

STRAW PLAITERS OF TRING

My Wallis Ancestors

by Stephen Cooper

I can trace my Cooper ancestors back to the early 19th century, when my paternal gt-gt-gt-grandfather John Cooper was a haberdasher in Tring, in the county of Hertfordshire; but my concern here is with my other gt-gt-gt-grandfather, David Wallis, also originally from Tring. His daughter Ann Wallis married John Cooper's son, John Adkins Cooper (born in Tring in 1822) in Manchester Cathedral Parish Church on June 14 1848, when he was 26 and she was 25;¹ but although the couple married in Manchester, they must have grown up in the South.

The Census of 1851, reproduced below, shows Ann Cooper (aged 28), not in Manchester, but in Upper Dunsley just outside Tring, in the household of her parents. No doubt she was visiting them on the night the enumerators came round, perhaps to show off her two infant sons Walter and George to Granny and Grandad.² The other fact which springs out at us is that Ann's elder sister Elizabeth appears to have a child in 1851, a 'scholar' who was blind in one eye, though she was unmarried.

The main thing that strikes me about the Census, however, is the importance of straw-plaiting - something which I have hitherto associated only with corn-dollies. David Wallis (58) is described as a house painter; but his wife Elizabeth (57) and another unmarried daughter of the same name (30) are all three of them straw-plaiters. In addition, we know that the Census of 1841 had described all the women and girls in the Wallis household, including Ann herself (aged 18) as straw-plaiters. In fact, straw was big business in certain counties of England, in the mid-19th century.

¹ The new Mr & Mrs Cooper established a permanent relationship with Manchester. They lived at Cheetwood Lane, Cheetham (1851), 30 Chatsworth Street, Chorlton on Medlock (1861), 4 Rumford Place, Chorlton in Medlock (1871), 25 Frances Street (1881) and 5 Mount Street, Levenshulme (1891). Meanwhile, John climbed the Post Office ladder. He was described on his marriage certificate as a 'letter carrier'; and appears in the Censuses as letter carrier (1851), Post Office Clerk (1861) and 'sorter General Post Office' (1871), before being described in 1881 and again in 1891 as both widower and pensioner; but he died in 1895 so that he is absent from the Census taken that year. The move to Manchester therefore proved critical, not just in terms of geography but occupation and eventually class.

² My great-great-grandfather John features in the same Census in Cheetham, Manchester. He was 28, and his place of birth is given as Tring: household schedule no 55, piece 2232, folio 168, page 17.

THE CENSUS OF 1851³

[married?] [age/sex] [occupation] [place of birth]

1086	WALLIS	David	6	Upper Dunsley	Head	Mar	58	M	House Painter	Bucks., Hulcott
1087	WALLIS	Elizabeth	6		Wife	Mar	57	F	Straw Plaiter	Herts., Wigginton
1088	WALLIS	Elizabeth	6		Dau	Unm	30	F	Straw Plaiter	Herts., Tring
1089	WALLIS	William Frederick	6		Grandson		5	M	Scholar Blind in one eye	Tring
1090	COOPER	Ann	6		Dau	Mar	28	F		Tring
1091	COOPER	Walter John	6		Grandson		2			Lancashire, Manchester
1092	COOPER	George Stephen	6		Grandson		2m			Lancashire, Manchester

³ Taken from *Population, Economy and Family Structure in Hertfordshire in 1851*, the Berkhamstead region, pp 280-1.

A visit to Tring is well worthwhile. It is a small market town in a gap in the Chilterns, now designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The population in 1851 was 4,746 and even in 2013 it was only 11,730. In the main, the centre of the town is attractive and unspoilt, as my photographs show, though Tring has now become a commuter town for Greater London. There is no sign of the straw-plaiting and straw hat industry which once provided employment for thousands of women and girls, except that, on the day of my visit, there was an advert in a shop window for The Hat Club, which I presume is a nightclub, or dive, depending on one's own point of view. The parish church is very fine and full of tombs of grand people. No sign of Wallises or Coopers; and the Museum of Local History is only open on Fridays and Saturdays.

