

The Firth Carpet Company in the USA

This article is based on research done by Dorothy Barker and Ian Philp of the Friends of St Mathew's Churchyard (Lightcliffe) and Robert McCue's book '*Firthcliffe N.Y.*'.

In 1867 a carpet firm was started in Bailiffe Bridge, a village about 4 miles east of Halifax and close to Brighouse. It became T. F. Firth & Company in 1875. The first owner was Thomas Freeman Firth, who was succeeded by his son, Algernon Freeman Firth in 1909 and then by Sir William Akroyd in the 1920s. It grew to be one of the largest carpet factories in the UK and produced Axminster, Wilton and tufted carpets from wool and man-made textiles.

The company was also known at different times as T.F.Firth & Sons, but, locally, simply as Firth's.

Amongst other commissions the company provided carpet flooring in the UN building in New York, on the QE2, for casinos in Las Vegas and palaces in the Middle East. It became part of the American Interface Group in 1997. But by 2000 the last carpets were made. The buildings were then sold, demolished and the land developed for housing.

Thomas Freeman Firth was created the first Baronet Aykroyd of Lightcliffe, Sir Thomas. He was succeeded to the title by his son, Algernon Freeman Firth. Both were renowned for their commitment to their workers and to the local community.

The Firth Carpet Company in Firthcliffe, Cornwall-on-Hudson.

T F Firth & Company's first venture into the USA was in Philadelphia in the early part of 1880s. Then in 1886, the company bought, at public auction, the former Broadhead Woollen Mill property, in what was then known as west Cornwall, or Montana, now Firthcliffe. Over the years the factory and the village built for its workers expanded.



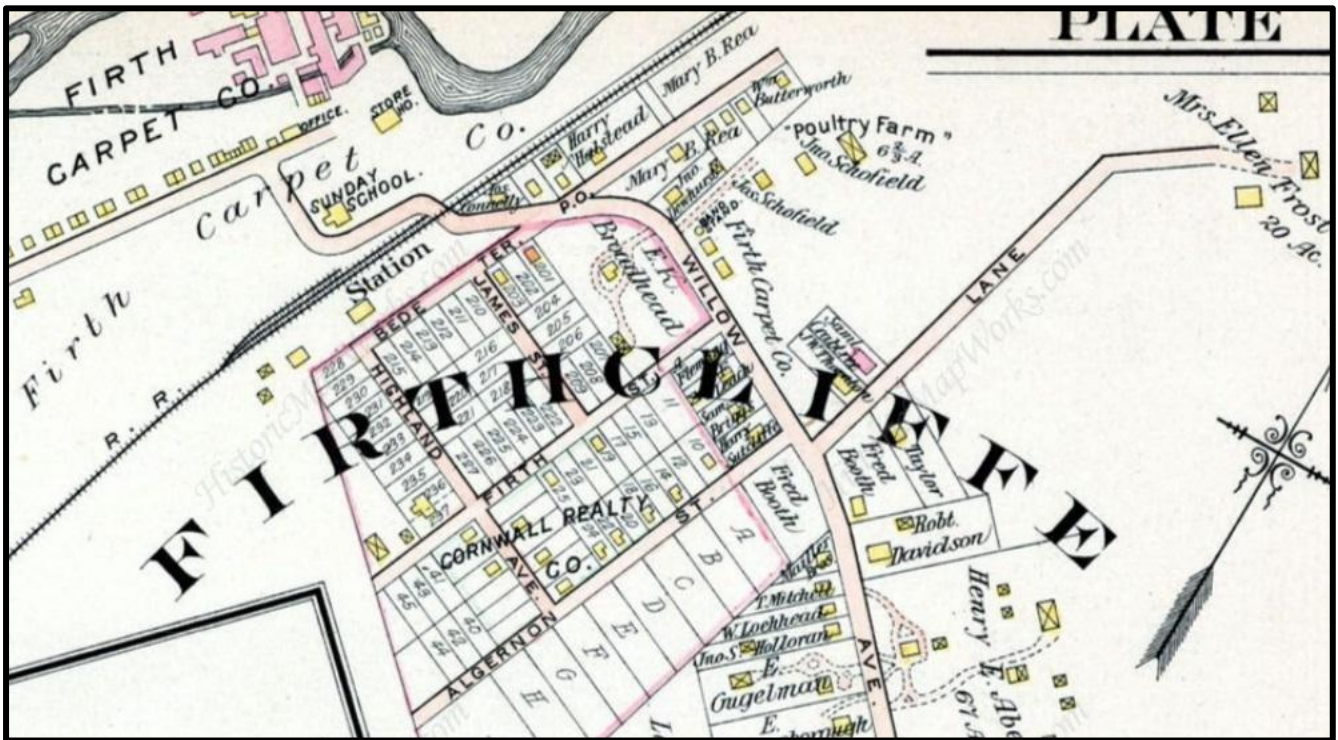
Cornwall-on-Hudson is about 60 miles north of New York just above West Point.

