



Ropemaking in Ipswich

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The Rope Maker

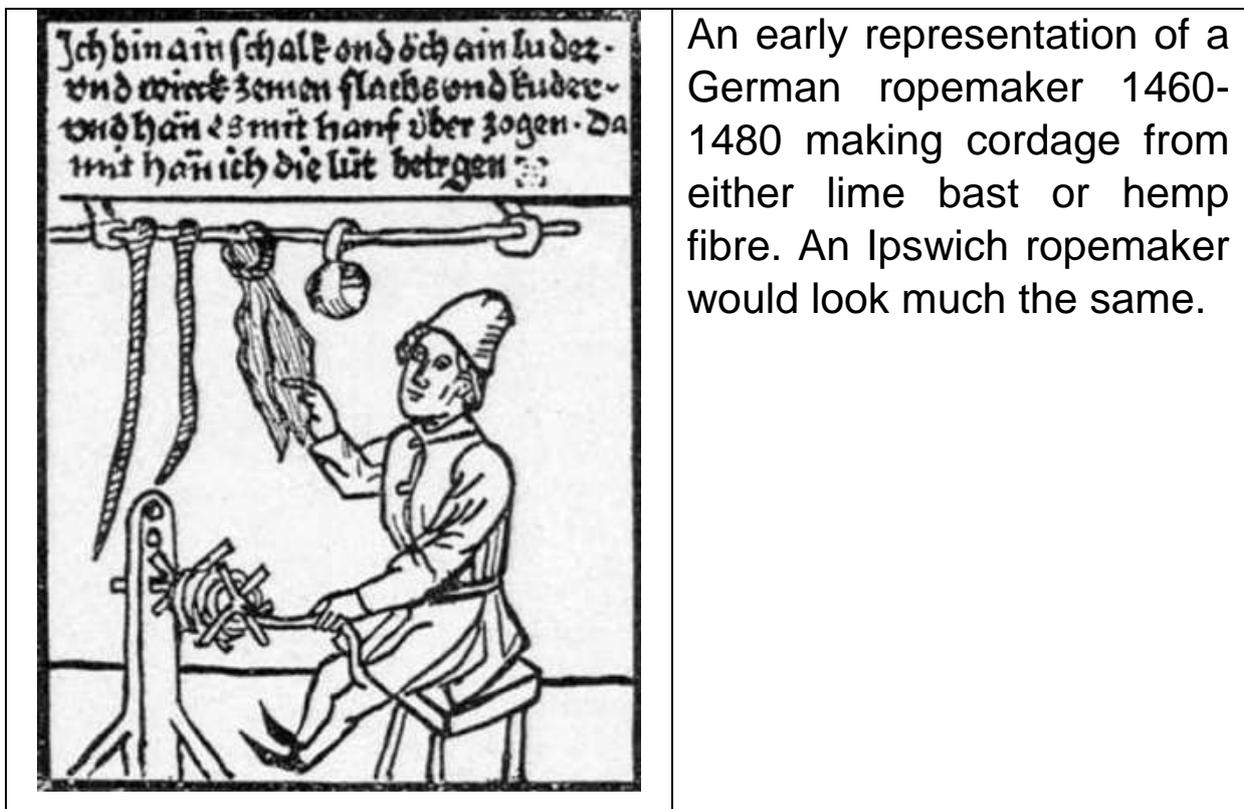
Rope is an essential requirement, both on land and water. Cordage in all its forms has been made for thousands of years, indeed it can be considered to be one of the building blocks of civilization. There is no doubt that even the earliest inhabitants of Ipswich would have had the need for, and the ability to make, some form of cordage.

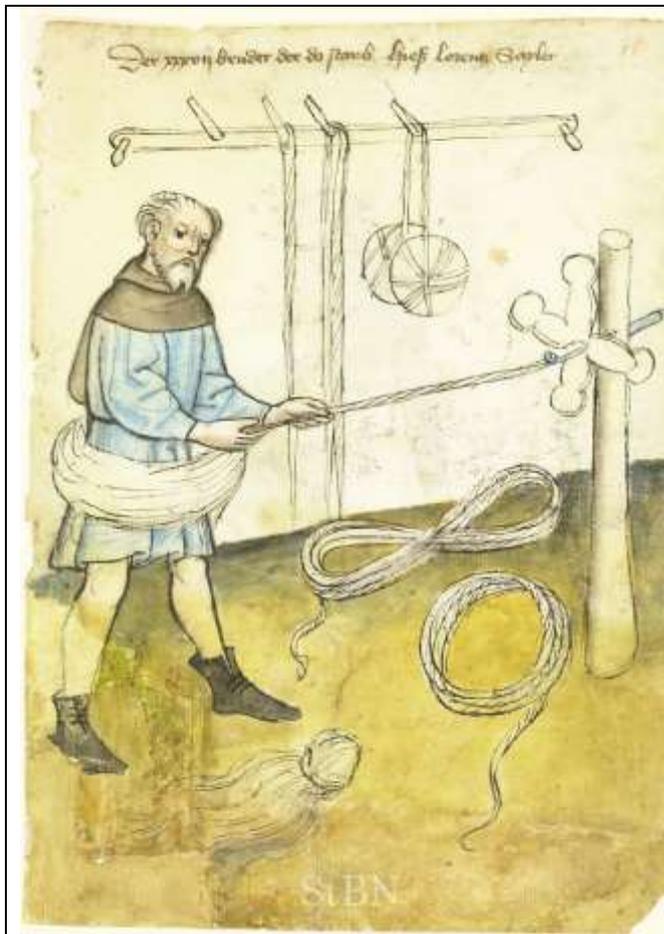
Perhaps the earliest hard evidence that indicates possible rope-making came to light with the excavations at Bridge Street and the 1981/82 detailed examination of micro fossils preserved in the water-logged deposits in the 12th and 13th century levels. These revealed an abundance of hemp fruits,

showing evidence of the process of retting at this time. This may have been for fabric production, but could certainly have been for rope-making. Whilst hemp was by then just becoming the main source of fibre for rope-making, the inner part of the bark of the Small Leaf Lime Tree (*Tilia Cordata*) is also likely to have been used. There is a very ancient coppiced small leaf lime tree in Spring Wood, which could be evidence of use of lime bast for cordage. Hemp was grown in East Anglia and processed right up until the early 19th century².

For hundreds of years Ipswich ropemakers would have supplied the needs of ships, industry and agriculture. Ropemakers were frequently associated with sail-making and sack-making, sometimes carrying out both of these trades.