Tring's prosperity was greatly improved at the start of the 19th century by the construction nearby of the Grand Junction Canal and, in 1835, the building of the London and Birmingham Railway. The industries which benefitted included flour milling, brewing, silk weaving and lace-making, as well as straw plaiting. In the late 19th century the town became the home of the 2nd Lord Rothschild (1868–1937) who introduced the edible dormouse, built a private zoo there, and took to having himself driven around in a carriage drawn by zebras. The zoo became part of the Natural History Museum on his death.

Tring railway station is an extraordinarily long walk (about 2 miles) from the town centre. A local told me this was because objections were made to the idea of a nearer station by Lord Rothschild but Wikipedia tells me that the Rothschilds only acquired their estate in Tring in 1872 (though they did object to a much later plan to build a steam tramway between Tring Station and Aylesbury).

According to the relevant volume of the *Victoria County History* "Dunsley was mentioned in Domesday Book, but now (in 1908) forms part of the Tring Park estate and is called Upper Dunsley."⁴ Upper Dunsley, where the Wallises lived in 1851, was then a tiny hamlet. The earliest Ordnance Survey Map available (see below) shows that at that time the hamlet was little more than a row of cottages in the fields near Dunsley Farm, about a mile from the centre of Tring. I can testify that there is nothing left there now of the cottages where my ancestors lived in 1851. Upper Dunsley now consists of a modern estate given over to sheltered housing, possibly built around 1980. (There is also a Lower Dunsley, while Dunsley Farm now houses a brewery and café, as well as farm buildings).

It is difficult to take the story of the Wallises much further. They led obscure lives and do not feature in the local newspapers held in the British Newspaper Archive. However, it is possible to say something about the straw-plaiting industry. The *Victoria County History* tells us that, according to tradition, it was introduced into Britain by Mary Queen of Scots, who was patron of a colony of immigrants from Lorraine; and it was then brought South in the time of James VI and I (King of

⁴ See also British-history.co.uk

England between 1603 and 1625).⁵ More reliably, the industry is known to have been present in certain English counties in the late 17th century. In particular, in 1689 a number of villages joined Dunstable and Luton in protesting against proposed legislation to enforce the wearing of woollen hats, since 'near 1,000 families, containing 14,000 persons at the least' in the area depended on the straw hat trade.⁶

In the 18th century Arthur Young wrote that local farmers disliked straw-plaiting, because it made the poor 'saucy' (by providing them with wages not directly derived from agriculture), and the women averse to industry (by providing them with employment they could pursue at home). However, the importance of the industry is attested by the fact that a petition was presented to the House of Commons in 1719, on behalf of "the poor straw-hat-makers, in the counties of Hartford [sic], Bedford, Buckingham, etc.", protesting about the importation of straw plait from Holland and straw hats from Leghorn (Legnano in Italy). Imports continued to increase until higher customs duties were imposed on both plait and hats in the 1770s (when an increase in smuggling resulted).

In the 1790s, the outbreak of war with Revolutionary France, and the difficulty in importing goods from the Continent which resulted, gave the domestic industries a great boost.⁷ By the 1840s, there were about 7,000 people in the Luton area alone, who were employed in the manufacture of bonnets; and this was at a time when the population of Luton itself was only around 12,000. Evidence of the growth of the industry was given to a Select Committee of the House of Commons in April 1847, when this was considering Hertfordshire Railway Bills, and in particular a proposed extension of the Great Northern Railway via Hertford, Hatfield and St Alban's. A Mr Jacob Harrison of St Alban's said he employed 2,000 to 2,500 'hands' in the manufacture of straw plait there. From his point of view, the proposed 'Great Northern branch' would be a great boon, because his 'principal business intercourse' was with Essex.⁸

Sad to say (at least from the manufacturers' point of view) the new branch line was not opened until 1865. Sadder still, the whole straw plaiting industry came under pressure from the 1860s, as a result of free trade and cheap imports of plait from the Continent, and then from China and Japan; and by 1914 it was practically extinct.

