Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

Sacks for Hire

by Reg Wilkinson

Many readers will have passed the entrance to Wantage Wharf and seen the battered enamel sign which advertises a sack hiring company. The function of the company is self-explanatory, but the sign does not explain who hired the sacks or the system whereby they were hired.

The hiring of hessian sacks for carrying grain became necessary when the construction of canals, and later railways, enabled farmers and corn merchants to transport their products over much greater distances than had been practical with horse drawn vehicles. In the old days farmers usually had their own sacks with their names printed on them in bold letters. These were suitable for local use, but as distances increased the likelihood of sacks being returned to their rightful owners decreased accordingly.

Sack-hire businesses which served the West Country and the Thames Valley counties came into being in the early part of the 19th century. Gopsill Brown & Sons Ltd. started in Gloucester and obtained a contract from the Great Western Railway to hire out sacks in Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Shropshire. The company also made use of canals and the River Thames to run a fast service between Gloucester and London.

Another firm, the West of England Sack Hiring Co. Ltd., took on the G.W.R. contract for Cornwall, Somerset, Devon, Dorset, Wiltshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire. The Midland Railway and the L.N.E.R. ran their own sack-hiring services.

Each hiring company had a network of depots covering the region which it served. The depots were located at corn merchants, coal merchants, haulage firms, canal wharfs and railways stations, or in any convenient building of reasonable size which was suitable for storing and issuing sacks. Among those located in what was then Berkshire, for instance, there were depots at places like Faringdon, Didcot and Wantage, and there was also one at Challow station.

When a farmer was in need of sacks he went along to the nearest depot and was issued with the required number. He was also issued with a sack hiring note, made out in triplicate, on which was entered the date and the number of sacks on hire. In addition to the farmer's copy, one was retained by the depot and a third sent to company headquarters. Acceptance of the hiring note automatically transferred responsibility for the sacks to the farmer; if he lost any, he had to pay for their replacement. The cost of a sack was usually 10s., a sizeable sum of money for such an item.

If a farmer sold corn to a merchant in hired sacks, the latter was required to make out a transfer note for the sacks. Thereafter the merchant was responsible for them and paid the hire charge from the date of transfer. A farmer who purchased corn from a merchant in hired sacks then became responsible for them in his turn.

The hire charge was usually two pence per sack for the first week and one penny per sack for each additional week. Empty sacks were returned to the depot and a receipt was issued. The hire firm sent accounts to its customers once every twelve months. To check the account, it was essential for the customer to keep the year's accumulation of hiring ,notes, transfer notes and receipts. A convenient method was to 'spike' the relevant pieces of paper on a short length of wire which had a round block of wood at its base and was turned over at the top so that it could be hung on a suitable nail. The paperwork was then available for easy reference when the bill arrived.

Hired sacks were all the same size and each one was made to hold at least four bushels of any of the more usual crops grown by farmers. Consequently they were known as 'four-bushel sacks' in most parts of the country, although in some places, because they were available at railway stations, they were called 'railway sacks'.

A bushel was a measure of capacity and was equivalent to four pecks or eight gallons. The exact amount in a bushel measure depended on how it was used by the individual doing the measuring. The careful farmer would overfill the measure, then pass the edge of a board, or a stick, across the top to strike off the surplus and ensure that the measure was filled to the level of the rim. This was known as the 'strike bushel'.

In time bushel measures were replaced by barn scales and a table of weights per bushel for different crops was worked out as follows:

Oats	42 lb.per bushel	168 lb.per hired sack.
Linseed	52 „ „	208 „ „
Barley/Rye	56 „ „	224 „ „
Wheat	63 „ „	252 „ „
Peas	65 „ „	260 „ „
Beans	66 „ „	264 „ „

This system was a great improvement on the measure system because the latter did not take into account the variations in density of different crops that took place from year to year, from farm to farm, and sometimes even from field to field.

The weight of a hired sack when empty was universally accepted as being 4 lb. This was allowed for by adding an extra 4 lb. weight, or by folding a sack and wedging it among the weights on the scales.

Because mechanical aids were not readily available, the bulky sacks had to be moved around manually. A sack containing four bushels of beans weighed well over 2 cwt., and anyone capable of manhandling such a bulk had to be fit and an expert at the job, especially if he had to negotiate obstacles such as granary steps.

A short time before the 1939-45 war Gopsill Brown and the West of England Company amalgamated to form the West of England Sack Contractors Ltd.

Although sacks are still available for hire, the demand has been considerably reduced by the introduction of methods of bulk transportation and storage for grain. In addition, the

good old hessian sack now has to compete with disposable bags manufactured from paper and the ubiquitous plastic.

This article was reproduced from “The Blowing Stone” Spring 1984.

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