Why **Firthcliffe**? The name was probably a combination of the family name of **Firth** and part of where the family lived at Holme House in **Lightcliffe**, Halifax. Thomas F Firth was sufficiently proud of Lightcliffe to include it in his title.

On 15th February 1884 twenty-four-year-old Fred Booth from Bailiffe Bridge arrived in New York on *S.S.Scythia* which had sailed from Liverpool. He had previously been employed as a clerk at the Firths' factory in Bailiffe Bridge. The Firth company sent him "to superintend the plant of this company (Firth Carpet Company), then located in Philadelphia." Later he would become the Superintendent at Firthcliffe. By 1909 he was the General Manager, a position he held for nearly 30 years. Even after retirement he remained as a Director and Secretary of the company for a significant further period of time. A fuller account of his life can be found on:

[Fred Booth \(1860 - 1934\) of Firthcliffe updated.pdf \(lightcliffechurchyard.org.uk\)](#)

This is a plan of the village in 1903.

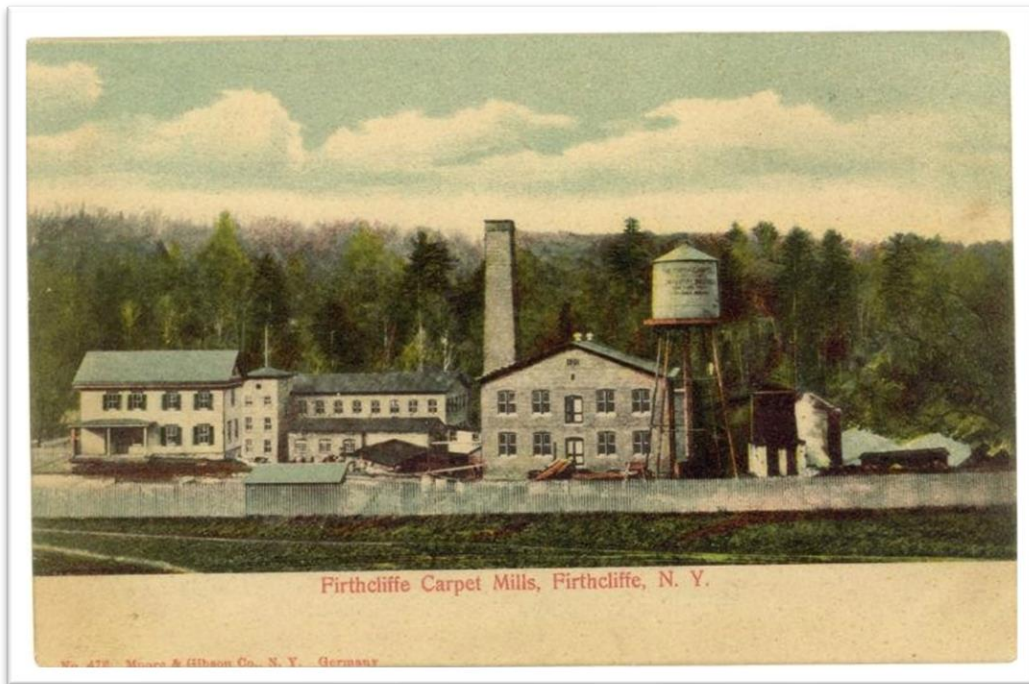


The layout above shows where the factory was in relation to the station and the roads. Notice that two of the main streets use family names, Firth and Algonron.

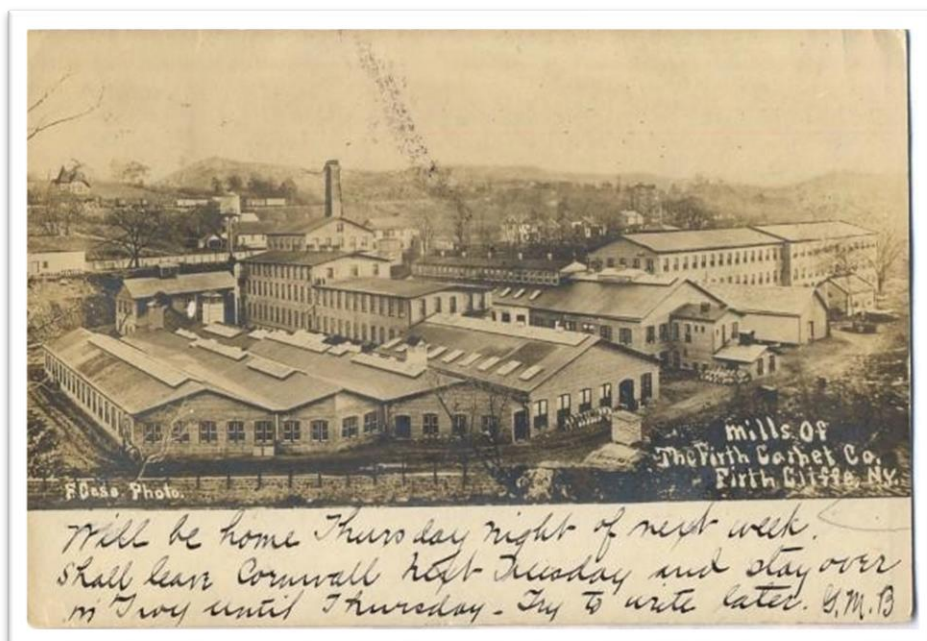
Fred Booth – notice his name on the map - was just one of the Bailiffe Bridge employees who took up the company offer to go to live and work in the USA on the understanding that if they didn't enjoy life there, they could return to England and take up their earlier position. We don't know how many took advantage of the offer nor how many stayed or returned. However, we do know of some, and brief details are provided at the end of this article.

