THE SALTERNS, LYMINGTON, 1840. *From a water colour by William Colborne.*

THE OLD LYMINGTON SALTERNS.

By W. Ravenscroft, F.S.A.

To anyone with time at disposal and antiquarian tendencies a not unprofitable undertaking would be the formation of a list of British industries once more or less flourishing but now, from one cause or another, extinct.

Among such would rank, by no means least in importance, that of obtaining salt from the sea, an industry not even known to very many and yet withal a calling extending over several centuries and yielding important revenues.

It would be scarcely credited by the visitor who stands on Milford Cliff and glances across the shingle bank eastward to the mud flats and streamlets of the South Coast lying between Keyhaven and Lymington, where little interrupts the silence of the scene except the cry of the wild birds which frequent this solitude that not a hundred years ago tall chimneys emitted smoke enough to cloud the fair blue of the sky, a series of windmills raised the water, and paths in all directions were metalled with cinders, while a considerable population extending along the coast from Hordle to Lymington found its means of subsistence in the salt industry, and trading ships were busy day by day in conveying the salt to Poole and thence all over the world.

As regards the antiquity of the "Salinæ," as the salt works were called, mention is made of them in Domesday in connection with the Manors of Milford and Hordle. Camden, also, in his "Britannia" (I., 145, Ed., 1722), says:—"In several places along this shore out of the sea water that comes up they make salt, which at first is of a sort of pale green colour, but by an art they have it is afterwards boil'd into a pure white. And it is of this sea salt, not of the other which is made in our English pits that St. Ambrose is to

be understood—' Let us look upon those things which are common and withal full of kindness to man ; how water is turn'd into such firm and solid salt that it is often cut with instruments of iron ; which is usually seen in the British Salts that are crushed into a substance as hard and white as marble and are very wholsom, &c.' "

Camden gives his authority, chapter and verse for the quotation and so takes us back for upwards of fourteen hundred years. Be this as it may the Domesday reference is supported by a number of subsequent allusions which all go to shew that from the time of the Conquest the sea salt trade was a valuable one.

Thus in 1147, A.D., we have a grant by Richard de Redvers to the Abbey of Quarr, near Ryde, Isle of Wight, of a tithe of all the Lymington salt and in this he refers to his father having done the same as he was then doing. In the time of Henry III. we have annual returns of £20 and £12 from salt made on the Lymington estates of Fawkes de Breaute and the Earl of Devon respectively.

In the reign of James I. a patent was issued for the " new invention of makinge white and bay salt," and this gave rise to subsequent trouble, since the new methods involved serious structural alterations and so the Lymington men and those of the neighbourhood prayed that their works might remain as they were until their defence could be heard, since alterations at such a time (June, 1625) would so interfere with their season as to cause their undoing.

During the 18th century the industry appears to have flourished considerably and the needs of the Government being great Sir Robert Walpole put on an additional duty to that already existing and thereby raised a storm of opposition by those interested in the trade.

But the 19th century saw still heavier burdens imposed ; and then came the end.

The salt works of Cheshire with their inexhaustible supplies of mineral salt came—as soon as roads became improved and communication easier—into severe competition with the Hampshire salt works and for the latter of

course the struggle, already hopeless, was emphasised by the cost of coal. Still a foreign trade lingered for some time and it was not until the year 1865 that the last saltern was closed.

Nothing now remains to be seen of all the buildings and chimneys and wind-mills and ponds which studded the coast from Milford to Lymington, except perhaps a few stumps below the sea at high water and only visible at a low tide. Possibly also there may be some vestiges of brickwork near Lymington but certainly not more.

Indeed a good part of the old site is below the sea and so apparently lost for ever.

The illustration accompanying this article is inserted by permission of the Milford-on-Sea Record Society and represents one of the salterns as it existed in 1840. It is from a water-colour drawing by William Colborne.

Now turning from the historical side a few remarks are desirable as to the extent of the buildings, trade, &c., and as to the method employed in obtaining the salt.

The heading of this paper is—"The Old Lymington Salterns," and this is intended to imply, as it naturally does, that others existed.

This was the case, but the most important appear to have been those called the "Lymington Salterns," and which included all those along the coast as far as Keyhaven and Hurst. Of the others in the neighbourhood Portsea appears to have possessed some of the largest but they did not rival those of Lymington.

In the year 1625 there were five at Milford and Keyhaven, thirteen at Pennington which adjoins Milford and Keyhaven on the east, eight at Woodside, which is in the Parish of Lymington, and some five others.

In 1743 there appear to have been not more than 18 but this diminution in number does not necessarily mean declining trade, since the Salterns varied a great deal in the number of "pans" they each possessed, at that time ranging from 1 to 28. Indeed the trade of Lymington in salt in the middle of the 18th century seems to have been at

its height. The buildings too were of all sizes and the wind-mills were about 12 to 14 feet in height.

The boiling houses were large brick-built sheds with low weather-beaten walls upholding a wide expanse of tiled roof, under which were the pans and furnaces.

The extent of the trade carried on may be best obtained from records of output and the duties paid.

In the latter half of the 18th century the duty paid by the Lymington Works was £50,000 annually.

In 1804, the average output was 5,000 tons, while other works within 30 miles contributed 2,000 tons more. Of this output (5,000 tons) about 140 tons were Epsom salts. The actual value of table salt was 1s. per bushel but the Government duty was 10s. per bushel which was increased in 1808 to 15s. per bushel.

Besides these duties there were those on coal and local tithes.

The distribution roughly seems to have been as follows :—

1,800 tons to America.
300 tons to Newfoundland.
300 tons to Holland and the Baltic.
200 tons to the Channel Islands.
3,200 tons for home consumption.

Vessels carried out salt and cloths made by the Somerset clothiers and brought back salt fish, timber and pipe staves of Newfoundland and the Plantations on which the trade of Poole principally rested.

The trade involved the employment not only of a considerable number of workmen but also of Government overseers, &c., and indeed at its decline the depopulation of the Parish of Hordle near the shore was one of the contributing causes of the old Church of that parish being pulled down and a new one erected further inland, where through the opening up of the Forest a population had grown up.

A few words as to the process of obtaining the salt are necessary in order to render this paper somewhat more complete. Three interesting accounts are before us, and

one would like to have given two of these but this would occupy too much space and as the earliest one is printed in the Victoria County History, Hampshire, V., 471, it is perhaps the better one to omit, being accessible to everybody. It is by Celia Fiennes and dates towards the close of the 17th century.

The others are from " Old Times Revisited " (edition dated 1879), and the Lymington Handbook, 1847, and as the former is not a widely known book I quote from it as follows :—

" The Saltern proper was a large tract of perfectly flat land divided into shallow ponds about 20 feet square by low mud banks about 6 inches high just wide enough for a man to walk upon with caution.

" Into these the water was baled by large wooden scoops from ponds which had caught the salt water at high tide ; and here it lay, evaporating more or less quickly according to the favourable or adverse weather.

" In various parts of the works were small wind-mills, which whirling with the continued and varying sea breezes pumped the water into different sets of pans as it approached nearer to the condition of brine and at last lifted it into large cisterns whence it ran, by gravitation into the boiling houses. . . . . .

" Sixteen weeks boiling was the general season averaged, and each pan made about 3 tons of salt per week, burning 19 bushels of coal for each ton.

" A drift or turn took 8 hours, after which the pan had to be cooled, emptied and cleaned.

" Sixteen drifts made a week's work."

The salt of Lymington manufacture is said to have been particularly pure and white, and the medicinal salts provided there are described as unequalled anywhere.