

A mill owner's sad and untimely end

Stephen Mills March 2022

Over the past few decades, I've explored and reported on the background and various developments associated with Eastington's woollen cloth mills. Throughout much of its history, the local cloth trade was centred on five mills in and around the village, and for most of this time, it was largely under the control of only two families, the Hicks and later, Hoopers. Of the latter, Charles Hooper was main driving force behind the success of cloth making in his five mills scattered along the lower Frome. He has long been regarded as an astute and successful businessman, one who developed and promoted Eastington-made cloth across the country, and even overseas. But by the late 1860s, all was not well on a personal front - but we'll come to that in a moment.

Hooper was born in 1810, and from the 1840s onwards, took over the running of Eastington's cloth mills. He was a very able businessman and at a time when many other mills in the Stroud valleys were closing, he managed to steer his business through these troubled waters. Eventually, the business began to struggle in the face of competition from elsewhere, particularly from mills in the north of England, although the impression given was that the company was managing to weather the impending storm. But by the mid 1860s, things had presumably deteriorated, although the future seemed secure. However, for Hooper himself, things were not going so well. It appears that he was not in the best of health, although we don't know precisely what was wrong with him.

But to start at the beginning. I recently came across some interesting information about Hooper in an unexpected place. Several years ago, Marion Hearfield of Stroud Local History Society posted online a transcript of a diary kept by Alfred Luke Randell between 1869 and 1876. His father was Geoffrey Randell who had moved to Stroud to take up the post of High Bailiff of Stroud County Court. Whilst reading through the diary, I came across an entry that I wasn't expecting - on the 15th September 1869:

"Mr. Hooper, mill-owner, of Eastington, cut his throat".

I felt that this must have been an error – there seems to be no mention of such an event in any of the local sources of information, and it's the sort of shocking news that sticks in peoples' minds for successive generations. I had never come across anything to suggest that Charles Hooper was so troubled. However, I did some more searching, and although I failed to find any mention in our area, I did eventually locate two short articles from Welsh newspapers of the time confirming that this had, in fact, been the case.

The *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette* of the 25th September 1869 reported the following:

Death of Mr. Charles Hooper. The inhabitants of the whole of the Borough of Stroud will receive with grief and dismay the news of the death of Mr. Charles Hooper, of Eastington Mills. It took place on Wednesday the 15th inst. at Llansannor, near Cowbridge, the residence of his son. Mr. Hooper had been for a long time seriously ill, and many times his

death had been almost daily expected, but it would seem that at last it was the work of his own hands under the influence of temporary derangement.

He destroyed himself by cutting his throat while at the family breakfast table, having for a few days previous been labouring under the delusion that his affairs were not prosperous. There needs no proof of mental aberration to those among whom he has lived a life of unostentatious piety and benevolence, and among whom he has been known as a kind master, a tender father, and an eminently consistent yet humble Christian.

A second article was carried by the *Cardiff Times* on the 18th of September:

SUICIDE OF A MANUFACTURER.—Intelligence reached Cardiff on Wednesday evening of the suicide of Mr. Charles Hooper (of the firm of Messrs. C. Hooper and Co., Eastington Woollen Mills, Gloucester.) The deceased gentleman was residing at a farm at Llansamlet, near this town, and had been depressed for some days past, being under the delusion that matters were going wrong in his business. On Wednesday morning he committed suicide at the breakfast table by cutting his throat.

Charles Hooper had been a great patron of Eastington; he promoted and encouraged education, established an infant school in 1856, supported the church (even paying for its expansion and restoration in 1851), introduced controls to regulate beer houses, and was a staunch supporter of the Temperance Movement, making his end so out-of-character and unexpected.

With his passing, his oldest son, Charles Henry took over the reins of the business – he was 32 at the time. Charles senior had clearly been under the impression that his business was failing, but ironically, under the control of several successive family generations, it was one of the few local cloth producing companies that managed to survive. The company only finally closed its doors in 1934, now housed in Bonds Mill, Stonehouse. Charles Henry's sons (Henry Robert and Charles Alexander) remained involved with the business, which was being managed by William J Miller Smith at the time of closure. Like their father and grandfather before them, both were also involved with the management of the Stroudwater Navigation for many years.

/So there



Bonds Mill, the last bastion of the Hooper empire. Fittingly, there is still a Hooper suite of offices at mill.

So, there ends a most curious affair, one that seems to be largely unknown. It almost seems as if Charles Hooper's untimely end was swept under the carpet, possibly to maintain his reputation built up over many years in Eastington for his business skills and assorted good works. Or, it may simply be that as his suicide happened in South Wales, it was largely missed by the local newspapers, although it does seem odd that there was no mention at the time. Perhaps the Hooper family managed to suppress the details of Charles' end, merely making it known that he had passed away? After all this time, I guess we shall never know for sure. Whatever the truth, the sad events in South Wales brought to a close the life of a man who had had a significant influence on the daily lives of many Eastington residents.