The very first actual ropemaker that we can identify lived in Ipswich circa 1464. He was **Piers or Peter the ropemaker** who provided ropes for outfitting the ship *Barbara* in Ipswich prior to a trip to Bordeaux. The household books of Sir John Howard [of Tendering Hall, Stoke by Nayland] quote rope being supplied by **Piers Roper** of Ipswich and **Peter Roper** of Ipswich, probably the same person, but certainly Ipswich ropemakers.



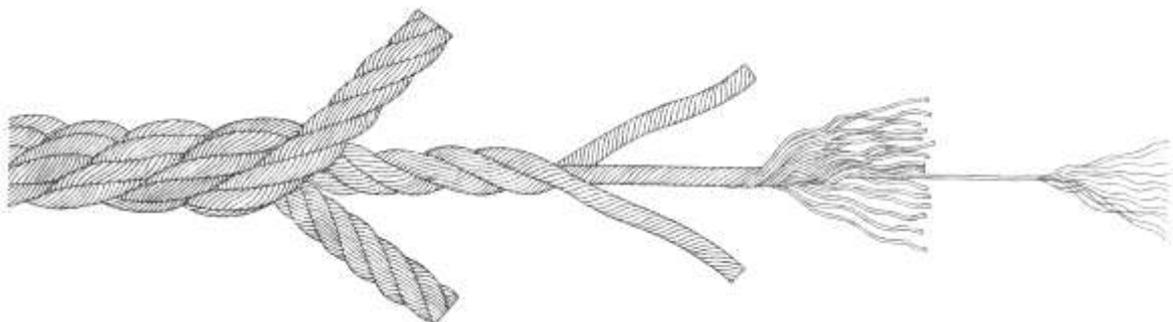


Spinning fibre into yarn



Twisting yarns into rope

A ropewalk is the long narrow place where the ropemaker spins fibre into yarns and makes his ropes by walking back and forth twisting the yarns into strands and then strands into rope and ropes into cable.

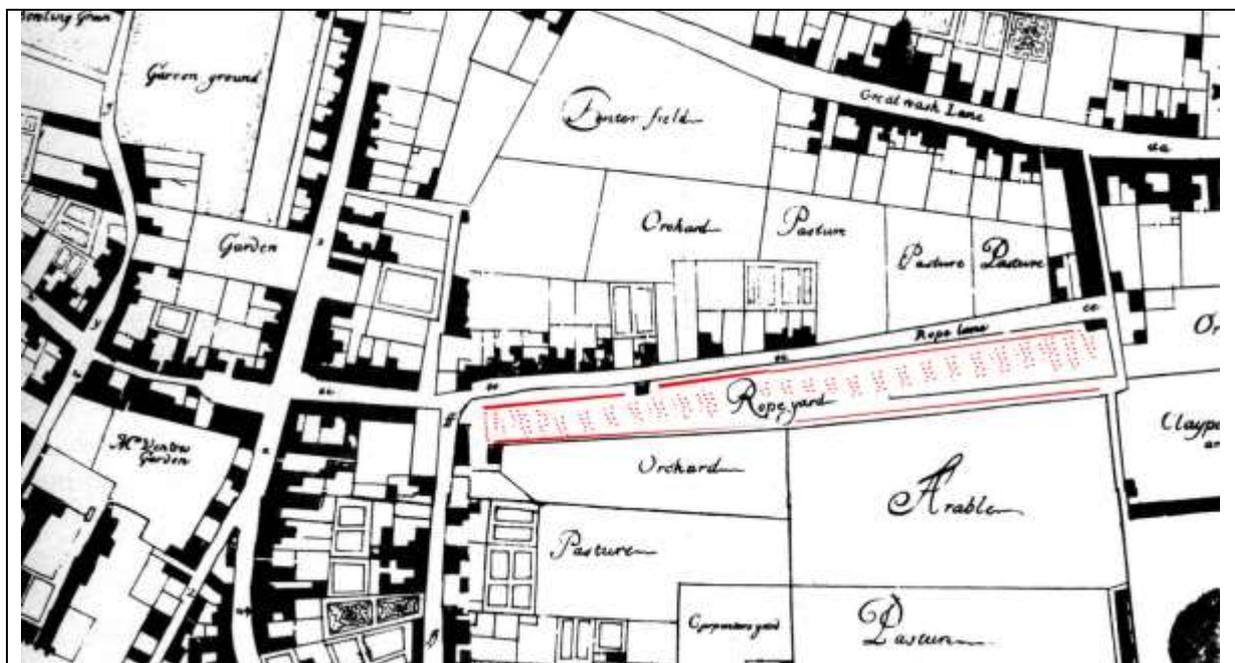


Over the centuries there have been at least 7 ropewalks in various parts of Ipswich.



The various sites in Ipswich where rope was made between 1625-1891 ▣

Everyone in Ipswich is aware of there once being a ropewalk where the road bearing that name is today. In actual fact today's "Ropewalk" follows the path of what was originally "Ropers Lane", The walk was actually parallel, but to the river side, of Ropers Lane, as is clearly seen in Ogilby's Town Map of 1674. It was the biggest and oldest ropewalk in Ipswich and was operating from 1625 –1798, with a small part still being used until 1818. At its peak it was about 300 yards long.



