

## **Symingtons of Market Harborough.** **Symington Brothers from Soups to Suspenders.**

This is a tale of two companies. It is about two brothers who went in separate ways to set up their respective firms both differed wildly from each other. I think it is fair to say that Market Harborough would not have been the same had they stayed in William Symington's first choice locations, Kettering or Lutterworth. Because of time restraints this is a very potted history, as both companies deserve far more detail than I have time to give.

Robert Symington was born in 1780 he married Janet (nee Lindsay) also born in 1780 of Crawickbridge in Sanquhar, Dumfriesshire, Scotland. The Eldest son, Robert was born in 1808. William came next on the 26<sup>th</sup> March 1809. He was also born in Sanquhar and was named after his grandfather, as is the custom in Scotland. Robert, the father, was a gardener and was either known or employed by Sir Walter Scott. The family are believed to be related to another William Symington who invented the Steam Ship in 1803. The ship was the 'Charlotte Dundas' and was demonstrated on the River Clyde and allegedly witnessed by Robbie Burns. James Symington was born in 1812 again in Sanquhar.

William left Scotland aged 16 and moved to England first working for an acquaintance of his fathers in Grantham who sold tea and coffee. After 18 months he was keen to start his own business so he took a coach to Leicester and then on to Market Harborough. He had decided that if he did not like the town he would continue on to Kettering or possibly Lutterworth. However, he commented, about Market Harborough "thought it the brightest little town I have ever seen'. He had considered staying in Leicester or Hinckley but found that both towns were in a state of starvation with people being glad to live on turnips. So he stayed and settled down and opened a business selling tea and coffee. He opened a small warehouse in Adam and Eve Street.

In 1830 his younger brother James decided to also move to Market Harborough and for a while worked for his brother as in the 1831 census he was listed as a grocer.

This was the start of the Symington dynasty and love affair with Market Harborough. James later styled himself as a Tailor, Hatter and Woollen Draper and he opened a small shop next door to his brothers.

Shortly after James came to town William moved to southern part of the town with a view to building a food factory on some land he owned. This left the shop next to James empty.

Robert, their father died in 1836 aged 56 years. A short time later Janet, their Mother moved to Market Harborough to be with her two sons. It appears that the two brothers went into partnership because an advertisement appeared in December 1841 that states

'W and J Symington, Church Street, Market Harborough, respectfully invite the public attention to their Stay manufactory, where all sorts of French and English Stays are made to order at the shortest notice, and on reasonable terms'.

William later went on to establish the W Symington and Co Ltd. 'soup' company.

Firstly lets talk about the Soups. W Symington and Co. Ltd. Known for its Symington Soups and Table Creams. As previously stated William Symington, born on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1809, who was described as a Canny Scot, moved from Scotland to Grantham then Market Harborough in 1827. He set up a grocery business in Adam and Eve Street near the blacksmiths shop and close to St Dionysius' church selling mainly Teas at first. He previous employer in Grantham had two young men going up and down the country getting orders. William decided he would, himself; go out canvassing for business in the local villages with samples of teas. The Grantham grocer had given William the name of a firm in London who could supply him with goods, and even guaranteed payment for items that William had if he could not pay for them. He purchased a good stock of teas and got a local cabinetmaker to make him a sample box to carry around with a selection of teas. In those days there was a great many different teas available, which are not around today. He priced his teas from 12s, 10s.6d, 8s and down to 6s per pound. He did however, admit that the '6s tea was scarcely fit to drink', and that you could not get a decent cup under 8s per lb. Tea at this time was so expensive because of a 50% tax on it. He started knocking on doors