Both sites, in England and Cornwall-on-Hudson, suffered from severe flooding at different times. In 1903 the whole area of Firthcliffe was devastated by a flood which caused damage to the factory and surrounding area. The state road and bridges were badly damaged as was the local railway infrastructure.

By 1908, the Firthcliffe factory had a turnover of US \$1,000,000 and employed nearly 600 workers. However, in 1909 the company was found to be in breach of the Contract Labor Act for illegally bringing into the USA a good number of workers and their families. In total it seems to have been around 80 with a few others turned back on entry. Twenty-four carpet workers were ordered to be deported. A US press report at the time states that those who were deported were strike leaders, and their families, because, following a strike settlement, the strike leaders were not re-employed.



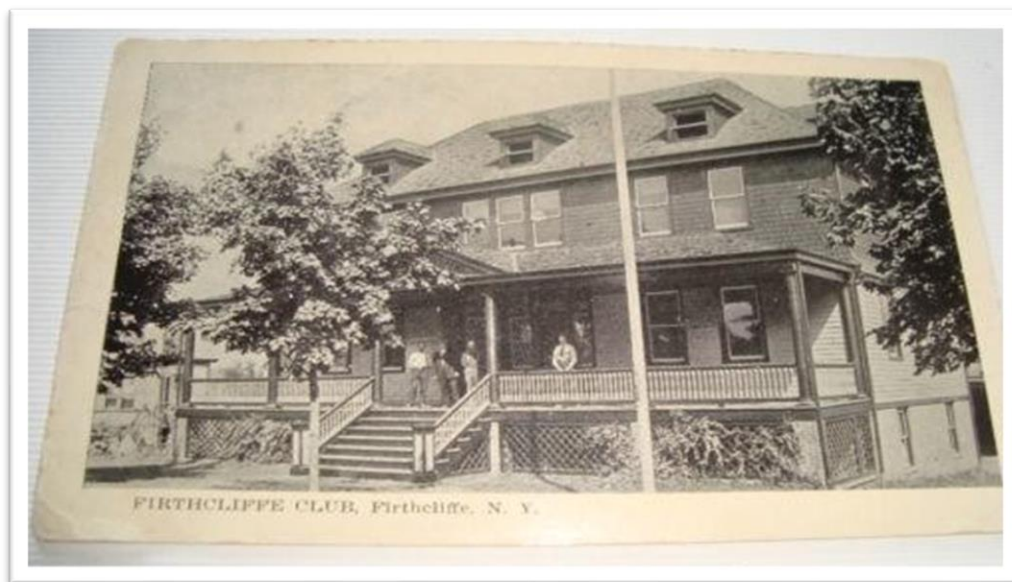
The company at this time employed around 600 workers and was the main employer in the district. It was estimated that between 1902 and 1908 the company had provided loans of over \$4,400 to enable skilled carpet workers to emigrate to Firthcliffe from the Halifax area.



The postcard image, dated 1915, shows the extent of the factory with drying rooms, spinning and carding sheds, loom wire making, storage and weaving sheds.

The original company had a good reputation for paying fair wages and looking after its workers and their families. Back in Bailiffe Bridge the company built a social club and a crown green bowling green. The former has recently been demolished for housing. The bowling club survives but may be under threat.

In Firthcliffe, the owners of the company built a clubhouse for their employees. The first floor had a pool and billiard room, and reading and card rooms. The second floor had a gym and dance floor. In the basement there were bowling alleys. In 1917 movie pictures were shown. John Robert Smith opened a barbershop in the clubhouse in 1921. The library had a collection of books which were a gift of Sir Thomas F Firth, the president of the company. Even if you were not an employee, you could use the clubhouse's facilities on payment of \$2 per year. The clubhouse was large enough for 200 people to attend the dances. The Christmas party in 1938 had 1,000 people in attendance.