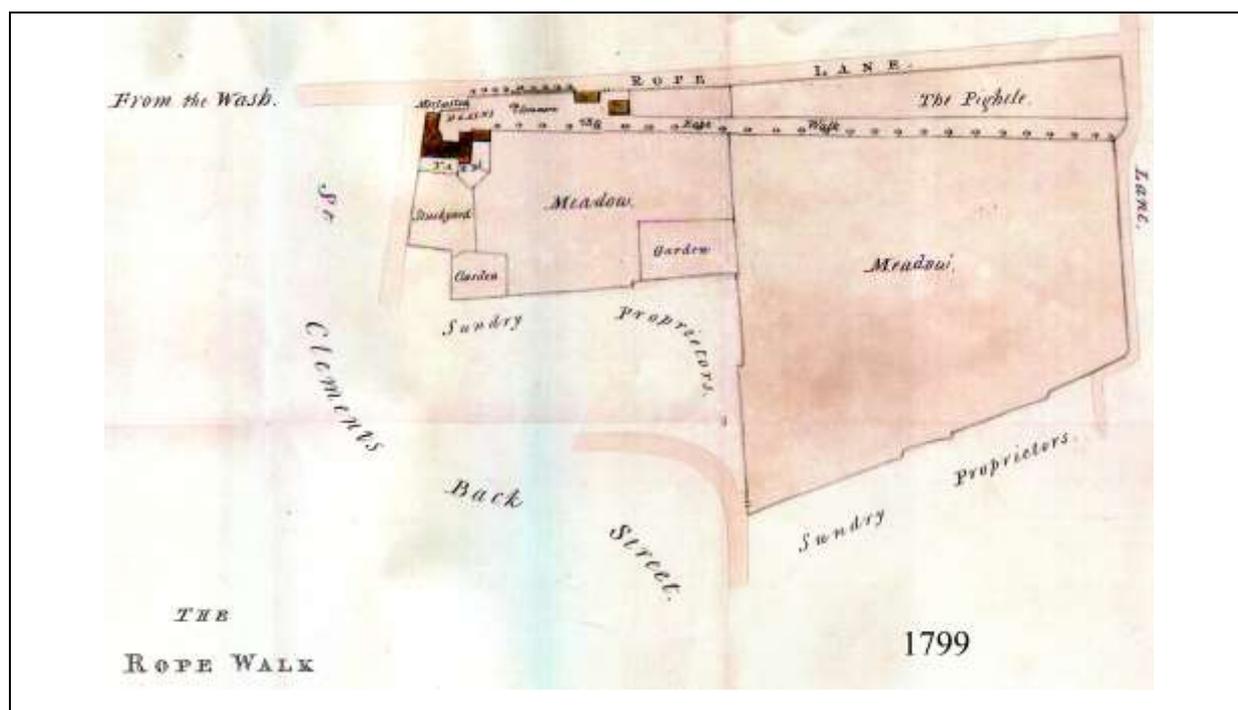
Ogilby's Town Map of 1674 with the Ropeyard parallel to Ropers Lane

In 1625 **Thomas Gallant** was given the use of 'Ropers Lane' for rope-making at an annual rent of 10 shillings³ It is possible that the land was already being used for rope-making. Over the years a number of men can be associated with this ropewalk.

The last ropemaker to occupy the whole of the site was **Robert Turner**, who was there in the decade 1788-1798.⁴ It was Turner's death that seems to have prompted the owners of the site, **John Forsett**, a plumber and ropemaker, who had his premises on Fore Street, and **William Smart**, ropemaker, of Key Street, to sell off parts of the site. In July 1799 Forsett and Smart had a survey drawn up by the famous Suffolk Surveyor Isaac Johnson, which shows the walk itself between a long avenue of sycamore trees, with workshops, yarn house, stackyard and tar shed depicted; a site of over seven acres, which included meadows and gardens.⁵

Shortly after that, in March 1800, there was a fire that destroyed the Thread House, probably where the yarn was tarred, as the belief was that the fire started when a lighted stick fell into a copper of boiling tar⁶.

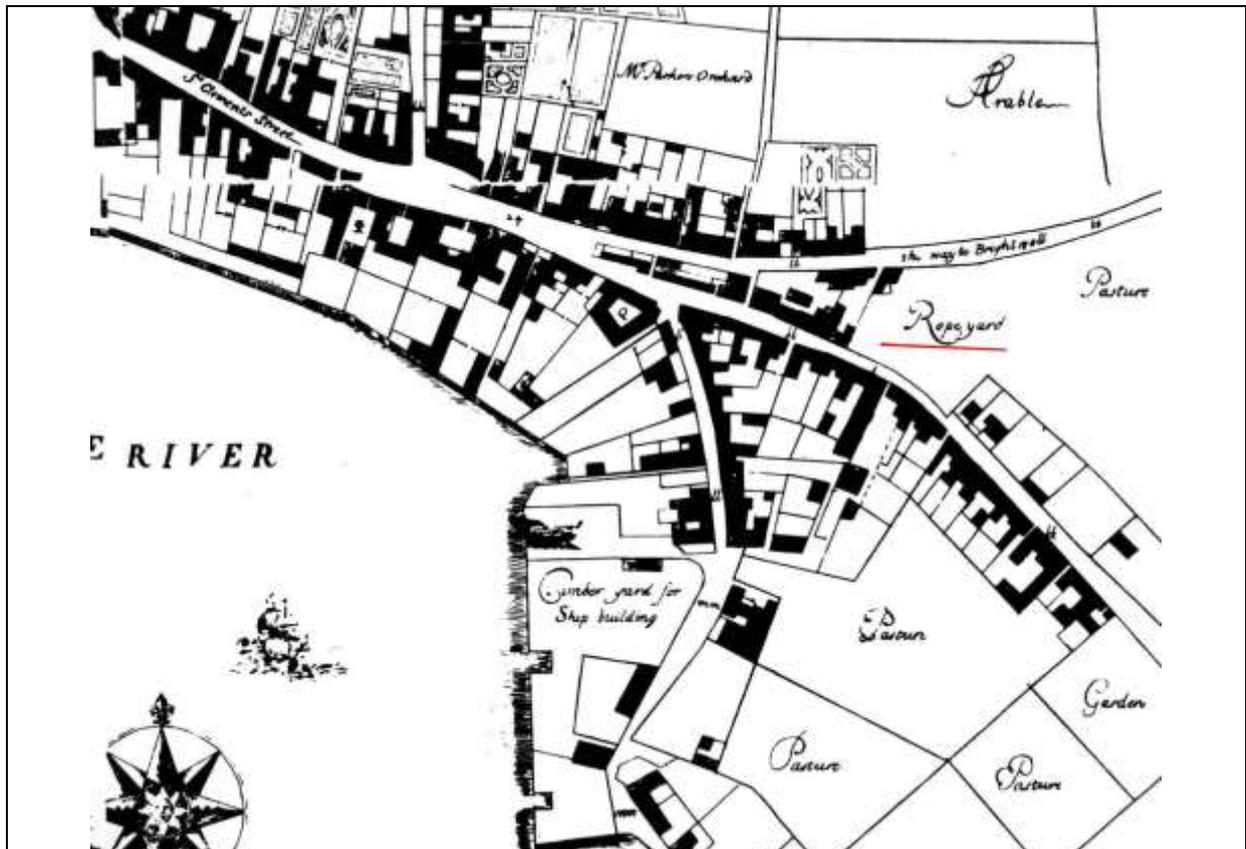
When **John Forsett** died in 1818, his will suggests that the western end, where the sheds and stackyard were, was still being used for rope-making, probably by **Jonathan Cook**, who occupied the *Cow and Pail* inn opposite, on the north side of Rope Lane and who, with **Samuel Cook** his son?, born about 1796, took **Henry Clemence**, a poor child of St. Mary Key, Ipswich, to be an apprentice in May 1826⁷. He appears in the 1841 Census as rope spinner, but in 1851 he was a coal porter living with his sister. On the 11th of September 1830, **Samuel** took **Eliza Clark**, aged at least 13, maintained in the Poor House at Tattingstone and settled in Burstall, to be bound apprentice⁸. **Samuel** is listed as a ropemaker in 1841 and 1851, but by the 1861 census **Samuel** was a pauper living in Ipswich District Union Workhouse.