in Little Bowden and Clipstone from which he gained many orders. Many people wanted to pay him whilst he was at the door but he refused payment until he had delivered to order by carrier. He then did the same round a fortnight later, when his customers would pay for what they had received and give new orders to be delivered. This success caused alarm amongst the many other grocers in Harborough; there were a good number at the time. They were quoted as saying "we can't sell any tea, for everybody seems to buy from the Scotch fellow". They even had a meeting at the Swan to see what could be done. "We don't know what we can do with him, he seems a steady young man". William prided himself on dressing smartly cautioning other to "dress well, but don't be a dandy". Most labourers were on 7s to 8s per week and a few got 10s, which made tea out of their reach. The grocers of the town meet 3 or 4 times to discuss the problem with 'Scotchman'. William made friends with a young grocer who kept him informed of what was said at the meetings. They decided that they would not buy goods from any traveller who sold to William. However, he purchased most of his goods in London at auctions. Introduced by a friend, he went to East India House and bought tea directly. He paid cash for everything he bought. He wanted to end the 'war' between himself and the other traders in the town so he found what he calls a "Mrs Grundy" a town chatterbox. He whispered in her ear that he would do something that would make the grocers sorry for, what he called, "prosecuting" him. As he expected it got back very quickly to his rivals. He knew a supplier in London who sold sugar at a very low price. He purchased a large amount of lump sugar and set up a stall outside his Adam and Eve Street warehouse and marked it up at a halfpenny a lb., which was less than he paid for it. It was all sold in a short time and caused a real commotion amongst the other grocers, as it was 2d less than they could sell sugar at with no loss in quality. He told his "Mrs Grundy" that he had a lot of moist sugar coming at the same price, which got back to his rivals very quickly. At this same time there were a lot of spices being sold to put into elderberry and other homemade wines, for which the grocers made 100% profit on. He told "Mrs Grundy" that he might go into the sale of spices this caused the other grocers to make 'Peace' with William, "They sent to me to tell me that they should be very pleased to oblige me by letting any shop in the town sell sugar to my customers. I told my

customers I didn't want to sell sugar, and after that I had no more trouble with Harborough grocers".

By this time William was doing very well in business he was also an inventor. At the time of the Crimean War (1853-1856) he took out a patent for preparing peas into Pea Flour, which was recommended for use by the British army. Boiling water was added to the flour to make a soup, the first copper soup. He also took out patents on 'Roasting and treating coffee', which consisted an arrangement of apparatus whereby the aroma, volatile oil, and other products evolve during the process of roasting coffee, cocoa, chicory, and other substances which escape and are wasted using the existing method, can be saved and used. William then goes on to explain how it works, it is long and complicated and written using very Victorian language.

William clearly moved about the town, various directories show him in 1835 as a 'grocer and tea dealer' of Little Street. By 1850 he was shown as 'tea dealer, wholesale and coffee roaster of Little Bowden and in 1854 as a 'coffee roaster' of Northampton Road, and in 1877 as living in Nithsdale House, Northampton Road, and the profession of 'Coffee Roaster' Bowden Steam Mills Northampton Road. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1835 he married Mary Weldon the daughter of confectioner John Weldon of Harborough. They had nine children of which seven survived. In 1850 he purchased a piece of land with buildings on it in Springfield Road, it is believed that he had use of the building for some years prior to its purchase.

In 1881 he and his second son Samuel, who later became a Justice of the Peace in Leicestershire and Northamptonshire, commissioned the extension to the Springfield Road Factory, in those days known as Billy Boy's Lane, which he moved to when he moved out of Adam and Eve Street. The architects were W T Brown of Wellingborough. The building was substantial, three storeys of nine bays and included shaped gables at either end, large oriel window supported by a curved central stone bracket and ornate inscribed pediments over the principle entrances. At this time William purchased a steam ship that he named the William Symington, it is not known if the ship was named after him or William who invented the first steam ship. In his will he left a model of the ship to Samuel and the actual shop was left as one share each to his 7 children. Before 1881 the buildings around the main factory were increased

and a number of new buildings and extensions were built. A logo saying Symington's steam mill was painted on the end of the main building. Various other parcels of land were purchased and in 1870/71 eight cottages, a coach house and stables were built; the cottages were for male workers. In 1882 the company won a Gold Medal at the New Zealand Exhibition. Pea-Flour was being distributed throughout the world as far apart as Buenos Aires, Montreal and Natal. William died in 1898 and his son Samuel ran the company. 'The Lancet' in 1901, even recommended another of the company's products, Egyptian Food, made primarily with lentils. In the same year the company was commissioned to supply Pea Soup and Pea Flour for Captain Robert Scott's first expedition to the Antarctic. In 1960 a tin of Symington's Pea Flour was brought back by American party who found the last camp of the fatal 1910 expedition, which lost the lives of all at Camp Evans. Apparently the Flour was as good as the day it left Harborough some 50 years before. Scott wrote in his diary "a lot can be done with the addition of a little boiled pea meal" The company grew with its dual focus on Pea Flour and Coffee, with the help of Hedley Roberts, and in 1907 they introduced Symington's Table Creams, as well as Granulated Gravy Improver, Custard Powder, Table Jellies and Lemonade Crystals, along with Fruit Puddings (unsweetened Blancmange) this sold for 31 years until its withdrawal in 1938. A range of 8 varieties of soup was also introduced. They also produced Dandelion Coffee, Egyptian Coffee and Oatmeal Groats (Whole Grains). By this time the company had the patronage of the British Royal Family, the King of Spain, along with both houses of Parliament. In 1909 Samuel died and his son, Howard Watson Symington, took over the running of the company with Roberts help. In the same year they entered into their first major consumer promotion. It used yellow coupons that encouraged the purchase of the various products in order to be awarded a prize of choice from a provided list. Dame Ellen Terry, a famous actress of the day, was the face of the promotion and an image of her adorned the advertising material and also featured in a full-page advertisement in the Daily Chronicle of October 26<sup>th</sup> 1912 advertising Symington Soups. In 1919 the Coffee part of the business was discontinued and the goodwill and rights to the coffee patent being transferred to Thomas Symington and Co of Edinburgh who are believed not related to the Market Harborough family. It was at this time that the

