

The Start of Carpet Making in Axminster

Introduction

This account is mainly devoted to the transcript of a copy, dated 21 May 1857, of an original hand-written document written by Thomas Whitty, not long before he died. The whereabouts of the original document are not known.

The full title of the document is 'A retrospective view of the origins and progress of the Axminster carpet manufactory, written in 1790'. Notwithstanding its date, it deals largely with events that happened during the second half of the 1750s, mainly because these laid the foundations for the successes that he enjoyed over the following 30 years. It does not mention the visit to Axminster, and in particular the carpet factory, by King George III and Queen Charlotte the previous year, but the intended recipients of this document would have been entirely familiar with that episode¹.

Although the 1857 copy is not signed, it seems quite likely that it was made by Thomas Ramson Whitty, shortly after the death of his own father, Samuel Ramson Whitty. Thomas Ramson Whitty was the great grandson of the original author.

The text given here is slightly different to that reproduced in Chapter 3 of Bertram Jacobs' book about Axminster carpets², which he attributes to a copy made from a piece of scrap paper found in Axminster after the bankruptcy of Samuel Ramson Whitty in 1835, which ended up in the keeping of Edwin Snell, the Axminster printer, and which may have been transcribed by William Pulman, an Axminster clock-maker and father of George Pulman, the author and newspaperman.

For the avoidance of doubt, this transcription covers the full text of the 1857 copy. The only changes that have been made concern (1) the use of capital letters, which are not consistently used in the original; (2) some of the punctuation, which is not always entirely clear in the original, and is sometimes entirely absent (leading to an extreme 'stream of consciousness' style which can be hard to navigate), and has therefore been edited in a more modern style; and (3) the breaks between paragraphs: several have been introduced to assist the reader.

Some footnotes have been added to provide additional context.

Following the 1790 text is a plan of the original carpet factory, which is also reproduced in Bertram Jacobs' book, which he clearly states to be based on an original hand-drawn plan prepared by Thomas Whitty.

Thomas Whitty's full 1790 text

"Thou shalt remember the way which the Lord thy God led thee in the wilderness to humble thee" was the exhortation which Moses gave to the Israelites, when they had been so wonderfully delivered from Egyptian bondage, conducted through the wilderness, and

¹ An account of that visit is available from the Axminsterheritage.org website as a separate document.

² See: 'Axminster Carpets (Hand Made) 1755 to 1957' by Bertram Jacobs (F Lewis, 1970). Readers should be aware that whereas this book is excellent on its primary focus, namely the carpets themselves, it is not so reliable on some more local issues (e.g. Thomas Whitty's year and place of birth, both of which are wrong, to take just one example).

brought near to the confines of the promised land. In like manner when I consider the various mercies I have been favoured with, in the various corrective dispensations wherewith I have been exercised, I have abundant reason to sing of mercy and of judgement, and to say surely goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life; and when I consider my ingratitude and unthankfulness to the author of my being, and the little improvement I have made of the various dealings and dispensations of God towards me, I have reason to be humbled even in the dust, and to acknowledge that I am less than the least of all his mercies.

“After having been conducted by divine providence through many difficult ways, and by unexpected paths in many of which the hand of the Lord most evidently appeared, I would now desire to set down and recollect some of them, in order to impress my own soul with a grateful sense of divine goodness towards me, and for the information of my posterity.

“From my first beginnings in trade³ until the year 1755, I carried on the clothing trade. But although at first my business seemed to be promising, yet, by various unforeseen circumstances it did not prove equal to the expenses of my growing family⁴, and often occasioned heartfelt sorrow in myself and dear wife: though upon the whole the Lord was pleased wonderfully to support my spirits and my credit. This difficulty in my circumstances and unsuccessfulness in my business occasioned me often to be thinking on or wishing for some other employment, which might turn to some better advantage. I continued in this state of uncertainty and speculation for several years, not being able to discover any thing which had a promising appearance to be of any service to my family. At length the Lord was pleased from circumstances that appeared trifling at first to open a way for a thorough change in my employment, and thereby to make a better provision for my family than I could have expected from the clothing trade if it had succeeded according to my most sanguine expectations.

“I think it was in the year 1754 that being in London I was at the house of Mr Wm Freek, an ironmonger⁵, when I saw in his warehouse several bales which appearing not to contain any goods in his way of business, I enquired what their contents were. He told me that they were Turkey carpets which he had imported, and if I had the curiosity to look at it he would show me one of the best and largest Turkey carpets in England; accordingly he took me into a large room and showed me a carpet 36 by 21 ft, the sight of which greatly surprised me; as I had some little knowledge of figure weaving I could not conceive by what means a carpet of so great a breadth could be wove in figure without a seam in it. After I had seen this carpet I could never keep it out of my mind long together, without being able to form the least view of the method of doing it.

