

## WOOLLARD TANNERY - And the Bergne Family

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An article in the Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society states that Woollard Tannery was brought into existence and run by Carthusian Monks(1). It was certainly in existence by 1630(2). The Broadribb family was established here in 1745(2).

The tannery remains today as part of a property owned by Fred Cross who, with villagers from Woollard, has partially re-stored the complex. Fred Cross now lives in a building that was originally Woollard's tithe barn, but was later used for drying hides. A second barn nearby served as the bark house. Oak bark was an essential element in the tanning process. Apparently the bark of young oak trees was best and was gathered in the spring. Bark was stored in the dry, otherwise the tannin would leach away in the rain.

The tannery is sited down a steep slope from the old tithe barn, by the Candlewick Brook (ST 634644). The brook's waters have a high mineral content which may have aided the tanning process and hence led to the location of a tannery here.

The stone paving of a gin worked by oxen has been restored to the north of the mill. This ground the oak bark to a powder using edge runners. Further north can be seen the wheelpit for a waterwheel, introduced to replace the gin. An underground watercourse tapped the brook higher upstream and fed a small pond. From the pond an elevated millrace led onto the wheel, which was clearly overshot. According to Spence 'the waterwheel was reported to be 12 ft. in diameter in 1805'. It is not certain, however, that the waterwheel was installed at this date; it may have been introduced later(3).

An advertisement for the sale of the tannery by auction appeared in 1832 and gives clear detail of the works at that time:

'An excellent TAN YARD, with a Dwelling House, Orchard, Stable and other Out-buildings attached. The Tan Yard contains bark house, mill-house and mill beam-house, drying shed, 23 handlers, 9 trows, 4 latches, 4 limes and 2 grainers, and is supplied with an excellent and never failing stream of water. The Dwelling-house is substantial and commodious and the Orchard, which contains about half an Acre is in its prime and in full bearing ...'.

'The above desirable premises are most advantageously situated in a rich and picturesque country within five miles of Bristol; the great emporium for Leather and Raw Goods ... bark is very abundant in the neighbourhood ... they are held under the Lord of the Manor of Publow for 99 years, determinate with the lives of two Persons which are insured in 600 ... '(4).

Beyond the tannery is a wharf on the stream. The Candlewick

Brook is apparently paved north of the wharf, or downstream, allowing carts to unload hides here. The large scale Ordnance Survey plan of 1855, however, indicates tracks either side of the brook, one of which is in the tannery grounds, leading up to the bark house(5).

Nearest to the wharf were the lime pits where the hides were unloaded and layered -hide-lime-hide-lime. The slaked lime loosens the epidermis, fats and hair follicles on the true skins.

Flesh, hair and roots were then removed manually, using scrapers, in the beam house. Mastering pits then removed the lime from the previous process before the hides were cut up into 'butts' prior to tanning. Workers would then move the butts through a succession of tannic acid pits - suspender pits, floaterpits and layerpits - initially on a daily basis, through pits with increasing strengths of liquor made from ground oak bark and cold water. The whole process could take in excess of 18 months. It is perhaps no wonder that tanning was regarded as a secretive business, with tanners disinclined to reveal the strength of their solutions(6).

It was the Broadribb family who advertised the sale of the tannery in 1832. However, one of the Broadribb daughters married Henry Bergne, a gentleman of Queen Charlton. Bergne rebuilt the tannery, introducing a network of underground culverts, providing a watering system for the establishment(7). It was also quite possibly Bergne who introduced water power for the bark mill. The late Austin Wookey has drawn attention to a triangle of freestone near the roof of the tannery, dated 1853(8).

Clearly the tannery was largely rebuilt in the mid-nineteenth century. The Bergne family continued as tanners here, Henry Bergne listed in 1861 and 1866 and George Bergne in 1872. John Williams was the last Woollard tanner, operating from at least 1875 until 1883 or so(9). Williams built the large Victorian house downhill from the old tithe barn in 1889, after the tannery had closed

Heavy-duty leather was made at Woollard in the nineteenth century and was mainly used for horse harness, in particular for the mail coaches, but also for mail boxes. Railways thus brought a decline in demand. Nevertheless, in the nearby village of Pensford, on the trunk road out of Bristol, there were no fewer than three harness makers in 1861: Thomas Carpenter, James Flower (also a saddler) and David Primrose (also a saddler and tenant of the Rising Sun)(10).