company branched out into the very important catering side, this was a major boost to the company and in the 1960s became a significant part of the company's income. In 1925 new Public Health Regulations came in and Symington's were quick to inform the public that their products conformed to the new regulations and that they even guaranteed it. 1930s saw the introduction of canned soups and ready meals in a can, such as Beef and Carrots, Haricot & Mutton and Lamb and Pea these were discontinued in 1936 after 3 years of comparative success. In 1934 more competitions were started with a top prize of £1000. Gracie Fields the popular singer presented the winner, a Mrs Maud Burrage of Norfolk with her cheque on 17th December 1934. They ran many competitions over the years with good prizes. They advertised on the side of London buses. Opened a Cookery Advice Bureau, produced cookery books with around 100 recipes in.

After the Second World War the company presented an ambulance to Market Harborough in Symington's Soup livery. They continued to promote the company by producing pencil sharpeners, games and jigsaw puzzles. During rationing some ingredients had to be changed, some on a daily basis. In 1946 the company gave Brooklands a house in Northampton Road to the council in memory of Howard Watson Symington for the benefit of the residents of Harborough. The council recently sold the property to developers. The following year they produced full Technicolor cartoon marketing to be shown in cinemas. By then they had become fully automated. 1953 saw an easing of rationing, pre war lines were reintroduced the factory was again extended and a range of foil wrapped 'luxury' soups were introduced, initially Tomato and Mushroom. In 1959 the company along with 3 other well known soup manufacturers were taken to court by West Sussex County Council for depicting common mushrooms on the packaging when boletus edulis mushrooms were used in the production. They agreed to modify the packaging and include the word 'dried' in front of mushroom. The case was dropped. 1967 the Company purchased a factory in South Africa to make own label products.

After many refused take-over bids the family and the board accepted an offer from J. Lyons and Co. Ltd. The company was sold on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1969. Lyons continued for a further year with the existing management team before integrating it

into the J Lyons & Co Group. In 1980 Golden Wonder and its sister company HP Foods purchased Symington's from Lyons. It became a trading division of Golden Wonder. It is thought the Lyons had intended to close Symington's down losing 160 jobs. In the transition 40% were made redundant. Golden Wonder announced its intention to re-establish the Symington's name, which had disappeared from grocer's shelves. Soon after a Symington's sign was erected on the site where it was first put up in 1850. Production increased, as did the workforce, new packaging was designed and new lines introduced. Catering packs were introduced. In 1988 HP Foods was bought by the French company BSN, the company owned Kronenbourg, Evian and Lanson Champagne. The deal included the W Symington part of HP and its HQ in Northampton Road. In 1990 Symington's was sold off to Telford Foods for £4.5 m. HP retained the Springfield Road and the Northampton Road premises. Telford Foods was started by 2 ex employees of Symington's in the 1970s to supply own label foods to the supermarket chains Symington's and Telford between them had 90% of the own brand market. Telford Foods did not make gravy powders or Table Creams so this part of Symington's was sold to Leeds based Brandway Group who still trade under the name Symington's today. Telford still retained the soup business. In 1996 Telford Foods decided that the Market Harborough Factory was no longer economic, production would continue at the Telford Factory. The Market Harborough Factory finally closed in 1997. In 2002 Telford Foods was also sold to Brandway Group. They also manufacture many different brands including Golden Wonder, Aunt Bessie's, Ragu, Ainsley Harriot, Chicken Tonight and many others, but all under the Symington name. They have, in Feb 2018 announced that they are supplying noodles to China. Note that Golden Wonder and Telford Foods are now part of Symington's what a juxta position.

