

OLD TIME SALTWORKS IN SUFFOLK.

By E. R. COOPER, F.S.A.

Salt has always been a prime necessity of mankind and its value is illustrated by the many references to it in the Bible and ancient literature, but little however is to be found as to its manufacture in early days. We are told that the Cheshire Salt making was a flourishing trade in Saxon times and no doubt long before, and under the Romans the making of salt from sea-water in "Salinae" was almost general along our maritime frontiers and was continued by the Saxons in their "Salt pans," but it is not till Domesday that any proper record of their location is to be found.

This trade must have been carried on since very early days along the Suffolk Coast and it is proposed to glance at the records belonging to that area as representative of salt making in our maritime counties.

Falconer's Marine Dictionary says that salt from evaporated sea water was first made in a Portuguese Bay and thence received its trade name of Bay Salt; it is also said that the name derived from La Baye in Brittany where salt was made and shipped to England in early days—Sir H. N. Nicolas. But in East Anglia the word Bay means a division, or compartment, and I suggest that the name derives from the series of shallow basins, or bays, which were filled by the tide at highwater and evaporated by the sun.

Domesday Survey records 20 salinae, or salt pans, in Suffolk, all of course within the flow of the salt tides, which it may be said in passing are considered to have reached a higher level on the Suffolk shore in ancient days, before the outlying sands, from Cromer to Covehithe, were formed and the main strength of the flood tide diverted to the offing. There had been another Pan at Easton Bavents, near Southwold, but the Domesday surveyors said "not now" and this may have been due to Coast erosion which has been going on there for ages. Quite naturally the South Yarmouth district shews the greater proportion, due no doubt to the demand for fish curing; so we find 3 salt pans at Gorleston, 3 at Burgh Castle and one at Fritton; all served by the Yare and Waveney Rivers; later on there were salt pans at Cobham Island, Yarmouth and in 1689 Dean Davies in his Journal speaks of going over the Saltworks there.

When the manufacture of White Salt started is also in the clouds, but from very early times salt has been made by utilizing brine from springs, or melting rock salt, and evaporating the brine by artificial heat. The product was purer and a better colour than Bay Salt, it was therefore distinguished as White Salt and commanded a higher price.

Then arose the practice of melting rock salt in sea water, which seems to have been called "Salt upon Salt," and Nashe, who wrote *Lenten Stuff* in praise of red herring, in 1599, and being a native of Lowestoft he knew all about them, speaks of Salthouses to make Salt upon Salt. In the *Calendar of State Papers*, Eliz. 293, is a reference to a letter, dated 1st June, 1567, from Edward Goodinge to Sir Wm. Cecil, the Queen's Secretary, relating to two Salt Houses in Essex and Suffolk, which were in his charge; he speaks there of ovens and pans and reports about 300

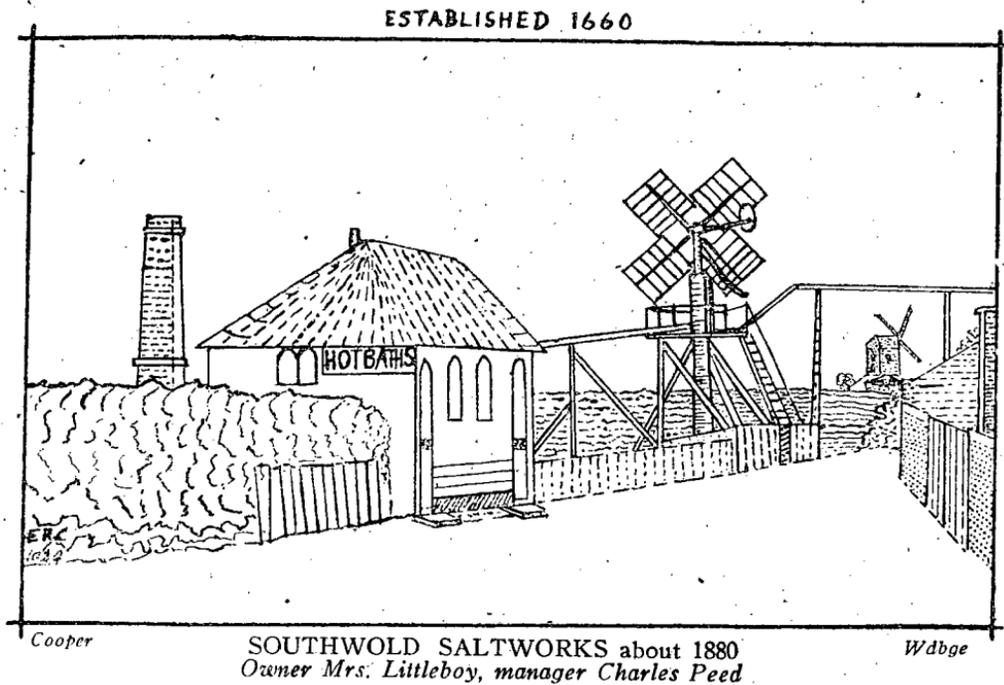


FIG. 1.