While local bark was used at Woollard, some oak bark was imported from the Forest of Dean. A large amount was required; up to five pounds of bark for one pound of leather.

Today oak-bark tanning continues at only two sites in the

United Kingdom - Messrs. J & F.J. Baker & Co. of Colyton in South Devon and J. Croggon & Son of Grampound in Cornwall. Both tanneries have been in existence for over two hundred years. On the grounds of safety, with open pits, they are not accessible to the public.

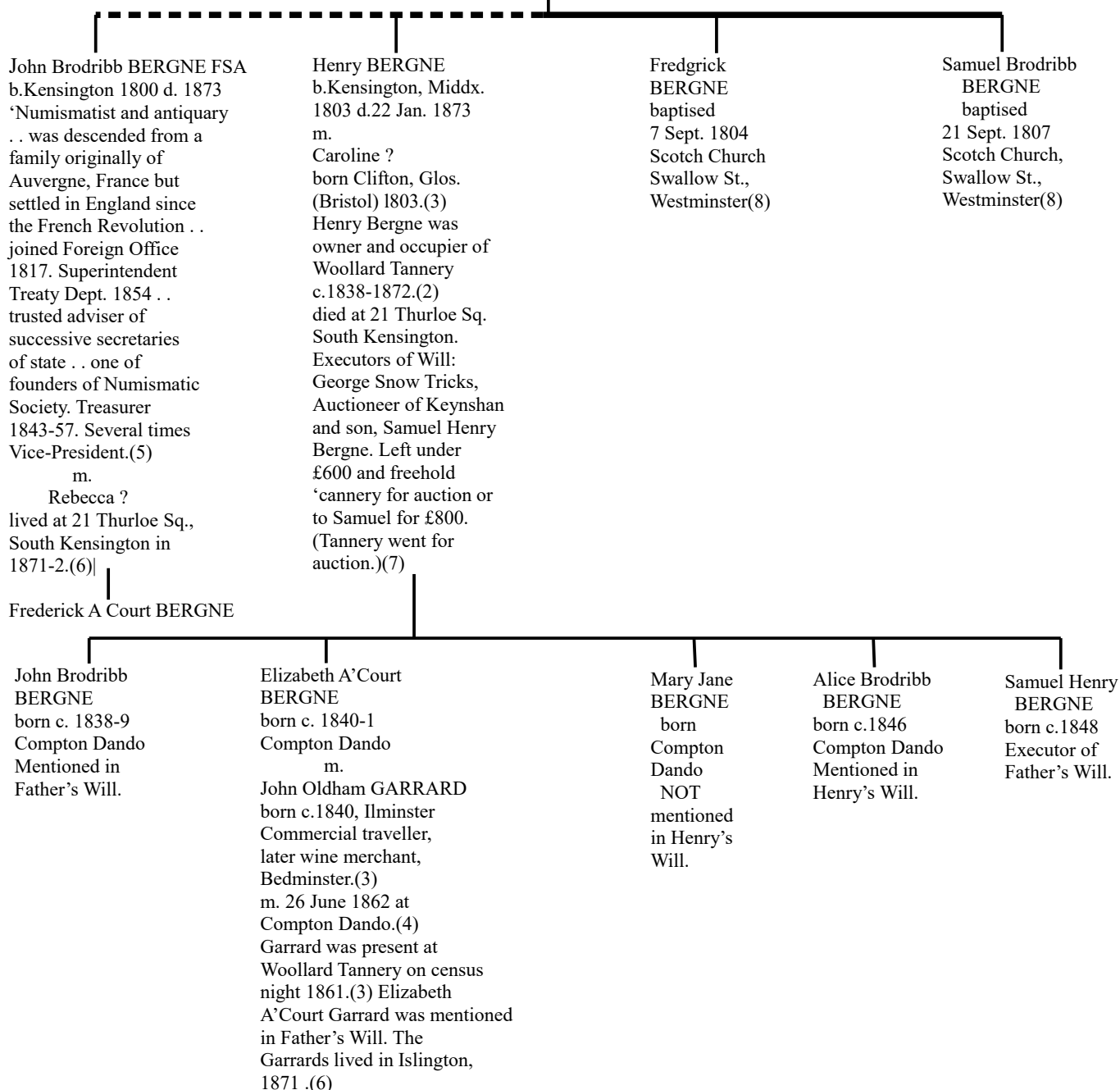
Sources

1. Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. Proceedings, 1900, Volume 150, p 182.
2. Joan Day. A Guide to the Industrial Heritage of Avon, Association for Industrial Archaeology, 1987.

3. A.J. Spence. 'Watermills of the Chew Valley', unpublished paper, 1983.
4. Felix Farley's Bristol Journal, 29 September 1832.
5. Ordnance Survey Plan, Somersetshire, 1885, 25 in. to 1 mile, Sheet 12.8. Local History Library, Taunton Castle.
6. Trevor Bowen. 'Nailsea Tannery', Pennant, vol. 1 , No.1, Summer 1992.
7. Notes taken on a tour of Woollard, given by Fred Cross to BIAS members on 8 September 1992.
8. Conversation With Austin Wookey of Coley, 1989.
