

Symington's of Market Harborough.

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 26th 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. 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 he opened a small shop next door to his brothers. This was the start of the Symington dynasty and love affair with Market Harborough. James styled himself as a Tailor, Hatter and Woollen Draper. 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, shortly after Williams move a Mrs Gold and her family including a teenage daughter name Sarah, moved in to the vacated property. They came from Warwick. 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. Robert died in 1836 aged 56 years. A short time later Janet moved to Market Harborough to be with her two sons. 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. 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. 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. By then James had dropped the Woollen Draper from the name and now styled himself Tailor, Hatter, Haberdasher and Stay maker. 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 1863 James was described as a clothier and auctioneer. The following year James Symington and Sons were listed as auctioneers and stay manufacturers. For a year or two the business remained as Sarah making stays by hand and by machine whilst James continued the tailoring side. In the meantime Robert had an eye to the future. Sarah's eyesight was failing after many years of close work. However, 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 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. In 1870 Perry Gold Symington (b 1846 d 1932) joined her brothers to supervise the female work force and shortly after Edward Johnson Symington (b 1851 d 1903), the younger brother, joined as a production executive. 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 for keep up with demand and the brothers sort to open more factories in other towns. In 1879 the brothers considered building a factory in Rugby. It caused an immediate outcry. A group of citizens from the town, including a

number of well to do businessmen objected in the strongest possible way suggesting that a factory would be in conflict with the 'Great School' and the town. Some even suggesting that it would increase immorality by placing so many young women, working together in one large room. The campaign both for and against was ferocious. The project went ahead with Symington's agreeing to build a new factory at their own expense (approx £20,000) provided that a local company is formed with a nominal capital of £5000, which was to be funded by the citizens of Rugby. Interest was to be paid and proviso was made that all the shares would be redeemed by Symington's within 10 years. This was to ensure local interest and involvements with the scheme there was still a lot of opposition but eventually William Knight a well-known Nottingham architect and brother in law (he was married to their sister Elizabeth), was engaged to draw up plans. This was built and opened on the 14th November 1881. It was in Spring Street, close to the railway station, which was the main way to distribute the goods. It was also in a good catchment area to recruit women labour. The factory was state of the art for the time with well-ventilated workrooms, heated in the winter by hot water pipes and lit by the latest gas lighting. The underneath machine shafts were driven by an eight horsepower gas engine. There was a powered lift for moving goods and special protecting gear was fitted under the machines to prevent the voluminous skirts of the time being caught up in the drive shaft. The factory employed 40 girls to start with and soon more joined. They received tuition in the complicated process of producing Victorian corsets from experts from the Market Harborough factory. Rugby 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.

All the factories worked to a strict timetable. Starting at 6am there was a break for breakfast and lunch and a normal working week would finish at 1pm on a Saturday. Late shifts were worked to fulfil urgent orders working until 10pm. Although long hours were worked leisure time was made full advantage of. By 1870 Market Harborough factory had its own brass band and mixed choir. Part of the factory was kept for a works concert every fortnight in the winter months. The Symington family also joined in with the entertainment.

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.

Basic constructions of early corsets were first a facing cloth, then an interlining of hessian and finally a stiff white cotton lining. These along with whalebone supports and a front fastening busk provided a corset both firm fitting and hard wearing. By the mid 1880's the sewing machine had gone from hand cranked to powered by steam via a shaft under long benches. The machines could work at much greater speed, which required the operators to develop great dexterity and skill to produce the intricate garment. Between the 1880s and 1890s corsets combined remarkable efficiency and great beauty. Most models of the time were boned with whalebone and split cane, with forty or more of these supports working in conjunction with shaped pieces and corded side sections without any ‘give’. The garments were exquisitely made usually from lined black sateen, and heavily embroidered in coloured cottons or silks.

1890 saw the invention of the suspender; these were not attached to the corset until 1900s. Originally being attached to a separate waistband, although it solved the problem of keeping stockings in place caused additional arraigning of the petticoats. Symingtons were quick to see that the suspender could be mounted on to the corset, by 1890 their “suspender Bodice” for children had the new invention attached. In those days young children wore rigid corsets to “teach” their bodies to grow into a good fashionable shape.

Production methods were important and among these were the steam-moulding process used toward the end of the 19th 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. During this time a process known cording became an important feature of the manufacture of many new designs. Cording gave a measure

of suppleness while still conforming to the desire rigidity of figure control, whilst fulfilling the need for tough wearing and washing requirements. There were three types of cording commonly used; cotton or stitch cording, string cording and cane cording.