Survey by Isaac Johnson, 1799

In the 1830 Directory, although there are five ropemakers listed in the parish in Pigot's Directory, none of them had addresses on Rope Lane. John Schullen the potter had taken over the *Cow and Pail* inn from **Jonathan Cook**. Ropemaking had probably ceased on the site⁹.

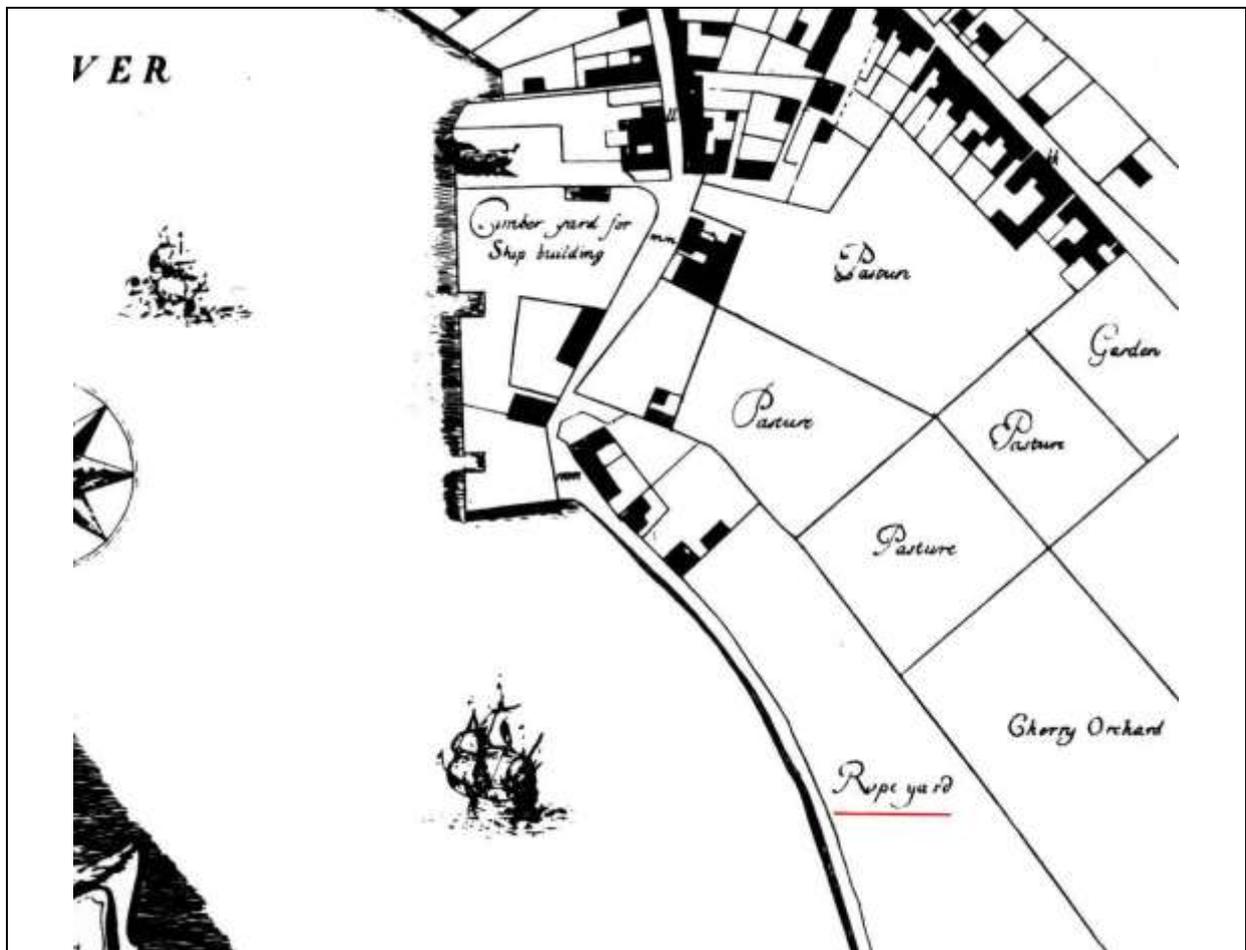
Ogilby's 1674 map also shows a further 2 ropeyards [another name for a ropewalk], one at the bottom of Bishops Hill and another down-river, near to where the Brewery was. This walk was still in use in 1805.



Ogilby's 1674 showing a ropewalk at the bottom of Bishops Hill



A watercolour in the Ipswich Museum Collection, with the title of *Ropewalk St Clements* by George Frost (1744-1821), sadly shows no sign of the walk or equipment, but the ship being built in the background suggests that it is the site of the ropewalk at the bottom of Bishops Hill.