Now to Suspenders. When William moved Mrs Gold and her family including 2 teenage daughters moved into the vacant premises. James took a shine to Sarah. The Gold's came from Warwick and mother was a widow. Sarah had been taught to make corsets at a time when every corset was beautifully made by hand and finished

with exquisite embroidery. She was therefore a craftswoman of great skill; she also possessed the unusual combination of an inflexible will and great personal charm. James courted Sarah and after 3 years the two married in 1835. Sarah moved into James house next door and into the drapery business.

The Hagar's directory of 1848 describes James as having a business in Church Street, as a Tailor, Hatter and Woollen Draper and Stay Manufacturer. Sarah learned how to make stays from her mother and was very well known locally for her work now making them for her Husbands business. James and Sarah had 10 children between 1837 and 1853. 5 of the children were to become active in the business at some point. Despite having 10 children in the relatively primitive early Victorian period Sarah still found time to help James in the business.

By 1851 James possessed freehold houses in Church Street and High Street, Market Harborough. The shop and house in Church Street were still retailing but they purchased a cottage at the rear of Plowmans Shop for the purpose of making stays. Within a very short time they took over a very fine double fronted shop next to the cottage. In 1855 at the age of 18, Robert, the eldest son, went to seek his fortune in America. His parents did not stop him going. However, within a year he was to return, not with a fortune but not empty-handed. Whilst in America Robert meet an inventor named Isaac Merritt Singer who was trying to convince his fellow Americans that he had perfected a sewing machine, which worked unfailingly. Robert immediately saw the potential of the machines for the family business and purchased 3 of the early machines and sent them to Market Harborough. Sarah embraced the new technology and installed them in her cottage workroom. By then there were 6 employees who refused to work with the new fangled and strange machines, which had to be threaded from a standing position. The seamstresses feared the machines would make them unemployed which at that time was a workers greatest fear. This is where Sarah's 'inflexible will' must have come in she was extremely firm with the girls who eventually gave in and the first mechanised corset factory in England was born. This, in turn brought about an increase in production and cheaper prices, which meant James could look for larger orders and grow the business very rapidly. In 1861 Robert, aged 23 and his younger brother, William, aged 20 were recorded as agents for four

insurance offices in the town. In the meantime Robert had an eye to the future. Just across the road in Adam and Eve Street there was a vacant factory, which had been built in 1805 and had been lastly a carpet factory. When Goddard's bank failed (more of this later) the carpet manufacturing was forced into bankruptcy in 1865 Robert and William rented part of the factory with the financial support of a William Stain. By 1870 the two brothers were described as Symington, R and W.H., stay manufacturers, Adam and Eve Street. They were well established as the 1871 census shows 72 stay makers living in the Harborough district and there would have been others coming in from outlying villages and the town of Desborough. The firm expanded very rapidly and in 1876 were known as R and W.H. Symington. By 1877 they had expanded into the rest of the factory, which they had now purchased, and had entrances in Adam and Eve Street and Factory Lane. That same year James Symington died aged 66. At this time the firm employed 500 people and made 250 dozen pairs of corsets every day. Production was insufficient to keep up with demand and the brothers sort to open more factories in other towns. These included Rugby; it was the first of Symingtons "Stitching Stations" which by 1893 was employing 250 hands with four small factories in Long Buckby, West Haddon, Welford all in Northamptonshire and Ullesthorpe near Lutterworth in Leicestershire. By 1881, two additional floors had been added to the "old side" of Adam and Eve Street and further factories were opened in Desborough, Rothwell and Leicester. The Symingtons now employed over one thousand people and had 500 machines throughout their network of factories. In 1881 they started exporting corsets to Australia.

Production methods were important and among these were the steam-moulding process used toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It consisted of hollow torso forms in various sizes, made of hand-beaten copper and attached to steel topped benches. Steam was fed into the copper forms, when they were at the correct temperature the corset linings were brushed with cold wet starch and wrapped around the appropriate form by lacing at the top and bottom and then being allowed to dry giving the corset its final and permanent shape.

In 1884 Robert and William Henry found that the rapid expansion of the business had exhausted them of funds, they were introduced to Mr George Katz Warren, a man of

considerable wealth who was living in Kibworth. He became a partner and provided capital that restored the strained finances and enabled new part of the factory to be built in Church Gate Market Harborough on a site of a row of cottages that were demolished to make way for it. Printing and box making being done in the factory Printing Shop.

