

The Hemp or Tow Pits -Seaton Ross

The hemp pits in Seaton Ross were situated north of The Hollies, Chapel Lane and consisted of numerous pits – the remains of these pits can still be seen to this day and can be easily reached by an easy stroll and are surrounded by a most pleasant copse which can be walked around. The pits are not part of the Defra footpath and due respect must be observed to the landowner. The pits are clearly marked on the 1851 Ordnance Survey map for the area and the 1910 edition shows 19 pits.

Hemp was never a major field crop but in the early modern period it was grown in small crofts attached to cottages and farmhouses. As such, it provided a useful source of extra income for poor families. After harvest, women were employed in curing and spinning and the men in weaving hempen cloth and the manufacture of strong ropes. Surplus seed was fed to poultry. Evidence exists that Hemp was grown in villages as far back as the 16th century as mentioned in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Nights Dream* and Thomas Tusser's *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*.

The best rope-making material in the world is hemp. The rigging for Nelson's ships, and those of almost every other navy in the world, was made of hemp. It is very strong, long lasting and does not chafe that easily. Ropes are made by twisting hemp yarns together. Hemp has to be retted, or rotted in water, and then shived, that is stripped of all its short fibres. A spinster (not necessarily an unmarried lady) then ties great bunches of the fibre to his waist, catches the end on a turning hook, and walks backwards, paying out the fibre as he goes. The yarn produced is then hardened by twisting, sized by rubbing with a horsehair rubber and then laid or doubles back on itself.

In the eighteenth century, hemp (*cannabis sativa*) was the most favoured material for the making of paper. In fact the hemp plants were grown on a large scale for this purpose alone. Old worn out ropes made of hemp were eminently suitable for this purpose too. The British navy of the time must have been a plentiful supplier of old ropes.

Flax from which linen was made and hemp which produced a coarser cloth were grown as a regular crop. Although some of the work took place outside the house, women were responsible for the preparation of flax and hemp for spinning. First the ripe plants were harvested usually in September, then soaked to remove the outer casing, and dried. Finally the flax or hemp was "braked" or beaten to loosen and separate the fibre, combed, and spun into thread.

Water retting took several days and the process was highly obnoxious due to the rank smell and the poisoning of water. Henry VIII made a law that stated "No person shall water hemp of flax in any river...where beasts are used to be watered on pain of forfeiting, for every time so doing, 20 shillings."

The watering or retting of hemp was crucial as stated by Gervase Markham (1568 – 1637), in *The English Housewife*: -

"Now for the watering of the hemp or flax, the best water is the running stream, and the worst is the standing pit; yet because the hemp is a poisonous thing*, and infecteth the water, and destroyeth all kind of fish, it is more fit to employ such pits and ditches as are at least subject to annoyance, and so let it continue in the water four days and nights, then take and wash out every bundle, and rub it exceedingly clean; which done, load it up, and carry it home, and in some open piece of ground rear it upright either against hedges, or such like, where it may have the full strength or reflection of the sun, and, being thoroughly dried, then house it.

*Advice on soaking hemp written by Thomas Tusser in the 16th Century: -

"Now pluck up thy heme, and go beat out the seed,

and afterward water it as ye see need:

But not in the river where cattle should drinke,

For poisoning them and the people with stinke".

The growing of Hemp gradually declined during the 17th and 18th century and most governments now forbid us from growing it in case we smoke it – *Cannabis Sativa*!