

IS HISTORIC EARBY MILL ENGINE DOOMED?

Within the next few weeks, as Johnson Fabrics Ltd. complete modernisation of their plant in Earby, a beam engine that has run Victoria Mill, Earby, for well over 100 years, has become "redundant". It would be fair to say that round that engine, such prosperity as Earby enjoys today, and has enjoyed in the past, has been built.

Many people in Earby, and far beyond, believe that the engine should be preserved for posterity.

A Craven Herald and Pioneer reporter this week talked about this wonderful piece of machinery with a man who knows more about it than probably any other individual, Mr. "Johnny" Pickles, of Hy. Brown, Sons, and Pickles. He confirmed that as far as he was aware it was the only engine of it's type still working. "It ought to be preserved," Mr. Pickles declared.

"The room that it will give if it is taken out will be neither here nor there. The amount it will bring as scrap- and it would be scrap- would be something and nothing. Preserved as a show-piece it would pay the rent, I am sure, though of course it's future has really got nothing to do with me. Yet it has been part of Earby since it was first installed in 1856."

SIXTY YEARS AGO

Mr. Pickles first became interested in the engine in 1899, and since then has been responsible for it's maintenance, and for a number of major alterations and repairs that have been carried out to it. He told us the history of the engine since he thinks that if efforts to preserve the engine itself should fail, at least it's story, spanning a century of progress, boom and depression, should be for ever available. Only he knows many of the details that he gave to our reporter.

Contrary to popular belief, the engine was built at Blackburn, by J.&W. Yates, and not at Burnley. It was put in by Mr. William Bracewell, father of the man known to all, and still remembered, by the name of "Billycock." In those days there was the "Old Shed," in Earby, opposite the Brook Shed engine house, and no longer standing, Mr. Pickles said.

Originally, the engine consisted of a pair of simple engines, but in 1872, compounding was introduced, and the two were compounded by William Bracewell of Burnley. the boiler pressure was lifted from 40 to 80 pounds per square inch. In 1897, it was provided with another new boiler, and made into a four cylinder, triple expansion job. Four new cylinders were provided, and a new flywheel.

"SMASH UP"

In 1905 there was what Mr. Pickles describes as a "smash up." The engine was out of action for a month, and during that time the huge flywheel - it weighs 40 tons - had machine cut teeth put round it's circumference. A year later, a pair of new steel beams and a new connecting rod were fitted.

Shortly after the first World War, the engine was stopped for six months. It was "hung up"

while a new foundation was put in beneath, and the engine then lowered on to it. Since then, Mr. Pickles has been responsible for boring all the cylinders, and in 1949, the air pumps were taken out, and independently condenser sets put in. Twenty tons of castings went into the work.

Mr. Pickles does not know the weight of the machine but estimates put it at 300 tons. In 1911, when the mill was used for spinning, the engine had 1,500 h.p. put on to it. The first engineer, Mr. Pickles recalls, was Mr. William Varley, of Brown & Pickles. He worked for the Blackburn manufacturers, who had installed the engine at Spring Gardens Mill, Colne.

OLD TRADITION

It was the usual thing for the builders of the engine in those days to provide the engine driver for the first year. Mr. Varley was sent to run the Colne engine, and his year was just about up when the engine at Victoria Mill was installed. He was sent to Earby, and stayed there until he died.

Today, Mr. Newton Pickles, runs the engine each evening. People are calling constantly, and not only from Earby, suggesting that the engine be saved. Countless hundreds of people in Earby owe their livelihood to the Victoria Mill engine.

Will it be preserved?