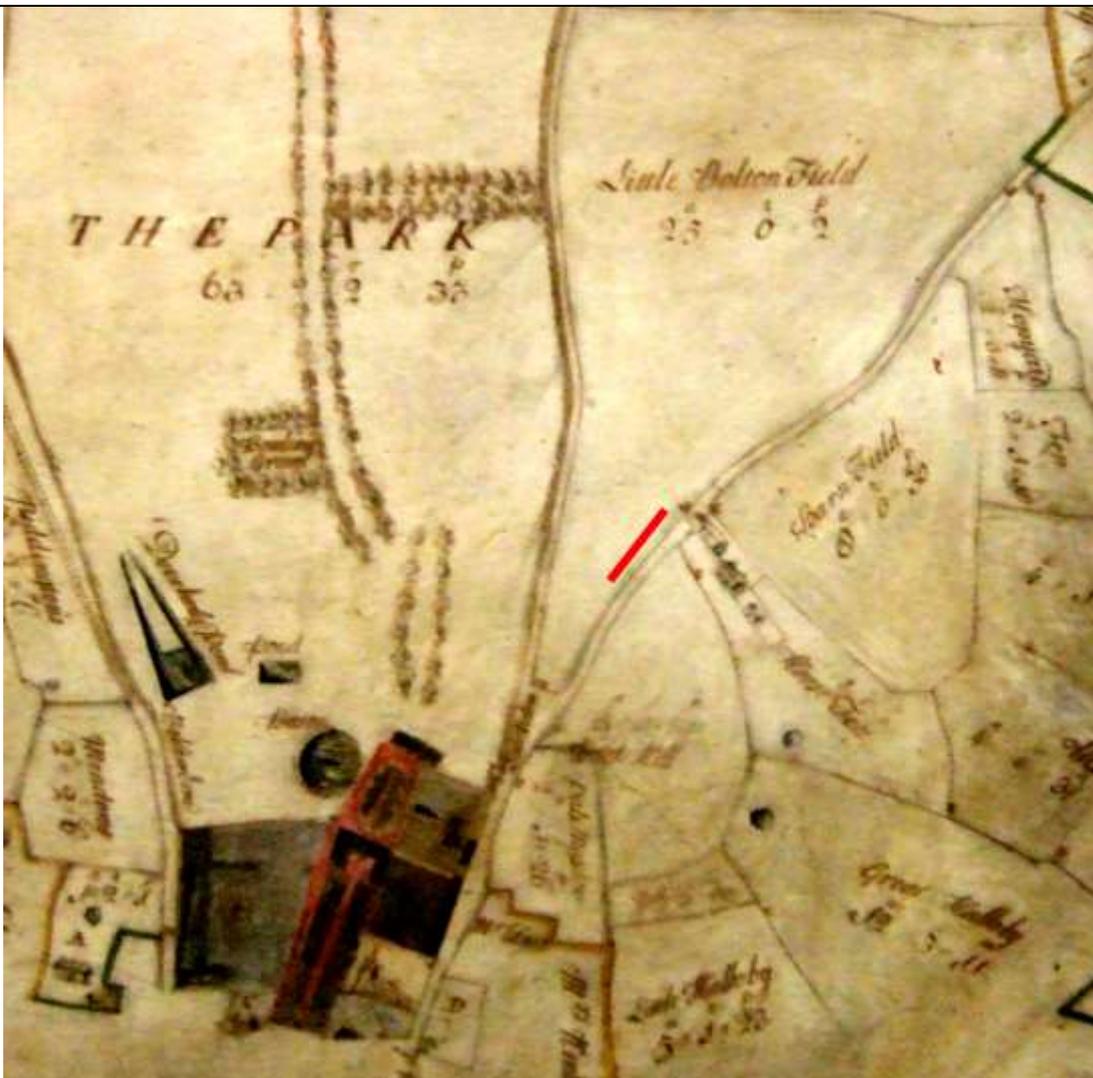
Ogilby's 1674 map, showing a ropery further down-river, near to the site of the Brewery.



This photo of a Dutch ropewalk from 1937 could perhaps be the sort of thing to have been seen there.

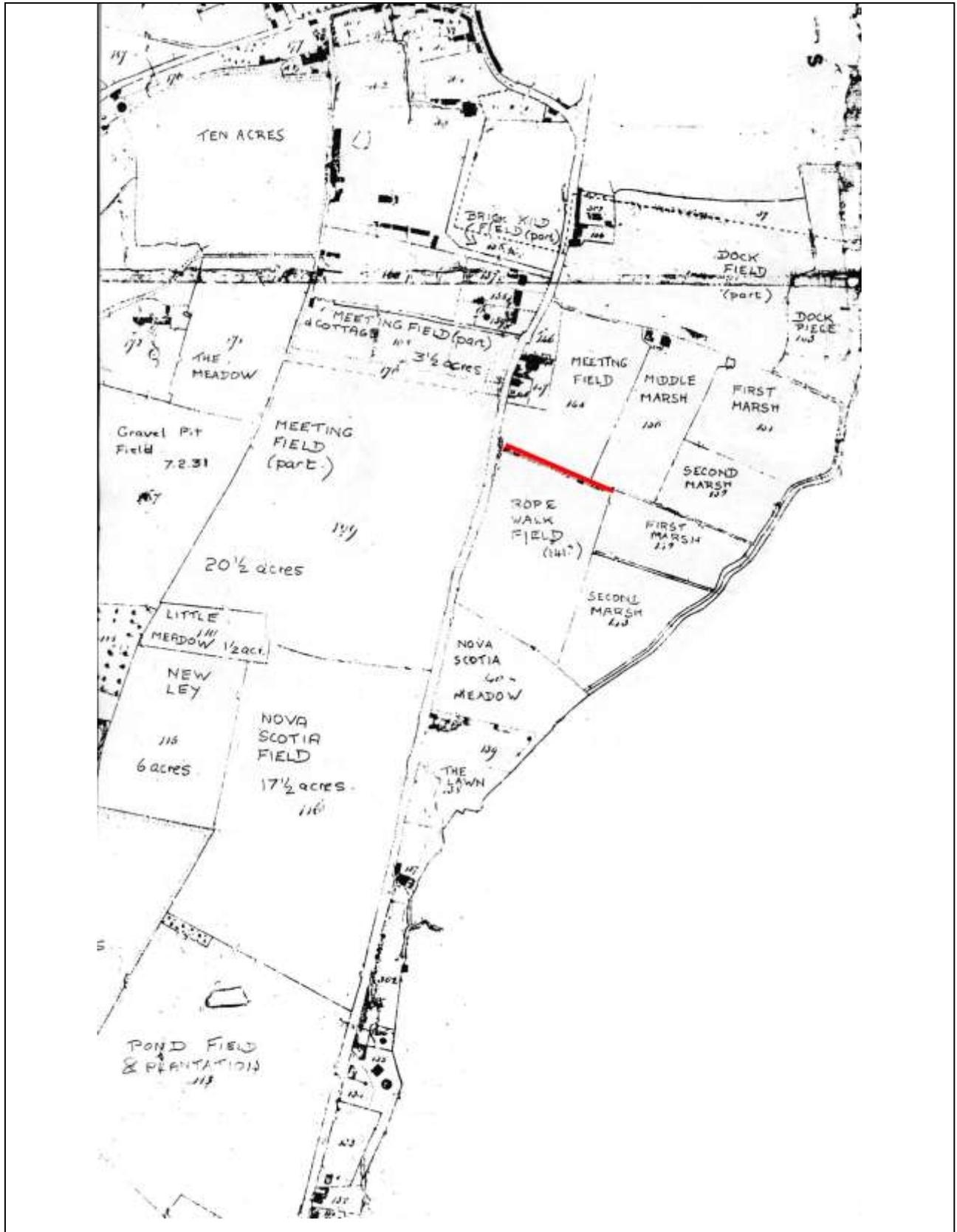
After the Ropers Lane walk closed down and was built on, there was still the need for rope in the town. Whites Directory for Suffolk 1844¹⁰ lists 5 ropemakers:-**Rands Edmund**, Bridge Street, **Rands Emanuel**, Fore Street, **Rands Nathaniel** , Quay Street, **Runting James** , Buttermarket [also sack-maker], **Woods, James** , Norwich Road.

