential customers survives, but it is not dated. However, the references to carpets that he had made (specifically the carpet sent to Turkey, and the carpets supplied to “... *His Majesty’s palaces at Windsor and Brighton*”) means that it was written after 1828, and the way in which he refers to His Majesty suggests that he was referring to King George IV, who died in 1830. It seem likely that the letters were sent out in 1829 or early 1830.

The text includes the following passage. “*The advantages of the Axminster Carpets are, that they are made in one piece, to any size or pattern and of any shape, however irregular. They are capable of the most beautiful designs in Flowers, Fruit, Armorial bearings, Grottesques or any other which harmonize with the furniture of a Room, and their texture is extremely durable.*”

He then refers to the adverse effects of foreign competition, and urges potential buyers to go to the showrooms of Henry Watson at 35 Old Bond Street, who he describes as his ‘Town Agent’ (and who is referred to above in connection with the famous Turkey carpet).

1835: The Goldsmith’s Hall

The two paragraphs which follow come from ‘Axminster Past and Present’ by Herbert C Watts (see above for details). The first is specifically about the carpet made for the Goldsmith’s Hall; the second (which follows on here, as in the original) is included for its more general interest.

“*Another large and valuable carpet, which was made for the Goldsmith’s Hall, London, was seen when in the making, and on view at the works by our townsman, Mr Thomas N*

⁶ Source: Chapter 16 of ‘House Histories for Beginners’ by Colin & O-Ian Style (Phillimore & Co, 2006). This comprises a case study covering Thomas Whitty’s house. This states that before re-building, Samuel Ramson Whitty purchased the property where the fire had started, which had previously belonged to Nicholas Bragge, which also included at least part of the former site of the former Bear Inn, and expanded into it. At the same time he improved the dwelling house by installing the two bays into the frontage, which can still be seen. In all probability he purchased not just the Bragge house, but the other three houses which were damaged by the fire.

⁷ Source: ‘The Book of Axminster’ by Angela M W Dudley (Barracuda Books, 1988), page 121.

Webber⁸. All of these gentlemen⁹ were personally acquainted with Mr S Ramson Whitty and his son, Mr Thomas Whitty, last of the manufacturers of Axminster carpet and grandson and great-grandson respectively of the founder of the industry. Mr Bradford bought some of the casks which had contained the dye for the carpets, and Mr Webber still possesses a soup tureen which had belonged to the last of the carpet manufacturers, and which was disposed of at the closing of the works in 1835.

“Until comparatively recent date one or two of the weavers could be found still living, the last, a Mrs Banks, died only a few years ago, and since I have lived in the town; another, a Mrs Pitcher, also died quite recently, and was buried in the Congregational burial ground in the town, as was also Mr Thomas Whitty, son of the founder of the industry, who was a Trustee of that place of worship, and a large contributor at the time of the building of the present chapel.”

The carpet made for the Goldsmith’s Hall must have been one of the last to be made at Axminster. Although comparable press reports from 1835 have not been found, we know that the old Goldsmith’s Hall was demolished, and then re-built and sumptuously furnished, and we know that it re-opened in July 1835. The London Evening Standard of 14 April 1838 remarked, almost in passing, that the carpet in the banqueting hall was valued at 1,600 guineas, but did not state who had made it. At that value Samuel Ramson Whitty would have been a strong candidate, and all the circumstantial evidence points in a common direction.

Bankruptcy and its aftermath

1835: Bankruptcy

The London Gazette reported on 4 December 1835 that Samuel Ramson Whitty had been declared insolvent.