“After a long time of puzzling to no purpose, I awoke one morning with a strong impression on my mind that I knew a method of doing it, and if I could examine a Turkey carpet I should see if my ideas of it were right; accordingly I communicated my thoughts to my wife and asked her if she knew whether there was any Turkey carpet in our town. She told me Mrs Forward⁶ had one that I might see, after breakfast I went up to Mrs Forward’s and desired a sight of her carpet, which she readily granted. By the sight of this carpet I found that my ideas were in some measure right, and on a thorough examination of the structure of it I was convinced of the probability of doing it, although I was in some respects much at a loss

³ Thomas Whitty was born in 1713, so he is writing here of the 20 years or so prior to 1755.

⁴ He had married Sarah Ramson in 1739, and they had 12 children, of whom six survived childhood.

⁵ This was probably William Freke of Stanhope Street, Clare Market, sometimes described as an ironmonger and hardwareman.

⁶ Mrs Forward was very probably the wife of Edward Forward, a lawyer who lived in Axminster.

particularly as to working a carpet of so great a breadth, not having yet any idea of them being made in an upright loom.

“After this my mind was almost continually employed about it, and my spare time in making some little trials in one of my broad looms, at length on the 25 April 1755 (being our fair day while our weavers were at holiday) I made in one of my looms a small piece of carpeting about 7 or 8 inches square resembling as near as I could the Turkey carpets, this further convinced me of the possibility of doing it but not of doing it quick enough to answer any purpose in trade. Soon after this I went to London taking with me my little essay on carpeting⁷ and showed it to some of my friends there, who all agreed that if I could make carpets equal to the specimen and sell them at the price of Turkey carpets it would become an interesting branch of trade. But there lay the difficulty which was yet undiscovered. What I could afford to sell them for as all my ideas hitherto went no further than an horizontal loom which would have been a very spare and tedious way of working but this difficulty providence soon removed in an unexpected manner.

“Whilst I was in London I saw an advertisement from Mr Parisot⁸ who carried on a manufactory of carpets at Fulham which had been lately introduced from France under the patronage of some, complaining of want of due encouragement from the Public and saying that if he was not better supported he must decline the manufacture and the youths who were apprenticed to it be returned to their parents. The reason of this I afterwards found to be that his carpets though deemed handsome, were sold at such an exorbitant price that few cared to buy them.

“This afterwards turned to my great advantage, when I could serve them much cheaper. This manufacture I had scarcely ever heard of. But considering if I could obtain a sight of it as it was on the same principal⁹ as I was desirous of attempting, though upon a much finer scale, it might be of essential service in removing the difficulties I yet laboured under, I determined to attempt seeing it. Accordingly when I left London to Fulham to breakfast and putting up at an Inn ordered a pot of coffee and chose to have it in the kitchen that I might be in the way of hearing any thing that was talked of; I had not being there long before two men came in to a pot together, and fell into some discourse about the carpet manufactory, which gave me the wishes for opportunity on inquiring about it, when one of the men told me he had a son who was an apprentice to Mr Parisot and mentioned the uncertain circumstances they were under. I then asked him if strangers were admitted to see the work, to which he answered he did not know, but if I desired to see it he would go and ask his son. He soon returned and acquainted me that I might be admitted and that he would conduct me there.

“Accordingly I obtained a view of everything I wanted, by which every remaining doubt was removed from my mind, and I was thoroughly satisfied I could go on with the manufacture, only the carpets were so much finer than I had formed any idea of so that I had not at that time the least idea that I should ever rival them. When I came home I immediately began to prepare a loom and materials for making a carpet. And on Midsummer day 1755 (a memorable day for my family) I began the first carpet I ever made taking my children and

⁷ In this context ‘my little essay on carpeting’ means ‘my small sample carpet square’.

⁸ Peter Parisot (1679 to 1769), a Frenchman, started making carpets in Paddington with the support of the Duke of Cumberland. He moved his factory to Fulham in 1753, but closed it in about 1755 having failed to make it pay. The buyer was Claude Pasavent of Exeter (see later).