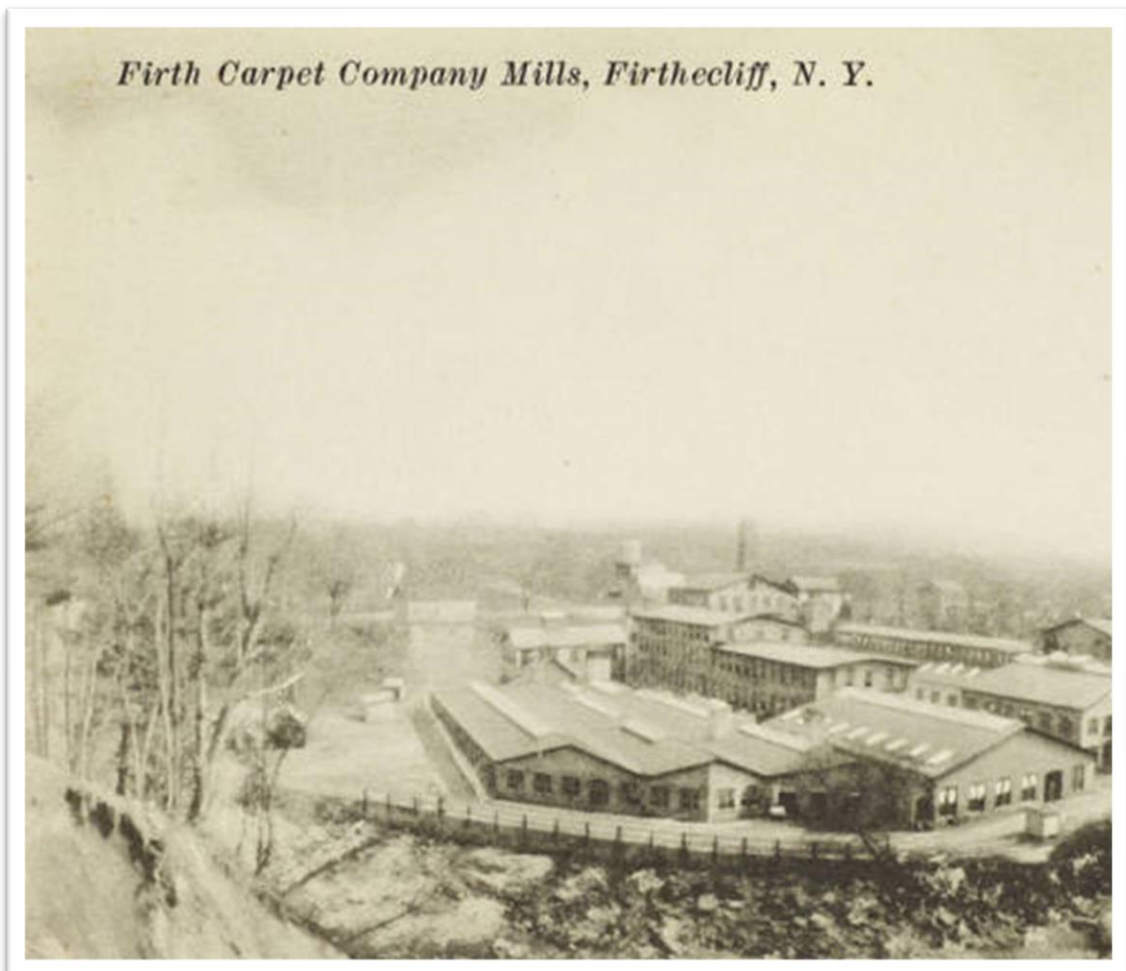
On 7th December 1903 there was a formal opening of the new clubhouse which had been funded by the company. Guests included members of the company together with prominent neighbours. Mr. Algernon F Firth, of Lightcliffe near Halifax, vice-president of the company had sailed on the *R.M.S. Teutonic* arriving in New York on 19th November for the December occasion.

The company provided a bandstand – see map - and Firthcliffe had its own brass band. Back in Yorkshire there was (and is) a strong brass band tradition. In Bailiffe Bridge, the local Clifton band dates back to 1838 and is still flourishing as the Clifton and Lightcliffe Brass Band and rehearses overlooking the bowling green.

Over the years Algernon F Firth made numerous trips across the Atlantic to visit the factories in the USA, sometimes more than once in a year. Before his visit in November / December 1903, he had already sailed over with his wife and daughter in the spring of 1903. His U.K. departure and arrival port was usually Liverpool but occasionally Southampton. New York was always the American port used and some records indicate that he then stayed at the Waldorf Hotel, Manhattan before presumably travelling on to Firthcliffe and /or Auburn by train on the New York, Ontario and Western Railroad. In Firthcliffe there was a Firth Villa where the Firth family stayed when they were in Cornwall. From the departure and arrival dates of these sailings Algernon Firth was probably away for over a month each trip. In 1919 he left Liverpool on the White Star Line's *R.M.S. Baltic* on 29th January arriving in New York on 8th February. His return journey was on another White Star Line ship *R.M.S. Olympic* which docked in Southampton on 8th March 1919. Understandably for a man of his status and wealth, he travelled in style.