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. George directed finances for fourteen years going every morning to the new factory. He had no interest in the manufacturing process and rarely visited the workrooms. He would remain in his office all day directing the financial affairs. His office was known as the “counting House”.

In 1890 Symingtons developed the first “flossing” machine in partnership with Singer. It allowed the process of fancy stitching below each support serving a twofold purpose of preventing the boning moving in its casing and providing a decorative trim to the garment. At the time most corsets were black in colour and the flossing usually in a deep yellow cotton to provide a contrast. Generally Symingtons sold their own designs through wholesalers and occasionally made corsets to wholesaler’s designs being boxed and labelled as the customer requested. 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. Mr Warren died in 1898 aged 77. 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, about this time more members of the family were to join the firm including Roberts nephew Frederick G. Cox at 14 working as an apprentice in the design department on a six and a half year apprenticeship on a weekly wage of 10 shillings per week, in the third year it went up to 15 shillings, and up to 20 shillings in the final three and a half years. Edward Symington's Brother in Law, Robert Howett also joined the firm. He was a great help in securing the future success and prosperity of the firm. Also joining the firm were two more Symington Brothers Edward Johnson and James Lindsay Symington. The firm incorporated on the 29th September 1898, as R and W.H. Symington & Co. Ltd. Shares were offered to the public with nearly half being reserved for Directors and Employees. Edward Johnson Symington died in 1903 aged 52 he had been a much-respected 'Governor' of the firm. Fredrick Cox, who started as an apprentice was now elected to the board. In the same year 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.

One of Symington's rivals infringed the patent of the Symington "Taylor-made" corset, in 1905 and court proceedings were instigated they were very long and costly. Symington's eventually won the day and there were celebrations at the factory. One of their greatest rivals was the German corset industry, who were exporting mass produced garments into Britain. Fredrick Cox was sent to Germany and took advantage of the free trade conditions and purchased a large amount of cloth, which was cheaper than in the UK. Peterborough factory made corsets of German design with German cloth cheaper than the imports and completion from Europe quickly dissipated.

In 1906 William Henry retired but only lived 2 years and died in 1908. In 1906 George Wilson Wilson became the Managing Director.

As mentioned earlier children wore corsets from an early age. Up until 1908 the garments were stiff and unyielding. Fredrick Cox realised this was not healthy for young children 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. The garment changed over the years, originally with 10 buttons made of rubber then plastic. Children stopped wearing button fastened stockings and drawers so the buttons on the side seams were removed.

In 1910 the factory introduced snowy white corsets, previously they had been off whites, grey or pale cream. Because white was difficult to keep clean a special workroom was created where dirt was controlled and workers wore white overalls seamstresses dipped their hands in chalk to prevent dirty finger marks. In 1913 a pale peach, called blush white, inspired by a rose in Frederick Cox garden, was introduced and packed into boxes sprayed with rose scent.

On the death of James Lindsey Symington in 1911 Perry Gold Symington was appointed to the board, thus her long and faithful service was recognised.

In 1913 an eccentric Australian named Mrs Jenyns came to England with corsets of a revolutionary design, incorporating back lacing. Frederick Cox saw the potential and tracked her down and interviewed her. The two eventually agreed terms and the company manufactured the corsets under licence. Within a few years the Jenyns' range, based on the inventors original principle was sold and marketed throughout the

world. Jenyns' Patent corset featured a distinctive laced panel that supported the wearer's lower back, and came into its own during the war when women engaged in war work, and needed the extra back support.

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. During the war there was a shortage of materials and the company produced an effective substitute for boning called 'Fibrone' which was made of compressed paper. This proved suitable for female munitions workers as they were forbidden to wear anything with metal in them.

In 1918 a Works Association was formed, all employees were members, and co-ordinated a sick fund, outings, parties and sporting activities. The Company have some very strict rules, which had to be observed by the employees. By 1920 the Company had been exporting corsets to Australia. The 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.

In 1920 Miss Perry Gold Symington converted Edward Johnson Symington home, The Elms, into a hostel for orphan children. She died in 1923 aged 77. In the same year a complete new range of corsets were launched called 'Avro' it was immediately followed by the 'Peter Pan' range of fleecy bodices, a lightweight development of the Liberty Bodice. The Avro range of foundation garments was the company's first, truly branded collection, which included a full range of Brassieres, bandeaux, corsets (including sports and maternity corsets), corselets, wraparounds and health belts. The range was named in honour of A.V. Roe, a family friend, and developer of the Avro fighter plane in honour of its wartime service. In 1925 Managing Director George W. Wilson died, he was a friend of George Bernard Shaw and Kier Hardie, his wife was a Wilson. This was the end of the 'Old School' era. Frederick Cox took over as Managing Director added by Robert Howett, and moved Symington's into a new era.