Where they made their rope may not have been where their places of business are recorded in the directories. This is clearly demonstrated by Emanuel Rands, whose directory listing has him at Fore Street, yet in October 1847 he had a watch taken from his Rope Manufactory in Little Bolton, possibly in or about Little Bolton Field, which was somewhere near what is now Bolton Lane or Tuddenham Road ¹¹.



Probable site of Nathaniel Rands Rope Manufactory,
Little Bolton.

The Tithe Map of St Mary Stoke from 1839 shows that Nathaniel Rand had a ropewalk at right angles to the Wherstead Road, although his place of business in the Directories is given as Quay Street.



Nathaniel Rand's Ropewalk off Wherstead Road

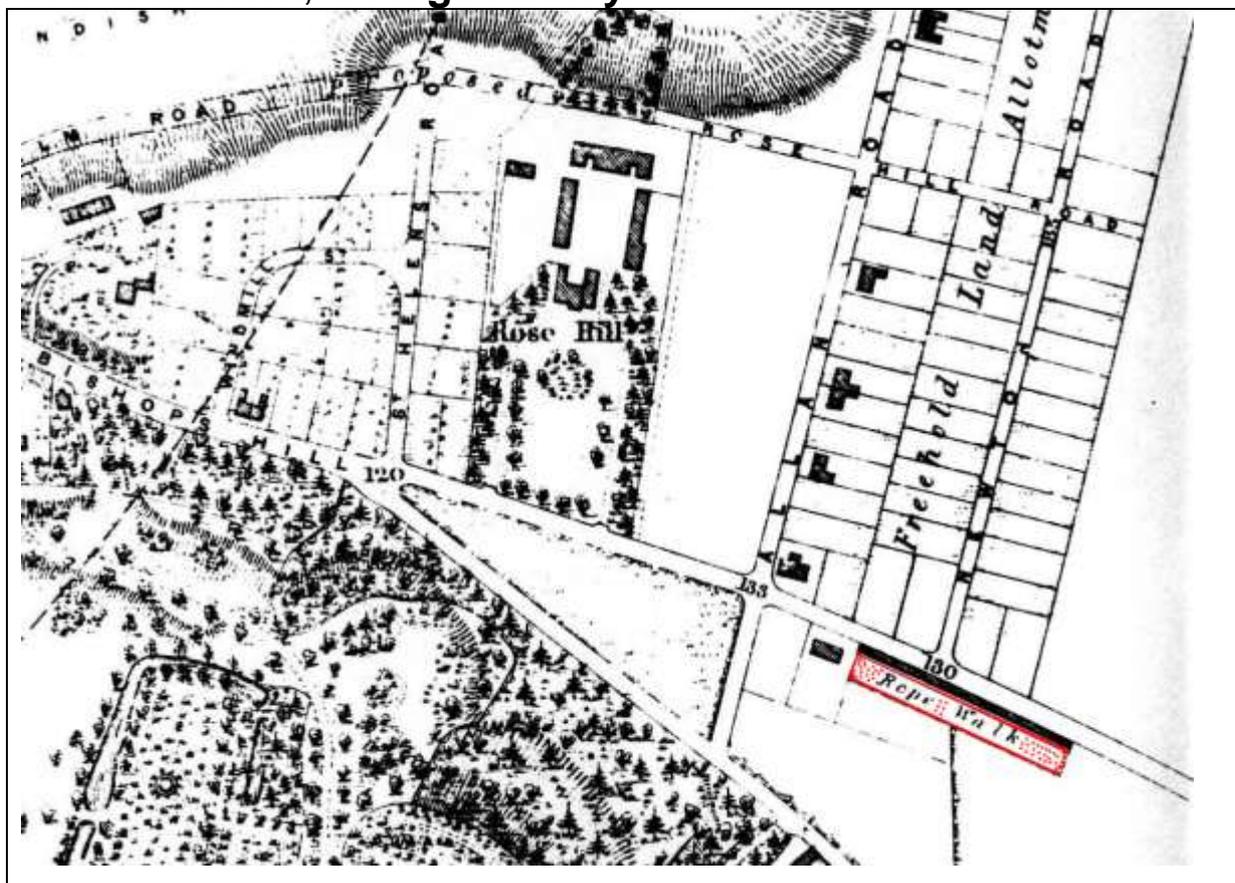
The Rands Family was a many stranded family of ropemakers, many of the family having the Christian name **Emanuel**¹². The first Ropemaker surfaces in 1769, the son of an Emanuel, a bricklayer. As the years go by, there are many more Emanuels, sometimes with two in the same generation and almost the same age, but from differing branches of the family. This makes it very hard to work out exactly who is who and may explain, for example, an 1844 Trade Directory entry, giving as ropemakers **Emanuel Rands** and **Edmund Rands**, when there is no trace of an Edmund in the census, just lots of Emanuels. Later generations made sack and cloth manufacturing their trade.

There appear to be inter-family disputes after the death of Emanuel Snr. in November 1863, as can be seen by court cases and various adverts in the Ipswich Journal in 1864, with various branches of the family setting up in competition with one another. These businesses do not last that long and we find that **Josiah Rands**, son of the late Emanuel, appears to manage to run a business for a while before joining up with **George Jeckell** in 1869, to form **J Rands & Jeckell**. There continued to be Rands involved in the sacks, covers, rickcloth and later tents businesses, and **J Rands & Jeckell** traded right up until the 1980s.

The pattern of Ropewalks moving out to the edge of a town as the town expands is repeated countrywide.

Where the other 1844 ropemakers made their rope, or perhaps bought in rope for sale, cannot be confirmed. However, operating from at least 1867, maybe earlier, until 1890, there was a ropewalk on Felixstowe Road, just past the end of Alan Road, on the right hand side going out of town. From the Ordnance Survey map of 1882, it can be seen that the Walk was about 500 feet long by 15 feet wide.