The company continued to grow with new buildings, such as an additional spinning mill, added in 1929. During the Depression there were times when workers were laid off. During WW2, work picked up again and the mills turned to the production of war time needs and materials including a flexible stretcher for use by the Red Cross and civilian defence organizations. In 1945, there were 525 employees. Sales during 1945 had increased to \$6 million, a significant increase on the previous year. By 1952 the number of employees had risen to 1,000 and sales were booming. The company had had medical facilities for much of its existence and an enlarged hospital was inaugurated in 1954.

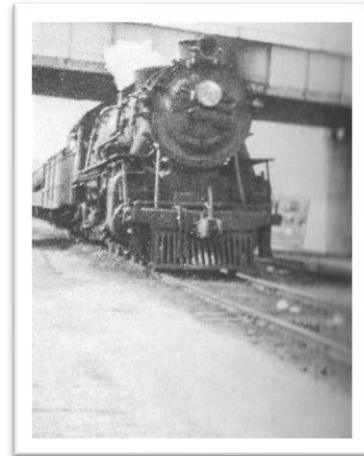
However, by the early 1960s the Firth Carpet Company was struggling and had \$5,500,000 debts in 1961. As with many such operations competition from other parts of the world with lower costs was making manufacturing difficult. A proposed sale to a company, Mohasco, was considered by stockholders and approved. This was merely delaying the inevitable end. Non-productive assets were sold off including the ball field and the clubhouse. The latter was sold to the Cornwall Hospital, who then sold it on and it became a restaurant until it was destroyed by fire in 1970. Mohasco sold the Firthcliffe plant to Majestic Weaving but by the early 1980s it had closed production.



Transport.

The American factory had a railway with full facilities built alongside. This was the Ontario and Western Railway. For those interested in railways, here are a couple of engines on the line near to Firthcliffe.

A train climbing the slope out of Cornwall, parallel to the Moodna Creek on the way into Firthcliffe.

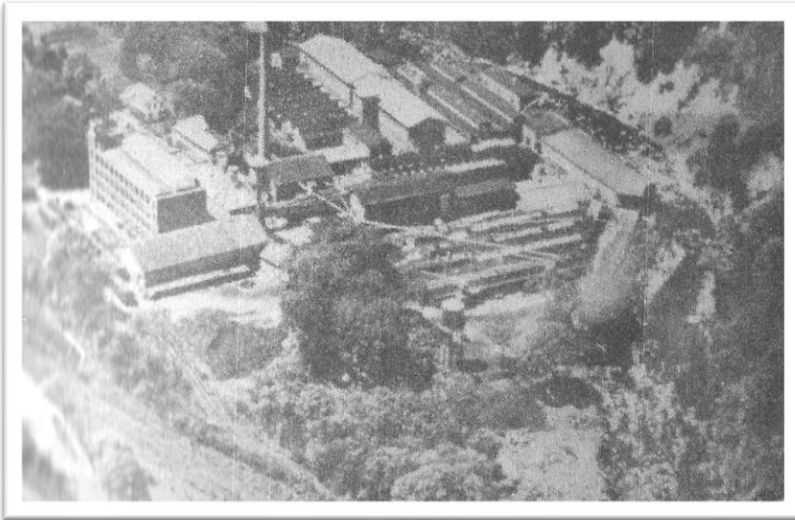


Later, as in England, materials would have been brought to the factory by road and finished products exported in the same way.



An aerial view of the Bailiff Bridge site shows the railway line behind the factory. It is clear that the topography would not allow for any freight facility. Where Firths used the railway it would have been either to the north in the Low Moor area or south in Brighouse.

Towards the end.



The Firthcliffe factory,
Cornwall-on-Hudson.

Part of Firth's,
Baillie Bridge, Brighthouse.
Around 1980



5 Bede Terrace-early 1900's- built/owned by the
Wardens, John Warden (1850-1945) was a weaver

BedeTerrace can be seen on the plan of Firthcliffe next
to the railway station. The company provided some
housing for its employees.



And a villa for the bosses!