The Western Times then reported as follows on 30 January 1836. *“We are glad to announce that the carpet business, which for many years past in this town has been a source of employment to a number of families, after a temporary suspension, has been recently resumed, and, it is to be hoped, will be continued with its wonted activity. This manufactory has been distinguished by royal patronage in several reigns; and a carpet of the most superb description was there manufactured for the predecessor of his present Majesty.”*

Spring 1836: A first attempt to sell the assets

Less than a month later, on 20 February 1836, the Western Times carried an announcement as follows. *“To be sold by Private Contract, with immediate possession, a very desirable Freehold Property, comprising the highly celebrated and long established Carpet Manufactory at Axminster in Devon, with Counting House, Shear Shop, Ware Room, Stable, Gig-House, and spacious Court Yard, and every necessary convenience for carrying on the business. The Manufactory is a newly-erected substantial Stone Building of about 110 feet in length by 28 feet in width, and consists of three lofty Floors. Known, as are the productions of this manufactory, not only in this Country, but on the Continent of Europe, it may be sufficient to say, that it is unique in its kind, and that this concern (the only one in England) has been carried on for nearly a century by the family of the late owner, Mr S R Whitty.”*

⁸ Thomas Nicholas Webber, long-time organist at the Parish Church of St Mary’s, was born at Exeter in 1814, but moved to Axminster in 1835, just in time to have seen the carpet factory before it closed.

⁹ This refers to James Bradford and John Welch as well as to Thomas Nicholas Webber: the other two had been named in the previous paragraph, which is cited above in connection with the famous Turkey carpet.

“To a person of business-like habits it offers a secure and profitable investment for a modest Capital. The Manufactory is now in work, and the Purchaser would be required to take off the looms, Implements, and other Stock at a Valuation.”

“For a view of the Property apply to Mr S R Whitty, at the Factory; and for other particulars (if by letter, post-paid) to Messrs Fox, or Messrs Elworthy, Wellington, Somerset; Messrs Boon¹⁰, Lyme Regis, Dorset; or Mr Aberdeen, Solicitor, Honiton, Devon.”

“Note: The Purchaser could be accommodated with the Lease of a convenient Dwelling House, immediately adjoining the Factory.”

No such private sale was concluded, and the Western Times of 30 April 1836 carried notices of two scheduled meetings of creditors of Samuel Ransom Whitty, at the George Inn, Axminster on 16 May, and a day later at the Bull Inn, Bridport.

Summer 1836: The final asset sale

The Western Times of 23 July 1836 was the first of many newspapers to carry a formal Notice dated 22 July announcing a forthcoming auction to take place at the George Inn, Axminster on Wednesday 31 August 1836 at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, arising from the bankruptcy of Samuel Ramson Whitty.

The 'headline description' was *“Carpet Manufactory, Dwelling Houses and Lands and Share of Stock in £3 per cent Consols in the following Lots”*. Ten lots were described (see below), and in several instances Samuel Ramson Whitty's interest in the assets concerned was a small share of a lease with a sitting tenant. The Lots were as follows (in summary).

Lot 1 was the freehold factory building, as described 5 months earlier (when the private sale failed to produce a buyer): see above.

Lot 2 was the adjacent dwelling house on what was described as Church Street (the former name for Silver Street), comprising an entrance hall, drawing and dining rooms, library, five excellent bedrooms, WC, kitchen and cellars. Also included were three cottages and the ruins of two more (recently burned down) on South Street, occupied by John Morgan and others as yearly tenants.

Lot 3 was an interest in five more cottages on South Street, occupied by Mrs Taylor and others.

Lot 4 was an interest in some land and property in Payhembury.

Lot 5 was an interest in about 5 acres of land at Gamberlake(s) (Axminster), occupied by S R Whitty as tenant.

Lot 6 was an interest in about 2 acres of land known as Hurd's Meadow or Brick Yard (Axminster) occupied by George Phippen.

Lot 7 was an interest in about 8 acres of land known as Claymead Meadow (Westwater, Axminster).

¹⁰ The Boon family were long-established cloth-makers based in the Lim valley. In the 1860s, following a fire at their woollen mill, James Boon moved his wool-stapling business to Axminster. The implication (which cannot easily be confirmed) of the inclusion of their name on the Notice is that the Boon family business was one of Samuel Ransom Whitty's trade creditors.