bushels made in the two houses and £63 expended to date. I think this Suffolk Salthouse was at Wherstead Strand, adjoining the Orwell River, just below Ipswich, where there was a Salina at Domesday. Edward Goodinge lived in the North Ward, Ipswich, but was, I think, a Wherstead man and on the 27th Aug., 1618, Robert Gooding, of Wherstead, "Salt finer," died and was buried in Wherstead Church, perhaps a son who succeeded his father.

In the Harleian Miscellany is "England's Way to Win Wealth &c.," 1614, written by Tobias Gentleman, a Southwold man then living in Yarmouth, and an expert on fishery matters. He also refers to making "Salt upon Salt" in Salt pans with salt from Mayo, or Spanish Salt, to make brine and coals to boil it, and in the "Trades Increase" also in the Harl. Miscell., 1615, it is stated that 200 Aldeburgh ships were employed taking coals to France and bringing back salt for the fisheries, no doubt from La Baye in Brittany, now Bourneuf Bay, south of the Loire estuary. Mayo is one of the Cape Verd Islands, belonging to Portugal, whence large quantities of Bay Salt were exported to England and Newfoundland; The Salina, or Saltpond, at Mayo lay between a sandbank and the shore, two miles long and half a mile wide. This was filled by the sea at Spring Tides and the salt formed and was raked off in between tides.

Dampier's Voyage, 1699, vol. 3, contains a most interesting account of this salt trade in which he says 100 English ships were engaged annually and a Man of War lay there to guard them. He also mentions in vol. 1 calling at the Island of Sall, in the Cape Verds, so called from the whole Island being full of large saltponds, but does not speak of any export trade. In recent times most of our imported salt has come from Cadiz.

Being of almost universal use it was perhaps natural that salt from early times has been the subject of taxation, said to have pressed most heavily upon the poor; the French Gabelle, or Salt Tax, was first levied in 1286 and lasted till 1790, when it was one of the first grievances washed out by the Revolution. In England Salt Duties were not imposed until 1702 and continued until 1825. From a small tax it ultimately rose to 15/- a bushel during the French Wars; one writer on the fisheries claims it was a mill stone round the neck of the trade and it contributed largely to the decease of the ancient Iceland Fishery voyage from Suffolk.

Thomas Gardner, who wrote the valuable history of Dunwich, Southwold, etc., in 1754, was Salt Officer at Southwold, equivalent to the Exciseman of today, but unfortunately he says very little about the trade, although the ancient Saltworks at Southwold were then in full swing. I believe these Works were the last to operate in Suffolk, and perhaps on the East Coast, and as I recollect them in going order a short description may be useful.

Whether Bay Salt was made there in the early fashion is unknown but in the Will of Wm. Godell, 1509, Southwold's great benefactor, he wills his houses at the Town's End with all the salt within them, which suggests that he may have carried on a Salthouse, perhaps on the site of the Late Works at the South end of the Town. The Trade Mark, incorporating the Town Arms, states that the business was established in 1660 and I

find that in 1765 a lease of the Works was granted to Joseph Baker, of Manchester, for 99 years at the modest rent of £11. Later on the place was the property of Robt. May for many years but in 1815 was sold to Edmund Preston, of Yarmouth. In 1848 Wilkinson and Littleboy, of Norwich, became owners and the last holders were F. W. Remnant's Executors. Latterly a coal trade and sea-water baths were carried on as well and I attended a meeting in 1892 with regard to forming a company to take the business over; Mr. Remnant stated they could make a profit on fine salt for table use but that for coarse salt they could not compete with the big firms. Nothing came of this and before long the Saltworks closed down, the plant and stock were sold and the buildings pulled down. The Winding up notice was in the London Gazette in 1894.