As for conditions in the industry, there was a widespread view at the time that it was poorly paid and consisted largely of mindless drudgery. On the other hand, some women and children said they found it pleasant and profitable, since it provided many households with a second, and even a third source of income; and, for what it is worth, the local newspapers contain many reports of shows, where prizes were awarded for the best female plaiters, which may demonstrate a certain

⁵ VCH, Herts., vol 4 pp 252-6 (1914).

⁶ Grof, p 14.

⁷ Grof, p 21.

⁸ *The Hertford Mercury*, April 19 1847.

enthusiasm for the job. On the other hand, the modern mind is shocked by the fact that prizes were awarded for girls not exceeding 15 years of age, and for girls not exceeding the age of 10; and on one occasion it was noted that one prize-winner

was so exceedingly diminutive that it was necessary for one of the attendants to hold her up, in order that she might be seen by the chairman.⁹

A newspaper report from the 1840s has much to tell us. An apprentice straw-plaiter named Mary Dobson, of Welywn, was brought before the Petty Sessions in Hertford. It was said that she had been apprenticed for three years under James Marshall's charity for the parishes of Wheathamstead and Harpenden, but had absconded, without warning (for the second time). She had been asked to return, but said that 'she would lie in gaol and rot before she did.'

The apprentice said that she had been very ill-treated, both by Mr and Mrs Dobson; that on the day she left, her mistress scolded her, called her idle, and said she should not stop in the house.... A next door neighbour said that the girl was idle, and as soon as her mistress went out would come out of doors and play with her children.

She called Charles, who for a time had been a fellow apprentice... The boy said that the girl had to work in one room from six o'clock in the morning till nine at night, except at her meals; and that her master and mistress went out and came home, he often very tipsy, and she sometimes no better.

Mr Dobson, in answer to the bench, said the usual hours of work were from six in the morning till nine at night; but she was not at it the whole time; she was sometimes sent on errands.¹⁰

In *Children of Straw, The Story of a Vanished Craft and Industry in Bucks., Herts, Beds and Essex*,¹¹ Laszlo L. Grof, a Hungarian who came to this country in 1956, provided an excellent study of the straw-plaiting industry in the village of Edlesborough in Buckinghamshire. Several of the photographs reproduced below are taken from his book; and I will summarise his findings, which were all based on original research. There is no reason to think that a study of Tring or Upper Dunsley would produce a very different picture.

The 19th century brought a number of fundamental changes to rural England, rapid population growth and changes in land ownership,

⁹ *Hertford Mercury and Reformer*, Saturday 7 October 1843.

¹⁰ *The Hertford and Bedford Reformer*, Saturday 14 November 1840.

¹¹ Barracuda Books Ltd., 1988.

coupled with much altered farming practices, made life acutely difficult for many families... Some were literally clutching at straws just to survive, and straw provided a number of alternative employments.... Women and children, and some men too, earned a few more pence by plaiting straw, not as corn dollies, but long plaits to be sewn into straw hats... The Census of 1841 lists 9,800 male and female straw plaiters in England and Wales, 84% concentrated in Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Essex and Buckinghamshire...¹²

In 1842 the Children's Employment Commission, after visiting 'a very great number of straw-plait schools, found that they were usually held 'in small cottages... in room of about 10 or 12 feet square'. The number of children varied between two and thirty, and from four to fifteen years. In one room, only seven feet square, they saw eighteen children plaiting.' 'There is rarely any attempt at education.'

In 1842 Parliament heard that 'the moral condition of the lacemakers seems nearly as low as that of the plaiters... chastity is at a low discount... prostitution is at a high premium.'

'They prefer plaiting, even now when the trade is low, to the restraints of service.'

All faults and failings were attributed to straw plait, which became a convenient scapegoat, the cause of all ills.

On the other hand, the Vicar of Abbots Langley held that straw-plaiting

1 Was not an unmixed evil – rather a mixed blessing.

2 For the most part, provided a much needed income.

3 Did not have an adverse effect on morality.

4 Was not any more injurious to health than many other employments.

5 Did provide the aged and widowed with an opportunity not to become entirely reliant and a burden on the parish.

¹² Hertfordshire had 4,415 female straw plaiters in 1841, 8,753 in 1851.