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.

1928 and 29 saw the successful introduction of a corset based on the Janyin's principle and designed for men. It seemed the company could do no wrong. By the early 30s the company's collection encompassed hundreds of different sorts of garments. They ranged from traditional corset garments for the older woman with a fuller figure to hook side and busk front wraparounds, corselets, medium, brief and deep brassieres, roll top, zip and hook side girdles, suspender belts, sports corsets, nursing and maternity corset. It was at this time that the 'brassiere' became known as a bra. Symington's produced many different styles and depths ranging from brief satin bras to wear with resealing evening dresses to fully boned bust bodices for women with larger busts. The adoption of the bra meant a decline in fuller figure garments such as the corselet and wraparounds and briefer girdles became the choice to wear with a Bra. The garments were available in a myriad of different styles and fabrics. The three most popular colours of the day were white, tea rose and pink. In 1938 there were more than fifty types of bra in the Avro range alone, and made of cotton, rayon, silk and satins. Elastic fabrics were developed with rapidly improving quality. In 1929 Dunlop developed a new elastic yarn, evolved from latex called Lastex. This allowed for the manufacture of garments with a much finer texture and two-way stretch. The new Lastex could be given the same surface treatments as other materials. Batiste, a strong elastic with a rick satin surface was particularly popular. Rayon had been introduced by Courtaulds in the early 20th century had reached its peak in the inter war years. It gave a visual look of silk and was widely used for underwear especially in its knitted form 'Swami' for cups in bras. The newly introduced elastic fabric with their sleek and shiny finishes meant smooth, flattering underwear and could be fabricated without rigid panels and heavy boning. The garments fitted so well they hardly showed through outer garments. In 1937 the company negotiated exclusive rights to use E.W Canham's patent slide closing busk fastener to replace the stud fastener and give a smoother finish to the corset. In 1930 the company introduced

a corset that had the effect of not riding up. It was made under licence from an American company. Marketed under the name 'Nuback'. This was incorporated into many of the most popular designs. Also that year the company acquired the majority shareholding of William Pretty & Sons Ltd., of Ipswich. Who were manufacturers of underwear mainly for export to the USA. They were sold under the name 'Beauty's Contour' and created a wide appeal in many markets. In this year they also acquired a financial interest in Alcock and Priestley Ltd., based in London they produced underwear under the brands Worth's and Allenia. Which was manufactured by Symington's. During WW2 the warehouse was bombed out so the company moved to Market Harborough, although a subsidiary of Symington's they had a separate board of directors and specialised in wholesale distribution. The Liberty range first appeared in 1935 and production continued and increased steadily through the years and became the, along with Liberty Bodice, the company's main line of production. The name Libertyland was painted on the roof of the factory. In 1932 Robert Howett died and Frederick Cox's eldest son Edward was appointed to the board. 1934 saw the setting up of a factory in New Zealand, in Wellington. 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. Children's bodices and swimwear were their main concern. In 1933 the company introduced the first roll-ons. In 1938 & 9 Cox designed and launched the Everyone one size swimsuit. They took out a joint patent with Martin White Ltd, for circular ruching of swimsuit and registered the telescopic swimsuit. Stitched with Lactron (cotton covered rubber) thread was stitched in narrow rows onto the inside of the fabric while keeping at constant tension. The suit would fit from size 8 to 18 and kept its shape. In 1942 William S. Stanford became managing director. 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.

The 50s saw the inflatable bra and new range of swimsuits. 1954 Waterhouse Reynolds and Co. Ltd. came into the group with four more factories in Leicester, Gainsborough and Blackwood. In 1957 an association with Christian Dior began. These were expensive and difficult to make and had to be modified for the British market. Production stopped in 1960.

In 1959 a new factory in Dandenong in Australia opened. During the 1960's and 70's Symington's produced good for the major retailers 'St Michael' for M & S, Dorothy Perkins and Keynote for Littlewoods. Much of the future success depended on these markets as Factory Brands went out of fashion. In July 1967 the Courtaulds Group made an offer of £1.75 million for Symington. 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.