⁹ This should say ‘principle’, but the spelling found in the original has been retained here and in three other places.

their Aunt Betty Harvey¹⁰ to overlook and assist them for my first workers. When the manufacture was thus begun many gentlemen came out of curiosity to see it and professed their desire to encourage it by ordering for carpets; among them one of the first was Mr Cook of Slape near Beaminster¹¹ who ordered for a carpet from the first pattern I ever made. When I carried this carpet home I met Mr Cook at Beaminster who desired me to open it to show to a gentleman there with him. This gentleman was a Mr Twynihoe of the Temple London¹², and was steward to the Earl of Shaftesbury; he was much pleased with the sight of it and told me he should be glad to render me all the service he could for the encouragement of a new manufacture; accordingly he mentioned it to Lady Shaftesbury who was a liberal encourager of arts and manufactures¹³. Her ladyship desired her to request Mr Cook to spare her that carpet, as she imagined it to be the first that had been made, saying she wished to have the first carpet of the manufactory although she might expect to have a much handsomer one when it was come to a greater perfection.

“Lord & Lady Shaftesbury were so well pleased with that carpet that they and their family have been since some of our best customers. In the summer of 1756 I received an order from Mr Twynihoe for a carpet for a friend of his and enclosing the first proposals of the Society for Promoting Arts and Sciences, of giving a premium for the encouragement of making carpets in England on the principal of Turkey carpets with an arrow pointing to the proposal of giving £30 to the person who produced the best carpet on that principal not less than 15 by 12 feet, and £20 for the second best of the same dimensions with this observation: ‘It could do you no harm to receive this premium next year’. Accordingly in March 1757 I produced a carpet to that noble society 16 feet by 12’6” which I valued at £15. Mr Thomas Moore of London¹⁴ produced another of the same dimensions which he valued at 40 guineas. The society were convinced on examining both carpets that although Mr Moore’s was made of the finest materials and therefore cost more money in making, yet that mine was best in proportion to its price. They therefore recommended to Mr Moore and me to take £50 and divide it equally between us, which we agreed to do.

“I sold my carpet to Boucher Cleeve Esq¹⁵ who afterwards parted with it to Mr Wm Crompton¹⁶ who was one of the dealers in carpets who were desired by the Society to examine the carpets and give their opinions as to the merits of the claimants. Mr Cleeve told me he bought it for the sake of promoting a new manufacture by showing it to his friends, but in Mr Crompton’s shop a much greater number of the principal people would see it than in his house. When Mr Crompton paid me for this carpet we agreed for me to make as many as

¹⁰ Betty Harvey was the older half-sister of Thomas Whitty’s wife Sarah. Their mother had married Samuel Ramson after the death of her first husband, Daniel Harvey.

¹¹ This was probably John Cook, and Slape refers to Slape Manor, which sits on the river Brit about 5 miles north of Bridport and close to the village of Wayhill.

¹² This was John Twynihoe (1723 to 1767), a London lawyer, whose family came from Turnham, near Blandford. His father and brother were clergymen there.

¹³ The 4th Earl of Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1711 to 1771) owned a grand house at Wimborne St Giles on Cranborne Chase. He was the Lord Lieutenant of Dorset, and a well-known connoisseur of art who extended the family home and filled it with fine furniture and paintings. In 1759 he married Mary Bouverie, daughter of the Rt Hon Jacob Bouverie, Viscount Folkestone and Baron Longford, and President of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts & Manufactures. This fact (i.e. the 1759 date) does not fit particularly well with Thomas Whitty’s narrative, which is dealing with the period 1755/56.

¹⁴ This would be Thomas Moore (c.1700 to 1788) of Chiswell Street, Moorfields.

¹⁵ Boucher (or Bouchier) Cleeve (1715 to 1760) was a wealthy pewterer of Cornhill, who assembled a well-known collection of fine art at his house at Foot’s Cray in Kent.

¹⁶ Bertram Jacobs in his history of Axminster Carpets identifies William Crompton as a merchant of Cockspur Street, Charing Cross.

I could to send to his warehouse for sale. In consequence of this agreement I had during the ensuing year orders for as many carpets as I could procure hands to make.

“In the summer of 1757 the society again altered¹⁷ their premiums a second time with this restriction: ‘That those who had already received premiums for making carpets could not be admitted as candidates unless they produced three carpets at least of the aforesaid dimensions’. In consequence of this advertisement I endeavoured to produce three carpets and on account of Mr Moore’s not being excluded on account of the high price of his carpet I made one of them a fine one at 24s a square yard in order to show that I could make a better carpet than Mr Moore’s at a much less price; these carpets were exhibited in March 1758, when Mr Pasavent of Exeter¹⁸ was my only competitor. He produced a fine carpet about 16 feet by 12 made by some of Parisot’s French hands which he valued at 80 guineas; its price was so exorbitantly high that it occasioned some debate in the society, but as their proposals mentioned the proposals to be given for ‘the best carpet produced’ and not for the best in proportion to its price, the society again recommended it to us to divide the premium equally between us again, which we agreed to.