Lot 8 was an interest in about 3 acres of land known as Little Claymead (Westwater, Axminster) sometimes known as Clayhill or Streets.

Lot 9 was an interest in about 60 acres of land at Westwater (Axminster) occupied by George Phippen¹¹.

Lot 10 was a one-sixth interest in £1,800 from a family will.

Interested parties were invited to contact the tenants or Samuel Ransom Whitty to view the properties. Further particulars were available from Mr Rawlin Mallack (an Axminster solicitor), or Messrs Allford & Kempthorne (Sherborne solicitors), or Mr Robert Henry Aberdeen (Honiton solicitor).

What happened next to the house and former carpet factory

The house (plus adjacent properties, together comprising Lot 2) was bought by Thomas Edwards¹².

'The Book of Axminster' states that the carpet factory building itself (i.e. Lot 1) was bought by Rawlin Mallack, for £800¹³, and that he "... *turned part of the building into a house, leaving the remainder as offices and court rooms for the County Court*". At least part of the building was certainly still owned by Rawlin Mallack when he wrote his will, which was proved in 1850¹⁴. As reported above, he had been involved in some capacity in promoting the 1836 sale.

A report in the Bridport News of 27 May 1892 supports this account, and takes it further forward. "*The building was converted into a private residence, and was appropriated to be the offices of the County Court. The large building is now used in different ways. One part is converted to that useful institution, the Axminster Hospital; another part is occupied by the Conservative and Constitutional Club, with residence for the caretakers (Mr and Mrs Pinson); and another part is utilised as an armoury for the local company of Volunteers.*" The hospital had opened a few years earlier, in 1887, at which point the County Court moved to the same rooms as the Magistrate's Court, above the Police Station on Church Street.

The Conservative Club still occupies part of the building, and the other two uses noted above occupied the upper and ground floors of the southern part of the old factory building respectively.

After the hospital moved to purpose-built premises on Chard Street in mid-1912, a single-storey extension was built to the rear of the ground floor of the former carpet factory. This enabled the whole of the ground floor to become the Axminster Drill Hall, while the former hospital floors were used for accommodation. The Western Times reported on 30 January 1913 that the new Drill Hall for H Company (Axminster) 4th Battalion, Devon Regiment

¹¹ The identification of George Phippen enables us to identify the Lot 9 property as Lower Westwater Farm. George Phippen was still the tenant there, and the farm was still described as comprising about 60 acres, when the Tithe Apportionment process was carried out in Axminster parish in 1838. Lots 7 and 8 are fields which lie between the farmstead and the lane, to the north of the farmstead.

¹² Source: Chapter 16 of 'House Histories for Beginners' by Colin & O-Ian Style (Phillimore & Co, 2006).

¹³ Source: 'The Book of Axminster' by Angela M W Dudley (Barracuda Books, 1988), page 121. Although the original source of this information is not identified, the same information is included on page 59 of Major W H Wilkins' 'Notes on Axminster' written in 1932, and can be regarded as reliable.

¹⁴ A copy of his relatively long and complex will is accessible via the National Archives website. It confirms that he owned the former carpet factory, but not the price that he paid.

(Territorial Forces) had been officially opened on the site of the old Cottage Hospital by General Donald, followed by the annual dinner, presided over by Captain Graham Forward.

During the inter-war years the top floor of the building was occupied by persons linked to the Territorial Battalion, often the Sergeant. By 1939 this role was filled by a member of the Moulding family, who continued to occupy the accommodation into the 1950s.

Writing in 1932 Major W H Wilkins wrote in his 'Notes on Axminster' that the uses of the rest of the building included the Drill Hall, Conservative Club and the Law Chambers of Mr Forward (but without specifying which of the Forward brothers he was referring to).

Later uses of the Drill Hall itself, after its military use ended, included use as a venue for entertainments and for sports (such as badminton) by local schools and clubs. It was later taken over by Axminster Carpets and used as a social club, before being purchased by Axminster Heritage Ltd.