In 1892 Robert Symington died he was only 55 and his sudden death was a blow to all who knew him. Despite his hot temper and flair for an argument he made many friends he was buried with full military honours as he had been a founder member of the Market Harborough company of Volunteers of which he was appointed Lieutenant, later to be appointed Captain of the Belvoir company, with a large number of the town and surrounding area folk turning out to pay their respect. This left William Henry in charge, encouraged by his sister, Perry, he took a greater interest in the work forces welfare. The firm were very benevolent and forward thinking for the late Victorian period. He built himself and his wife, Mary (nee Jackson) a magnificent mansion on Leicester Road called 'The Park'. William Henry was much stricter than his brother Robert. He would walk through the workrooms every day, was always immaculately dressed with the fragrance of his cigar warning of his impending approach. Seldom on these walkabouts did he fail to spot some fault and would bring it to the notice of those concerned. He toured not as a matter of efficiency but a timely correction could reduce the risk of accidents to operatives. Sarah died in 1890. In 1903 a new factory was built in Peterborough it housed 250 machinists but by 1911 it was too small and was extended, employing a further 200. By 1921 the factory was further extended and by 1939 employed 650 people. During WW2 it made parachutes, tropical shirts and gym shorts, reverting, after the war, to making corsets.

There were many notable men and women at the helm of Symingtons over the years one such person was Fredrick Cox, he realised it was not healthy for young children to wear the constraints of a corset so he came up with the 'liberty Bodice', a soft knitted garment which moulded itself to the body without the unhealthy constraint, giving children a greater freedom than the fashion had done before. It was at first a flop but after a re-launch and corsets for children were outmoded the Symington factories made 270,000 a year. At the height of production 3 million were made per year.

Advertisements appeared which portrayed 'Liberty Bodice' wearers as having happy, fun times. With free giveaways and children with names like 'Soccer Sid the Liberty Kid' yes boys wore them too, 'Climbing Clara' and 'Priscilla' who asked in 1922, "I've got a Liberty Bodice, have you?" saying that her liberty bodice made play more fun, and "children of all ages grow more supple, romp better and are better in every way". In 1912 a larger garment was made for adults and proved popular with sportswomen. By 1915 it was advertised as a sports garment.

In 1914 250 young men from Symingtons went to war, thirty-five never returned. An extension of the factory on Mill Hill was planned in 1913 but war intervened. The building was completed and occupied by 1916.

1914 saw the first factory in Manchester it was a building taken over from a well-known Wholesale house, which had been making its own corsets. Which may have been the CWS who moved the corset making to Desborough, because of the wealth of experience in the area for making corsets.

In 1920 The Australian government raised the import duty on foreign corsets to 30%. So Symingtons purchased the Reliance Building in West Melbourne and in December 1921 opened a new company R. & W.H. Symington & Co. (Aust.), Pty. Ltd. In the spring of 1922 a party of thirty-three girls and three men started the long trip to Australia to form the nucleus of the new factory workforce. They rapidly expanded and extensions and new factories were built around the original factory. It was later known as Liberty Corset Factory.

They acquired several companies throughout Britain to expand their production.

1934 saw the setting up of a factory in Wellington, New Zealand. When the New Zealand government imposed import restrictions on practically all British goods the factory had to step up production to fill the void. In 1934 they set up a company in Ireland in association with Dundalk Textiles Ltd. The two companies worked closely together. Personnel, equipment and technical equipment were sent from Market Harborough. During WW2 Market Harborough factory cut back production of underwear and produced equipment for the Armed forces. They made more than one million parachutes. They also turned over part of the factory to customers who were blitzed in London and a Coventry firm who made parts for Rolls Royce employing 350

workers. They also produced many hundreds of thousands of other garments, uniform etc for the Ministry of Supply. In 1946 the company took over a factory in Kirby, Liverpool with 600 to 700 workers. 1954 Waterhouse Reynolds and Co. Ltd. came into the group with four more factories in Leicester, Gainsborough and Blackwood.

In July 1967 the Courtaulds Group made an offer of £1.75 million for Symington. It was evident from the outset that Courtaulds intended to close R & W Symington down. In 1966 the company made a loss of £14,639 against the previous years profit of £93,232. With assets of some £3 million. By October 1967 they started to close factories. From 1967 to 1990 the Courtaulds Group owned the company. They reduced the factory size in Market Harborough the 'Old Side' of the factory was demolished and part of the building was sold to Market Harborough Council for the Library. Most of the name brands were dropped and production was for Evans, Mothercare, Next, Keynote and a number of mail order outlets.

The company finally closed its doors in 1990.

There were several other Corset companies in the area Burditt's in Desborough and a large factory was built on Rothwell Road Desborough by the Desborough Industrial and Provident Co-operative Society to re house the CWS corset factory that re located from Manchester.