“Mr Pasavent’s producing a fine carpet and valuing it so high was a great advantage to me as it occasioned my fine carpets to be looked upon as cheap, no-one being able to see such a difference in its goodness and beauty as there was in the price. In consequence of this I had during the ensuing year a demand for fine carpets as fast as I could make them.

“The Society then proposed their third and last premium for making carpets to be produced in March 1759 with this further restriction: ‘That those who had already received premiums for making carpets should not be admitted as candidates unless they produced six carpets at least of which every one should be judged superior in goodness in proportion to its price to any produced by any other person’. This stimulated me to try to my utmost ability, and accordingly in March 1759 I produced the six carpets of which several were fine ones and of large sizes; the only competitor was Mr Jesser of Frome¹⁹ (Mr Moore and Mr Pasavent both declining it) who produced one carpet. When Mr Jesser came to see my carpets he candidly acknowledged that he had no right to the first premium of £30 which was without any debate adjudged to me by the Society.

“These repeated successes so advanced the price of my carpets that I had a constant and almost uninterrupted demand for many years, which has continued but with little variation as to demand, and with no diminution as to its reputation to this day.

“Thus have I endeavoured to recollect the ways of providence by which I have been led in unknown paths through the wilderness. O that a grateful sense of the goodness of the Lord may be deeply impressed on my heart and the constant language of my soul be what shall I render to the Lord for all his goodness towards me. I will take the way of (temporal) salvation and call upon the name of the Lord as long as I have a being.

¹⁷ The text says ‘altered’, but the original may well have said ‘offered’, which would make better sense.

¹⁸ This would be Claude Passavent, a Swiss Huguenot whose factory at Exeter ran from 1755 to 1761, and employed workers who had previously worked for Peter Parisot.

¹⁹ This would be William Jesser of Frome Selwood (probable dates 1734 to 1779). The ‘Annual Register’ of 1760 (which reported events from 1759, and can be found on-line) states that he had submitted two carpets to the competition, not one. This figure of two is confirmed by other records in the Royal Society archives consulted by Bertram Jacobs for his book.

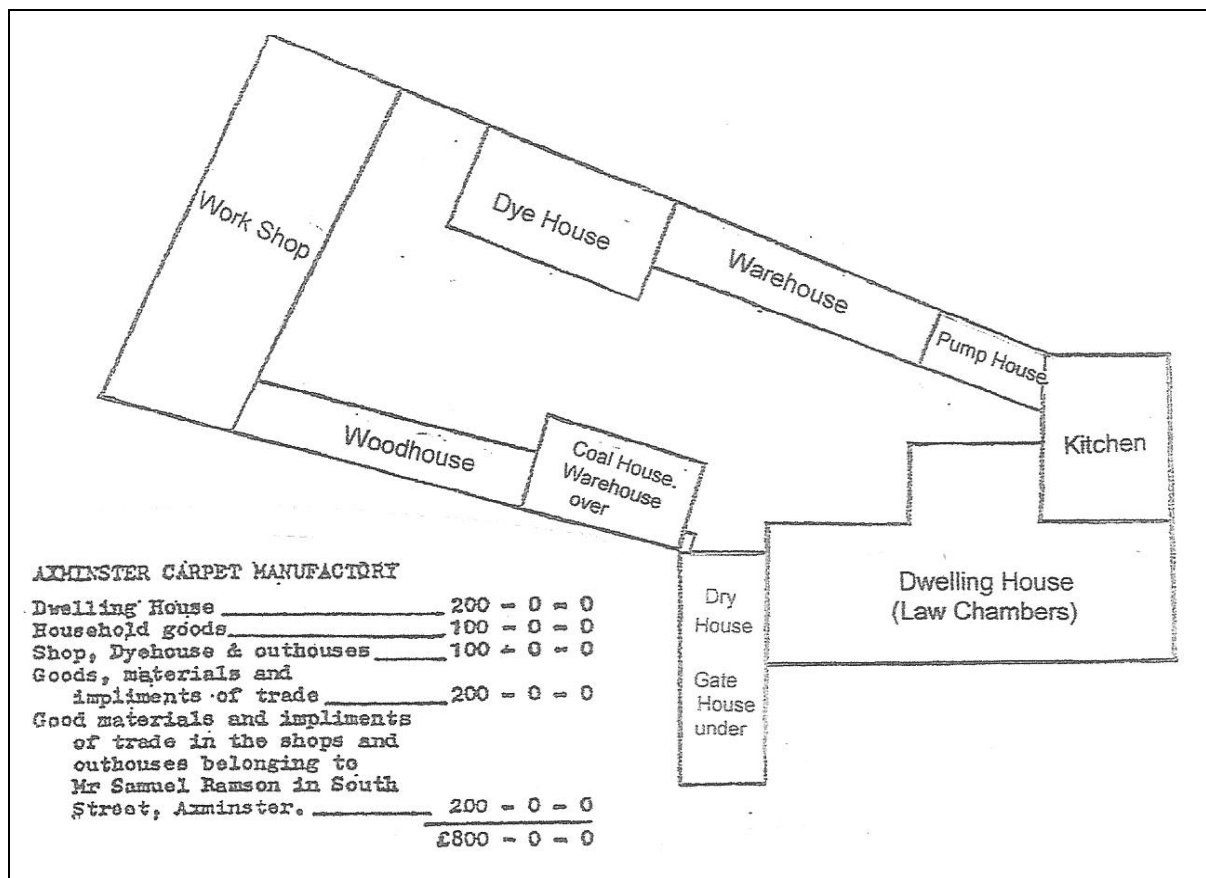
“Whilst many question whether the God of providence has any thing to do in conducting the affairs of mankind but resolve all to fate and chance, let me not be so blind and stupid as not to see the hand of the Lord nor regard the operation of his providential dispensations.