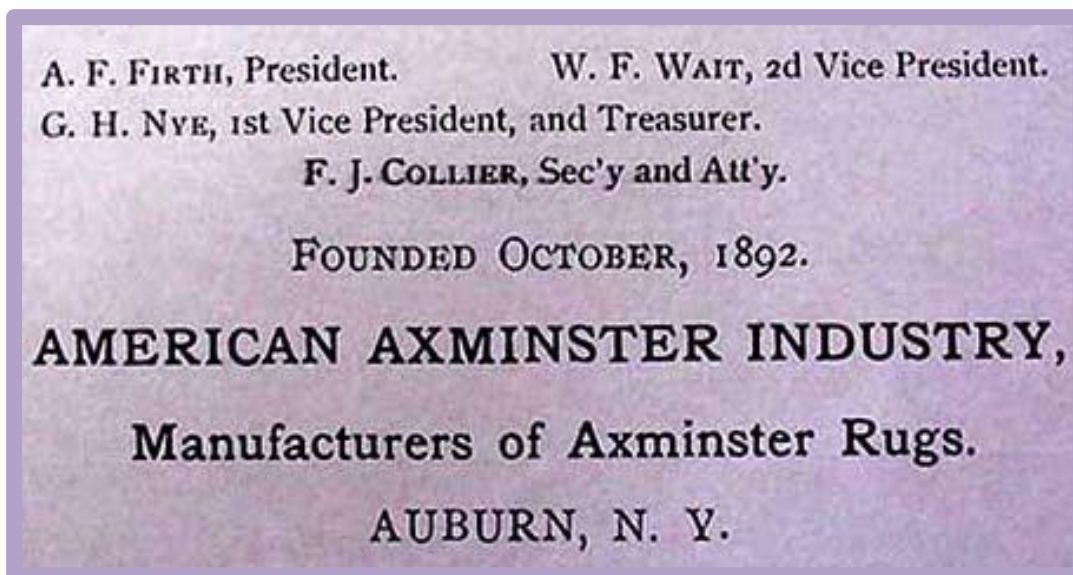
The Firth Carpet Company in Auburn, N.Y.

The Auburn Weekly Bulletin, in October 1903, reported that the American Axminster Industry was on the market. The men behind the venture were George H Nye and William F Wait, already well-established industrialists with experience in the woollen industry. The article describes the rugs that were being produced as being 12' by 9' and weighing about 52 pounds. All of the machinery had been imported from England and, at the time, there were 11 large looms with the expectation that these would be added to in the near future. There were a further 15 broad looms and two narrow looms for weaving Chenille. In 1903 there were just 7 patterns available but they used up to 200 dyes.

The building, on South Division Street (now Columbus Street) had been recently modernised with strengthened floors to carry the heavy looms and new windows fitted. A new dyehouse had been added to the site.

Charles W Read is named as the Superintendent who had come from England. Albert J Cooke was the chief designer and travelled several times back and forth to England presumably to Bailiffe Bridge. The bulk of the workforce were Americans, but several had come from England with experience in the carpet manufacturing trade. The wages were said to be two and a half times those in England. The plant was geared for expansion as the demand increased.

The president of the company was A F Firth, based in England, and duplicate books were kept there. Mr Nye and Mr Wait were in on-site control. This reads that Firth's had already taken a significant stake in the company and this is evidenced by this advert from 1904.



This is confirmed by an article in the *Auburn Citizen* of June 1912 which details the purchase of the American Axminster Industry by the Firth Carpet Company on 1st June. The company would continue to manufacture Orient and Amaxin Chenille rugs. Extensive alterations and additions were planned and some of the older buildings were replaced by modern purpose-built structures guaranteeing the company's future in Auburn. The headquarters of the amalgamated company were to be in Firthcliffe, Cornwall-on-Hudson.

In February 1917, the company president, Sir Algernon Firth, stayed at Osborne House, Auburn. He inspected the Auburn plant and the departmental heads held a luncheon in his honour. Shortly after this visit, the company announced that it was spending \$20,000 on additional buildings to accommodate, the superintendent Joseph K Hamilton said, the growth of the business. It had not been possible to extend during the duration of World War 1 as only essential work was permitted by the government.



Ten years later the local paper carried news of further expansion. Three new buildings, costing \$140,000, would boost production by 30% and an increase in the size of the workforce. These would be at 62, Columbus Street. Mr Peter T K Gebhard, managing director, said that the total investment would be in the order of \$350,000 to \$400,000 when the cost of the new equipment was included.

It seems likely that several workers from the Bailiffe Bridge area moved to Auburn, USA. However, the only one positively traced is Joe Harry Radley. He had been a stone mason or quarryman in Southowram (3 miles from Bailiffe Bridge) and emigrated, according to his obituary, in 1918. However, other records and Malcolm Bull's Calderdale Companion would seem to indicate that he and his family emigrated on 13th March 1914 on the S.S. *Alaunia*. This does seem to be substantiated by the fact that he had a WW1 U.S. Draft Registration Card for 1917-1918.

Joe Harry Radley had been a cornet player with the Southowram Brass Band. When the seventy-one-year-old died on 11th July 1947 he was buried near to the factory in Fort Hill Cemetery. His death was noted in the *Halifax Evening Courier* for 13th August 1947. [The emigration date should be 1914.]