ILLUSTRATIONS



**Ordnance Survey Historical Map of Upper Dunsley 1878-1888,
showing rows of cottages similar to Tasker's Row, below
(www.cassinimaps.com, supplied by Stanfords, Covent Garden)**



**Tring High Street in the 19th century
(Wikipedia)**



**Tring High Street in 2016
(author's collection)**



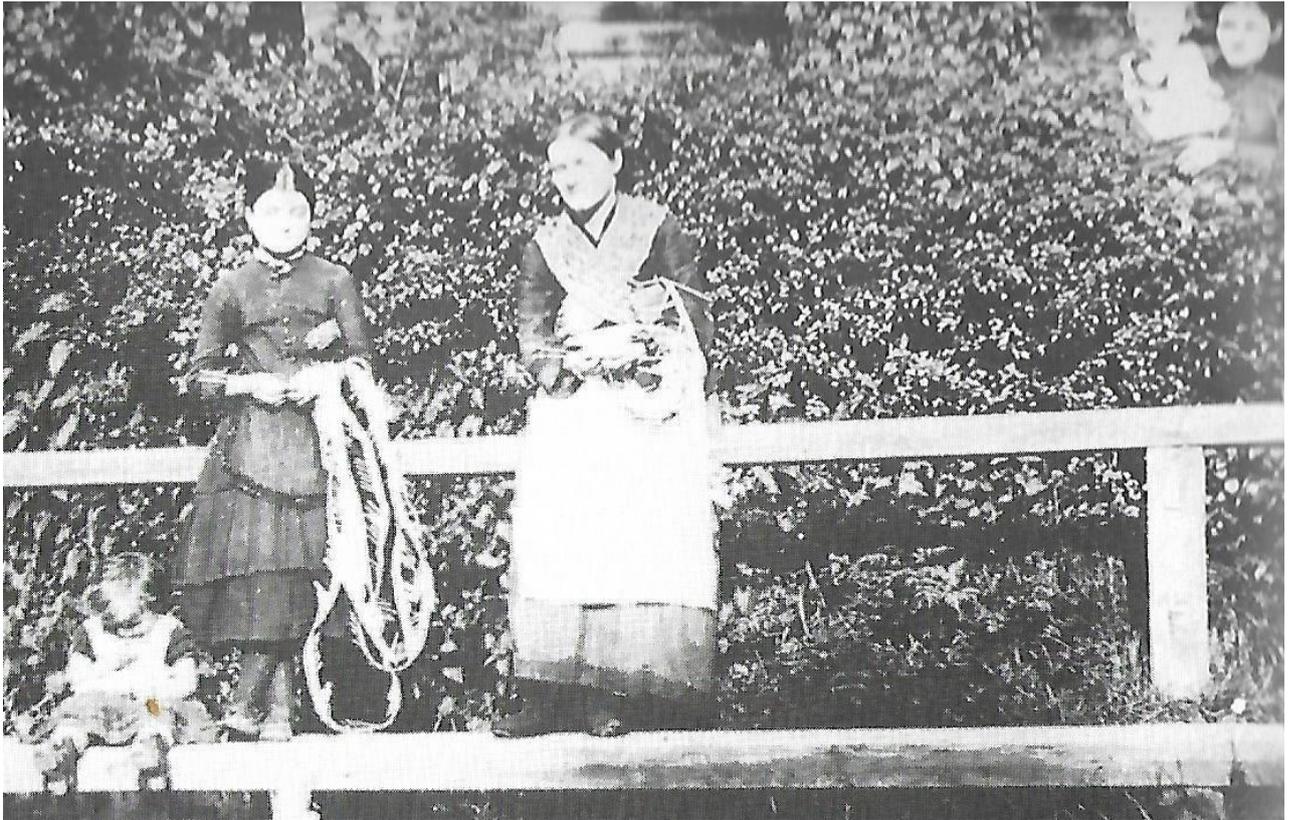
**Tring parish church, 2016
(author's collection)**



Plaiting straw and sewing bonnets, C.A.Smith, R.I., RBA., 1891
(from GLaszlo L. Grof)



**Tasker's Row, Edlesborough, early 19th
(Grof)**



**Three generations of straw-plaiters, at Charlton Pond, Herts.
(Grof)**