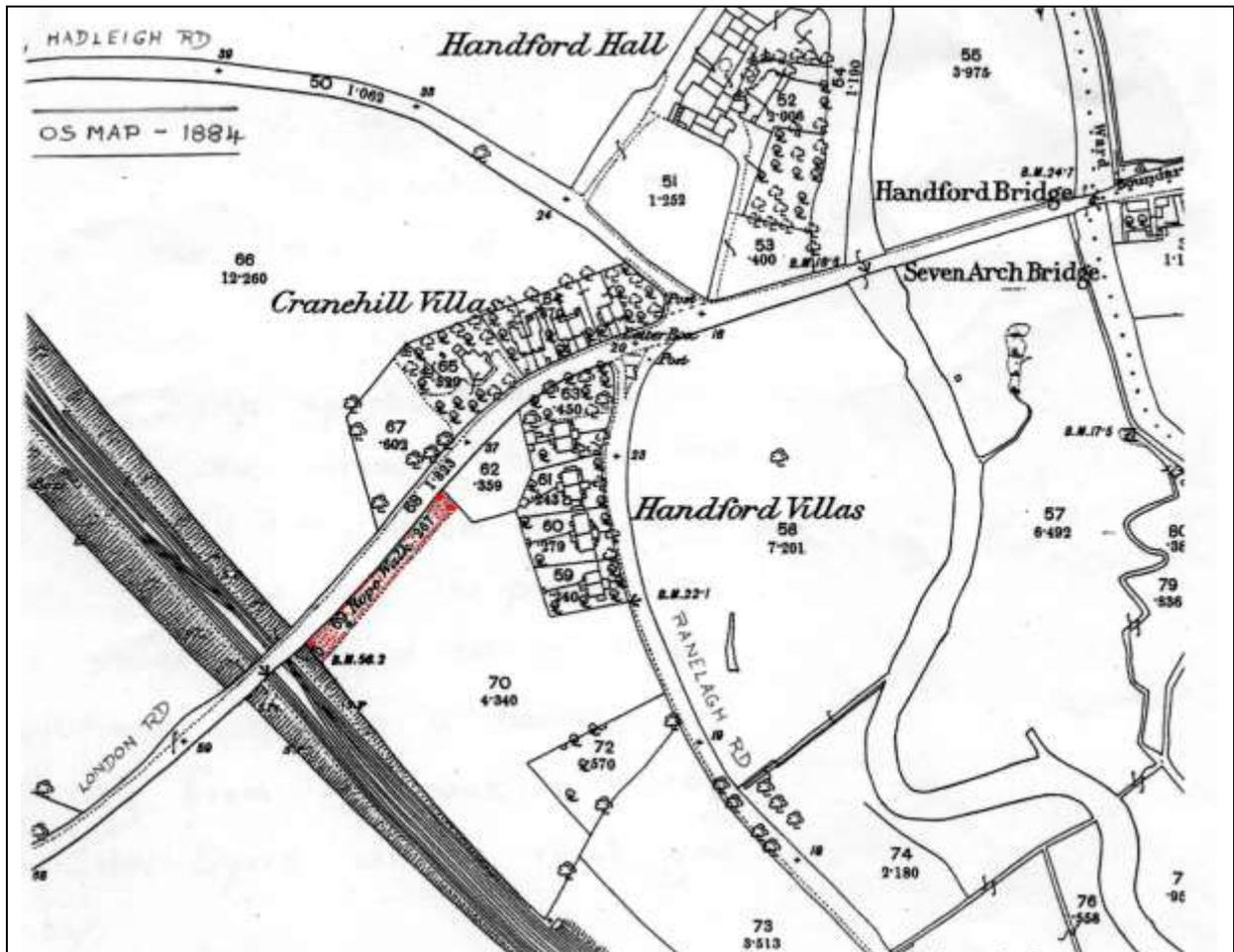
It was firstly worked by **Walter Cuckow**, part of the Cuckow sailmakers and ship-owning family. The 1871 census has **Walter Cuckow**, age 38, unmarried, sailmaker and ropemaker employing 6 men and 3 boys. The Walk was later taken over by one of his men, **George Finney**.



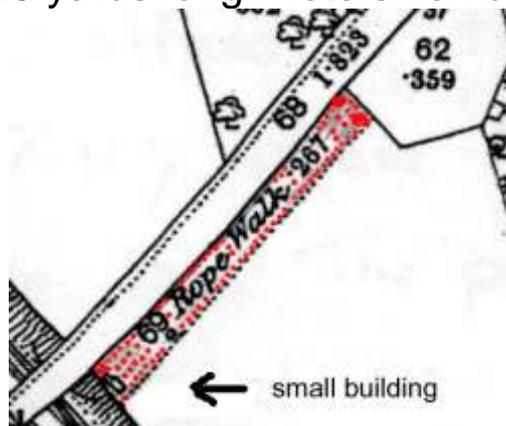
Whites plan of Ipswich 1867

George Finney [or **Finny**] was the illegitimate son of Elizabeth Finney, christened in St Lawrence, Ipswich in 1824. For the 1851 census, George is living at 90 Handford Road with his mother, a pauper, and is a ropemaker, perhaps another poor boy who was apprenticed ropemaker in the same way as **Henry Clemence** and **Eliza Clark** were to the **Cook** Family. In 1861 he was living with his brother. In 1871 he was living at the ropewalk in Felixstowe Road, that belonged to Walter Cuckow, and by 1890 he was trading at the same place in his own name. He died there 17th of June 1894, aged 69.

About the same time from the ordnance survey map of 1884 there was another ropewalk at the bottom of Crane Hill. The Walk is about 110-120 yards long.



Ropewalk, Crane Hill, London Road.
 From the Ordnance Survey map of 1884. The Walk is about 110-120 yards long. Note small building one end.



The Walk had disappeared by 1904.

Who actually worked this Walk is not certain. However, apart from Cuckow with his walk on Felixstowe road, there were just two other Rope and Twine Makers who were listed in the Stevens Ipswich Directory of 1885:- **G.W Holmes** of Curriers

Lane and **Charles Taylor** of Dogs Head Street. Probably one of them was using this walk. Perhaps their actual ropemaker was Wm Rose, who was living at the time not far away in Handford Cut and gave his occupation as “Ropemaker”.