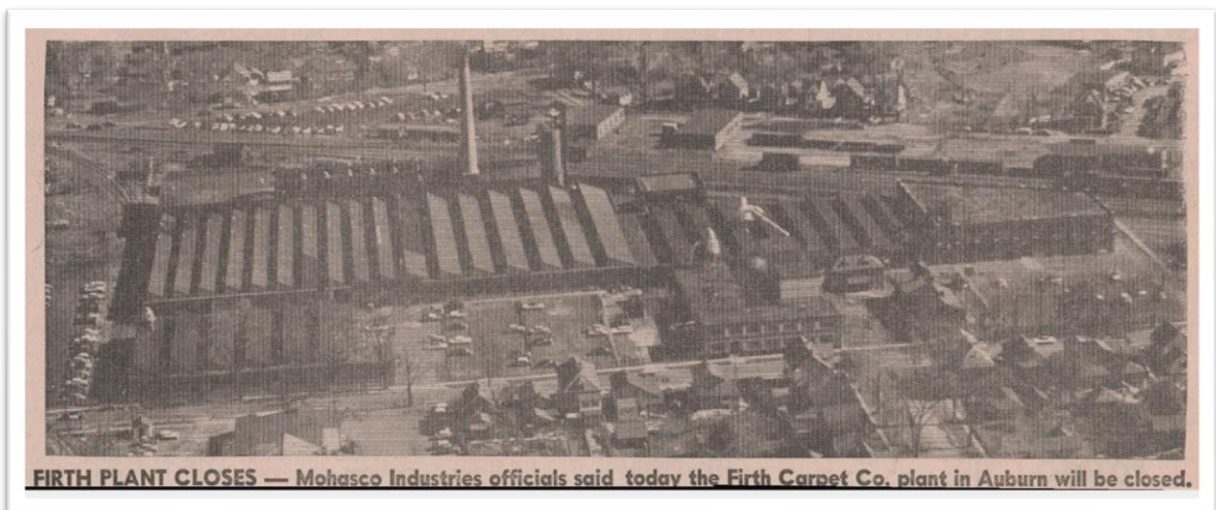


Just after WW2, on Armistice Day the Firth Carpet Company had a float in the celebrations. The float had examples of carpets and materials manufactured for the war effort.



And now the end.

In August 1962, *The Citizen-Advertiser* announced that the company's new owners, Mohasco Industries were closing all work at the factory and the plant would be sold. In January, when Mohasco had 'merged' with Firth's, 400 were employed in Auburn. Much of the machinery had already been moved out and only a small number were still there completing existing work. At its height, the company employed 1,000. It had occupied 250,000 square feet with the majority on the ground floor. The site's area totalled 8.8 acres and had several separate buildings. When it closed, it had an estimated value of \$700,000.



The following **Bailiffe Bridge people** are recorded as having some connection with Firthcliffe or Auburn.

Fred Armitage (1869 – 1931) was a tapestry carpet weaver and emigrated with his family to Firthcliffe in 1905. His wife, Emily, had 5 children, Arnold, Emiley, Frank, Phyllis and Albert. Most of the family returned to England at the start of WW1. (Source: MBCC, Robert Harrison)

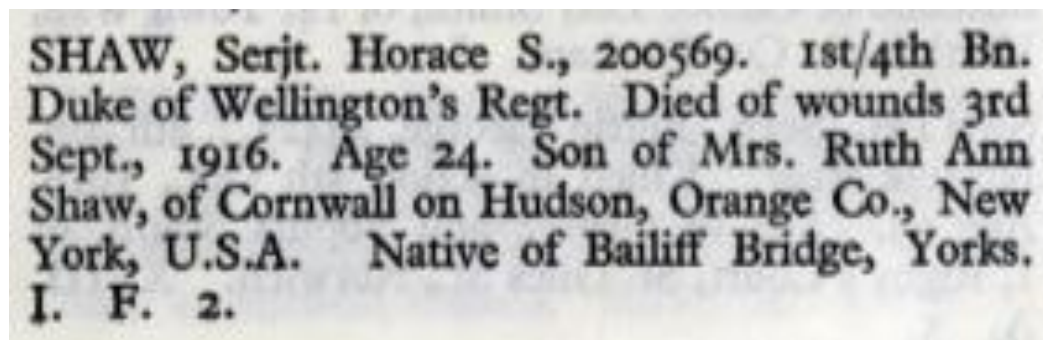
Arnold Armitage (1890 - 1969), Fred's eldest son, was a carpet printer. He served in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces in WW1. He died in Newburgh, Orange County in 1969. Arnold married Ada Shaw sister of Horace (see below) on 5th July 1910 in Cornwall, USA.

Frank Armitage (1898 – 1974) was conscripted back in Bailiff Bridge, survived the war and returned to Firthcliffe in 1919. He also died in Newburgh. Youngest brother, Albert (1902 – 196?) returned with Frank in 1919.