“When I first begun the carpet manufactory I had not the least idea of the Society which was then in its infancy ever been likely to give premiums for its encouragement. But how admirably circumstanced was the event as soon as I was capable of providing a carpet to be exhibited they advertised their premiums. Another circumstance was very remarkable. That instead of my competitors being any injury to me in future trade they were of great service in stimulating me to endeavour at making greater improvements in the manufacture than I ever might otherwise have obtained an idea of.

“These Memoirs of the Carpet Manufactory I give to my Son Thomas Whitty, by him to be transmitted to his children. April 16th 1790. (signed) Thomas Whitty.”

The original carpet factory

The plan below shows Thomas Whitty’s original carpet factory, parts of which burned down in 1828, with a list of values probably associated with insurance cover. It is taken from page 33 of the 1970 book by Bertram Jacobs which has been referenced several times above. No evidence has been seen to indicate when the plan was originally drawn, though Jacobs concludes that it was made relatively early in Thomas Whitty’s stewardship of the business. It is understood that the original of the hand-drawn plan is in the library of the Royal Society of the Arts.



The factory as illustrated was located behind the surviving replacement 19th century building (which now houses the Axminster Heritage Centre, plus the adjacent Conservative Club).

The original dwelling house, now the Law Chambers, survived the fire, but was subsequently extended to incorporate the original 'dry house'²⁰, as well as the kitchen and pump house. The evidence for this is that when the history of the Law Chambers was explored in the 20th century, the original well was found beneath a floor inside the current building. This would almost certainly have been inside the original pump house as illustrated above.

The dye house which survives from the 1828 factory is located some way from its 1755 predecessor (as shown above), rather closer to the original coal house.

It seems likely that most of the buildings other than the dwelling house were relatively simple single-storey structures.

The dwelling house itself was built on or very close to the premises of the former Bear Inn.

The valuations include a reference to premises on South Street belonging to Mr Samuel Ramson, and the factory as illustrated backed onto the yards and outhouses of two or three properties which faced South Street. In 1731 Thomas Whitty had been apprenticed to Samuel Ramson, a clothier and fellow-member of the Congregational church, whose daughter, Sarah, he subsequently married. Thomas and Sarah Whitty then built a house in the garden of Samuel Ramson's house, which he leased from the Petre estate, and which fronted onto South Street. Their son, Thomas, bought both houses from the Petre estate in 1793. This information comes from Chapter 16 of 'House Histories for Beginners'²¹.

²⁰ Anyone looking at the Law Chambers from the street will easily be able to distinguish between the original house frontage, symmetrically arranged around the front door, and the later extension to the left.

²¹ Source: 'House Histories for Beginners' by Colin & O-lan Style (Phillimore & Co, 2006). Chapter 16 provides a fascinating and detailed case study, covering Thomas Whitty's house, now the Axminster Law Chambers.