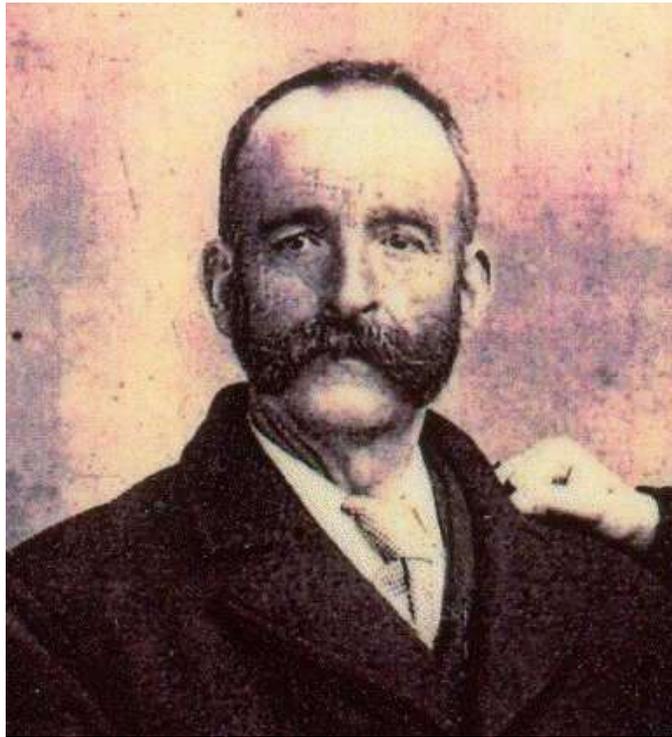
William Rose was born about 1822/3, and christened on 24th January 1823 in Woodbridge. Aged 28, in 1841, he is recorded as a twine spinner living in Woodbridge, so it is likely that he served an apprenticeship with one of the Woodbridge ropemakers. He moved to Hackney in East London and in 1851 is recorded as ropemaker, living in a street amongst other ropemakers, twine spinners and travelling salesmen in the rope business. By the 1861 census he had moved to 31 Handford Cut and lived there, calling himself a *Twine Spinner*, and later *Rope Spinner* or *Ropemaker* and is last listed in 1884. It is possible that he would have worked on the ropewalk on Crane Hill, either on his own account or, more likely, supplying some of the rope traders in Ipswich, as he is not listed as a ropemaker in the trade sections of the various trade directories.

Over the years there are, from the records, brief glimpses of the kind of people and the kind of life led by ropemakers. Some are more businessmen, rather than actually working on the ropewalk itself. Sadly, quite a few finished their lives in the workhouse.

Browne (possible **William**) was a ropemaker from Nacton, who moved to Wivenhoe Cross (the outskirts of Wivenhoe) and set up a ropery there in 1770,¹³ which was devastated by a boiler explosion in 1855. The family business was bankrupted in 1872¹⁴ when, interestingly enough, a **William Browne Jun.**, ropemaker, had moved back to Ipswich from where he was living in Wivenhoe.

John Downing, John Downing Jnr, Charles E Downing

John Downing, born about 1811, is listed in the 1841 census as a ropemaker. He had sons, **William** born about 1841, died 1869, **John Jnr.**, born about 1843, died 1875, who are listed as ropemakers in the 1861 census. Another son **Charles E Downing**, born 16th May 1852, died 1939, was apprenticed as a ropemaker when he was ten years old and he



continued for twelve years before travelling to Australia¹⁵ and returning to Ipswich. In 1871 he was living with **George W Holmes**, a rope-dealer, and was calling himself a rope-dealer. In 1881 he was again trading in Ipswich as ropemaker and fruiterer. Subsequently he moved to Framlingham where he traded as a rope manufacturer. He died in 1939 at Hitcham Almshouses, Framlingham.

John Downing Snr. cannot be found in the census of 1871; perhaps he too went to Australia, possibly with Charles, but John Snr. also returned to Ipswich, as he appears again as a ropemaker in the 1881 census. He died 24th June 1891, in Ipswich Workhouse.

James Woods, born about 1781 is listed as ropemaker in the 1841 census. He is not seen in 1851, but is entered as an almsman, formerly a twine spinner, aged 87, in the 1861 census.

George W Holmes, born about 1832, the son of a Saxtead miller, started life as a miller and then, by the 1871 census, was set up as a rope-dealer in Ipswich. He had young Charles E

Downing living in his house, designated a rope dealer. **George W Holmes** continued to trade as a ropemaker or manufacturer and died in 1900.

Charles Taylor, born in Stowmarket, about 1851, went to London, worked as a warehouseman and then came to Ipswich, where by 1881 he had set up as a sack manufacturer, but is also in trade directories as a ropemaker.

John Giles, Jeremiah Giles, Frederick Giles

John Giles, born about 1800 in Ipswich, was a ropemaker in Woodbridge in 1841 and died in 1863. He had a relation, **Jeremiah Giles**, who worked for **Emanuel Rands** around 1836 (when he was accused of stealing a watch from his ex-employer). John's son, **Frederick Giles**, born 24th February 1832 in Woodbridge, worked with, or for, his father in Woodbridge, but was in hospital in Ipswich in 1881 and subsequently, in 1891, became a labourer in a sack factory and, in 1901, a rope spinner's labourer.

To have a listing as a "rope and twine maker" did not automatically mean that they made their own rope, as they may have bought in some or all of their stock.

Whilst The 20th century saw more and more ropes being brought into Ipswich from the large industrial roperies in London and the north of England, there was a small walk at Hadleigh up until just before the 2nd World War and the last remaining ropemaker in Suffolk, The Haverhill Rope, Twine and Sack Company, ceased trading early in 1982.

¹ Research is a collaborative venture.

Thanks for help from: Francis Beaumont, John Blatchly, Willem Bosma, John Collins, Jill Freestone, Frank Grace, Stuart Grimwade, David Jones, David Kindred, Bob Malster, Liz Pawson, Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich.

² EVANS, Nesta: *The East Anglian Linen Industry*, Gower Publishing Company, Aldershot ,1985

³ [calender of patent rolls, 16 Elizabeth part xiv 375 quoted in *History of Ipswich* R Malster]

⁴ [SRO FB98/E3/5 St Clements Church wardens accounts 1788-98] as quoted in Frank Grace *Rags & Bones*

⁵ SRO HD 1208/1-3

⁶ Ipswich Journal 1800.03 15

⁷ SRO FB98/G3/61

⁸ SRO FB98/G3/90

⁹ The place of residency or business is not necessarily the place where the rope was made as is shown by Emanuel Rands and Nathaniel Rands having walks away from their place of business.

¹⁰ *Whites Directory for Suffolk* 1844

¹¹ Ipswich Journal October 23rd 1847

¹² It was often the practice for the first born son to be given the name of his grandfather , hence 2 boys of a similar generation with the same name

¹³ Harvey Benham; *Last Stronghold of Sail*, page 54

¹⁴ Ipswich Journal September 10th 1872

¹⁵ Information on Ancestry.com from a family member