Herbert Broomhead (1870 – 1919) emigrated to America sailing on the *Mauretania* in 1910. He had been given £40 by his family. He was welcomed by his nephew, Arnold Armitage, and lived in Firthcliffe. He died in Newburgh 9 years later.

Some members of the family of Joe Harry Radley worked at Firthcliffe. Joe Harry Radley (1875 – 1947) had been a stone mason in Southowram (near Halifax). He emigrated with his family in 1914 and settled in upstate New York, possibly Auburn. He was buried in Fort Hill Cemetery Auburn. (Source: MBCC, Sheridan Fryer & Sue Walker).

Ada, Sam and Annie Shaw were brought up, along with their brother Horace Shaw (1892 – 1916), by their widowed mother Ruth Ann Shaw née Stansfield in Bailiffe Bridge. Ada Shaw emigrated to Firthcliffe in 1910 and married Arnold Armitage as already noted. On the 1911 census her siblings and their mother were with their maternal grandfather in Bailiffe Bridge. Horace and Annie worked for the Firths in their Bailiffe Bridge carpet factory. Sam was a silk dresser. During WW1 Horace served as a sergeant with the 1st/4th Battalion Duke of Wellington's (West Riding Regiment). He died on 3rd September 1916 and was buried at Mill Road Cemetery, Thiepval. He is remembered on Firth's War Memorial in Bailiff Bridge, the Rolls of Honour in St Matthew's Church, Lightcliffe and that in Clifton. Whether his death prompted the rest of the family to go out to Firthcliffe is unclear. But Sam was definitely there by July 1917, the date on his USA WW1 Draft Registration Card. When the medals and effects of their deceased brother, Horace Shaw, were being issued in 1919 the Lightcliffe vicar had to confirm that all his immediate Shaw family were in Firthcliffe, Cornwall, Orange County, New York state, USA.



SHAW, Serjt. Horace S., 200569. 1st/4th Bn.
Duke of Wellington's Regt. Died of wounds 3rd
Sept., 1916. Age 24. Son of Mrs. Ruth Ann
Shaw, of Cornwall on Hudson, Orange Co., New
York, U.S.A. Native of Bailiff Bridge, Yorks.
I. F. 2.

(Source: CWGC Archives; MBCC, Ivor Davies & Glynn Helliwell)

Richard Small of England emigrated to Firthcliffe in 1905 and married Martha Ann Hirst of Firthcliffe, but also originally from England, on 2nd December 1908 in Orange County, NY state, USA. What is not clear is whereabouts in England they were both from. According to their USA marriage record Richard was the son of William M. A. Small and Alice D Molley (perhaps Moxley) which could be the couple who married in the Aston district in 1873. The birth of a Richard (Edwards) Small was registered in Aston in 1877. But this disagrees with the date of birth – given as 17th March 1878 - on a USA WW1 Draft Registration card for Richard Edward Small working for Firth Carpet Co. in Firthcliffe which must be him. Martha Ann Hirst, the daughter of John Hirst and Ireland-born Mary Hutchinson, was easier to track down. She was born in Meltham, Yorkshire in 1871 and subsequently lived in Hipperholme in 1881 and then Rastrick in 1891 and 1901. By 1901 Martha Ann Hirst was head of the household comprising her sister Nancy Hirst and fourteen-year-old niece Annie Smith. All three women must have then emigrated to America

The Smalls were recorded as living in Firthcliffe in 1910 when Richard was a labourer in a carpet mill. Martha Ann's sister, Nancy Hirst, niece Annie Smith and boarder, Robert Campbell, also all worked at the carpet mill. On 6th October 1910 Nancy Hirst married John Bruce in Orange County, NY state, USA. Again, both bride and groom were originally from England but living in Firthcliffe. The Smalls and the Bruces were next door to one another in Highland Avenue, Firthcliffe (see map) in 1915. The Bruces were still in Firthcliffe in 1925, but the Smalls have not been found. (Source: MBCC, Carole Edwards Caruso)

If you need any further information about any of these people or have any additional information, please contact us on lightcliffechurchyard@gmail.com

Acknowledgements.

'*Firthcliffe N.Y.*' Robert McCue. Available on Amazon.

Additional information is based on Malcolm Bull's *Calderdale Companion* (MBCC), an essential source of reference for all things historical in Calderdale.

Thanks to Dorothy Barker, Chris Helme and Bob McCue.

Map of Firthcliffe: H A Mueller, Orange County 1903. Fort Hill Cemetery, Auburn

Especially thanks to Lin Sullivan, Research Aid, History Discovery Center, Seymour Public Library. Auburn N.Y.

For more information and some old photographs, visit the Lightcliffe & District History Society. <http://www.lightcliffehistory.org.uk>.

The website <https://www.lightcliffechurchyard.org.uk> for the local Lightcliffe churchyard is also a good source of information on the history of Lightcliffe and Bailiffe Bridge.

**Ian Philp. Lightcliffe, Halifax
October 2024**