9. Kelly's Directory of Somerset, 1861, 1866, 1875, 1883. Morris's Directory of Somerset & Bristol, 1872.
10. Ibid.

Appendix: The Bergne Family

John BERGNE = Elizabeth BRODRIBB  
of Kensington of Camely, Somerset  
m. 18 July 1799, Camely.(1)



Sources

1. Bristol and Avon Family History Society Index for Somerset parishes now in Avon 1754-1837
2. Compton Dando Tithe Award and Apportionment D/D.Rt 407 and 407A, 1842. Somerset County Record Office and Kelly's Directory of Somersetshire 1861 and 1866.
3. Census returns, Compton Dando  
1841 H0107/947 folio 6, p.5  
1851 H0107/1944 folio 577, P.3  
1861 RG9/1701 folio 34, p.15
4. Compton Dando D/P/Com.d2/ 1/7 Marriages 1838-1973 (searched to 1865). Somerset County Record Office, Taunton.
5. Dictionary of National Biography Leslie Stephen & Sidney Lee
6. Census returns, Kensington 1871.
7. Henry Bergne's Will. Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills, Somerset House.
8. International Genealogy Index at Record Office, Chancery Lane (and at Bristol Reference Library).

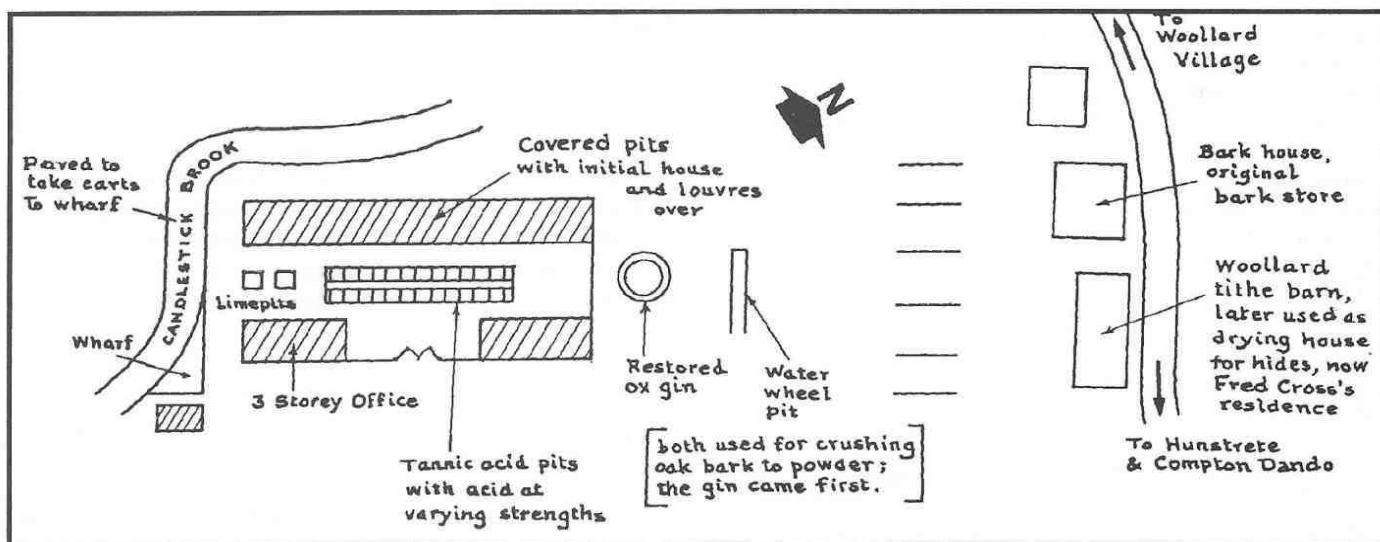
While the DNB implies the Bergne family settled in England following the French Revolution, the IGI's list the following:

Ann, daughter of John and Ann Bergne of St. Anne's, Soho (London), 1756

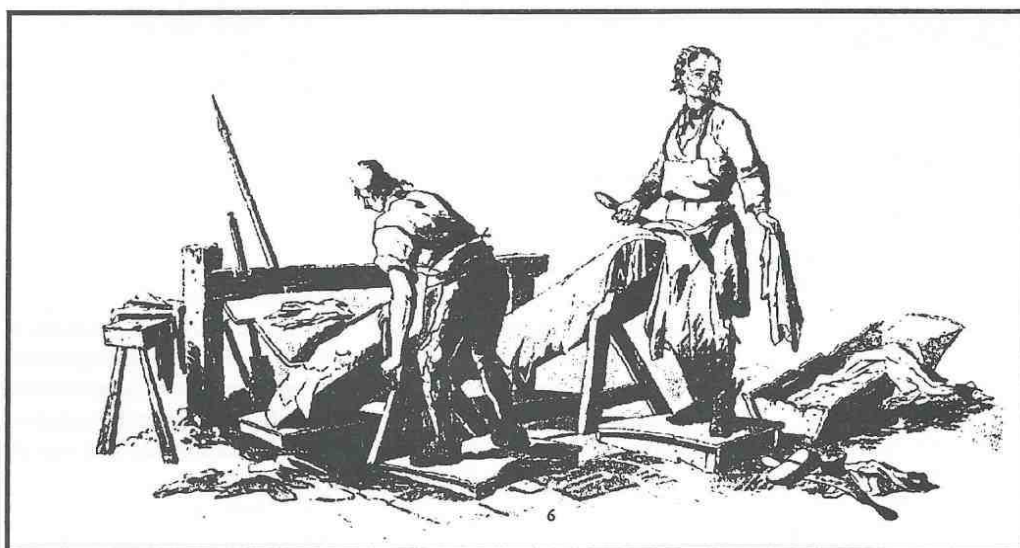
Also a will of a Jean Bergne, died 1795, London, mentioning his daughter Ann, married to a Frenchman living in France. Jean left £1800 to his nephew John Bergne, 'son of my brother John'.

The Bergnes used the Scotch Church at Swallow Street, Westminster, (later cleared to make way for Regent Street). None of Henry's children were baptised at Compton Dando, although his will was witnessed by the vicar. Possibly the family were therefore French Huguenots - Protestant and tending to non-conformist - or Calvinists (the same religion).

Research by Gillian Bedingfield of Congresbury and June Webb of Highbury, London.



Sketch plan of Woollard Tannery in 1992 (Martin Bodman delt Mike Chapman)



Smoothing and scraping hides (W.H. Pyne's 'Microcosm', 1808, reprinted by Dover Inc., 1977)