These works were situate at the head of Saltworks Creek, up which the tide flowed into a well over which stood a small windmill, with canvas sail cloths, like the little drainage mills, with open top pumps, once so common on the Suffolk marshes. The water flowed from the pump along open troughs over the road to the Works, and alongside to the bathhouse; Handgear was provided for use in calm weather. I went over the Works shortly before they closed and saw some very nice looking coarse salt just removed from the pans. Originally I believe the rocksalt came by sea from Runcorn and Liverpool, and in the Southwold Harbour Act of 1741 rock salt was assessed at 1/- per ton dues, which by the 1830 Act was increased to 1/4 per ton. When railways came the Cheshire salt was carried across to Hull and shipped from there to Southwold, but after the Southwold Railway started in 1879 the rocksalt came through by train.

In 1789 the Brig Gallant of Ipswich delivered 106 tons of salt at Southwold Harbour, the freight from Liverpool being 15/- per ton, but the accounts do not say if it was rocksalt, nor give name of consignee.

Another Suffolk Saltworks was formerly one of the chief manufactures at Woodbridge, according to Kirby (1764). Woodbridge in the Olden Time by Lockwood, 1889, states that these Works, and the Saltpond belonging, were situate behind the Common Quay, that as at Southwold Rocksalt was boiled in saltwater and evaporated by coal fires, that it was then ground and packed in conical baskets. He tells us that the repeal of the duty after the end of the Wars caused the decay of the trade, and I find from other sources that it was on its last legs in 1830, and was defunct by 1850. Just below the Lime Kiln Quay at Woodbridge is a good sized excavation in the saltings, now open to the river, which by tradition was once a Saltpan, and there must have been many of these Saltpans along the Suffolk Coast, at such places as Benacre, Walberswick, Dunwich, Minsmere, Aldeburgh and Bawdsey, all busy fishing ports in bygone days to which salt was a prime necessity.

Salt was formerly sold by the "Wey or Weigh" containing 40 water bushels of 5 pecks, 56 lbs. to the bushel, and the price in the 17th century was about 40/- the Wey. The Accounts of the Iceland Bark Jamys, of Dunwich, 1545, shew that she took 15½ Weys of salt at 36s. 8d. the Wey,

for the salting of the fish caught (The Dunwich Iceland Ships by E. R. Cooper, Mariners Mirror, April, 1939).

Some account of the Southwold Saltworks, with sketches, appeared in the Pall Mall Magazine for June 1893, and views of the old Salt pans and weighing room are to be seen in the English Illustrated Magazine for March, 1893. A Note on Salt pans in Suffolk was contributed by me to the Transactions of the Newcomen Society, Vol. xix, 1938-9.

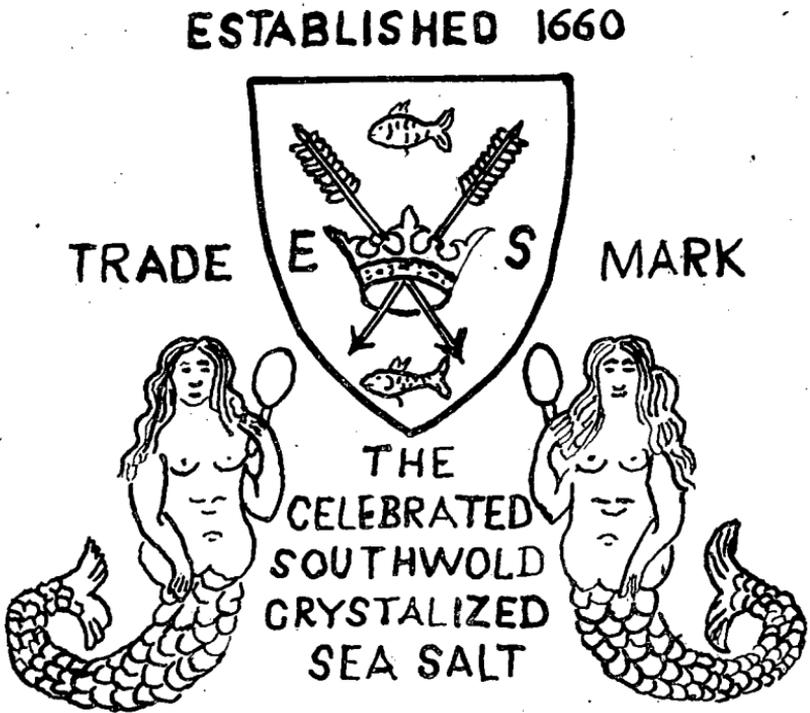


FIG. 2.