

A family history - Mike Snell



NAILS, LEATHER AND CHOCOLATE

**Two families search for
sweeter times**

As they sweated long hours at their respective crafts, it's unlikely that either Charles Troth or Samuel Beech gave a single thought as to the part they were playing in the crafting of England's social history.

Nor, as they strove to keep themselves and their families fed and clothed, did they think much about their future.

But while their lives were very different, and there was more than 30 miles between their respective homes in Bromsgrove and Walsall, the Troths and Beeches shared a common destiny. Such was their personal drive for improvement that it would bring the two families together in a way that mapped the social change brought about in the industrial engine room of the West Midlands.

Neither family was well off and they were both forced to work hard in the drudgery of their trades. The Troths were nailers; the Beeches were leather workers; two industries that sprang from the huge growth in engineering and transport as a result of England's industrial revolution. And both families chose to embrace the opportunities that were thrown up by these social upheavals.

Nails

Charles Troth was born at the turn of the 18th century, a time of great social and political change at home and abroad. He married local girl, Mary Smith, on Christmas Day in 1821 and the couple made their home in Sidemoor, a village on the edge of Bromsgrove, and where generations of Troths were already well ensconced. By the spring of 1841, when the first national census was taken, Charles and Mary already had eight of their eventual 11 children: Ann (b. 1822), William (b. 1824), Eliza (b. 1826), Emma (b. 1830), John (b. 1831), Daniel (b. 1833), David (b. 1835) and George (b. 1837).

In the next eight years the couple went on to have three further children: Walter (b. 1842), Caroline (b. 1847) and Ellen (b. 1849).

Nail making was Bromsgrove's principal trade involving not only men, but also many women and children. Indeed, in the 1841 census the five older Troth children (the

youngest was 10!) were all listed as workers in the family nail making concern.

Different parts of the Black Country specialised in different types of nail: horse nails were made in Dudley, rivets and small nails were made in Old Hill and Rowley Regis, large nails and spikes were made in Halesowen, while tiny tacks and brush nails were made in Bromsgrove. During the 19th century behind Bromsgrove's High Street and in the roads running off



A young girl making nails, around 1890

it, there were many courts and yards packed with workers. The nail trade was also concentrated in Bournheath, Catshill, Lickey End and Sidemoor, where Charles lived with his young family.

Nail making for families like the

Life in a nail shop

A typical nail shop was usually about 10 or 12 feet square with one door and one or two unglazed windows. The nail shop had a central hearth or fire so that all the family could work independently of each other but using just one fire, thus saving on fuel. There could be as many as six working round one fire.

Nailers usually either rented or owned their shop but a nailer who for some reason had no shop of his own, could rent a "standing" from a fellow nailer and share the fire to carry on making nails. Nailers provided their own tools. These were not numerous or expensive. The bellows, a small block or anvil, sharpening tools and for nailers making large nails, a special machine.

The Midland Mining Commission report of 1843 reports: *"The best forges are little brick shops of about 15 feet by 12 feet in which seven or eight individuals constantly work together with no ventilation except the door and two slits, a loop-hole in the wall. The majority of these workplaces are very much smaller and filthy dirty and on looking in upon one of them when the fire is not lighted presents the appearance of a dilapidated coal-hole. In the dirty den there are commonly at work, a man and his wife and daughter, with a boy or girl hired by the year. Sometimes the wife carries on the forge with the aid of the children. The filthiness of the ground, the half-ragged, half-naked, unwashed persons at work, and the hot smoke, ashes, water and clouds of dust are really dreadful."*

Troths was not lucrative and it was known for people to starve to death. In 1842 nail makers' masters made things even worse by cutting wages by 20%. That was the final straw for the workers. Thousands of nail makers from across the Midlands marched to Dudley where nail masters were holding their annual meeting to set wages.

On their way to the conference, the workers called in at the nail warehouses and forced the masters to come with them as prisoners, slashing the bellows of any nail makers found to be working. When they arrived they forced the bosses to meet with representatives of the workers. Their success was short-lived as somehow the masters had managed to summon help, and while the meeting was taking place the cavalry arrived with sabres drawn.

Most of the nail makers fled, but many were arrested. Security was stepped up, with heavy artillery patrolling the streets of Dudley, and trouble continued to simmer between nail makers and the soldiers. Order was gradually restored, and troops distributed food to the workers, while the prisoners arrested during the riot were treated relatively leniently by the courts after they heard about their state of starvation.

Nailers usually rented their cottages and nail shops from nail masters. The master supplied the forge and bellows, but the worker had to supply his own bench and tools and pay to maintain them. Iron was fetched in 60lb bundles and taken home with the week's order of what was needed. When the completed work was returned middlemen, known as foggers, did not always treat the nailers fairly. They gave little allowance for wastage and were

sometimes found to have tampered with the scales to reduce the amount of money they paid out.

In an article¹ by Robert Sherard (the noted 19th century journalist and biographer of Oscar Wilde) one Bromsgrove woman described what amusement she found in life: "*There is none for me; bed and work is all we get.*"

Throughout the 19th century successive generations of Troths plied the nailer's trade, living cheek by jowl with each other. They were not alone. Several other families were traditionally nailers in this part of the world, including Giles, Kimberley, Crawford, Byng and Dyers. By 1881 there were nearly 20 separate Troth families living in the small community of Sidemoor alone and most, if not all, were related.

Charles Troth's son Walter married local girl Harriet Dyers in early summer 1863 and the 1871 census shows them living with his mother and father (who were in their seventies) in Sidemoor. Walter and Harriet had by then four children: Kate (1864), George (1865), John (1868) and Simeon (1870). Over the next 14 years they had six more: James (1872), William (1874), Margery (1876), Arthur (1879), Ashwell (1882) and Emma (1884).

Interestingly, between 1867 and 1908, at least 50 boys in the Bromsgrove district were given the first name of Ashwell; in the same period there were a number of Ashwell Troths recorded with at least one in the family line (Walter and Harriet's son who married Florence Annie Nowell in 1908). What started this trend, however, is uncertain as the name was rarely used elsewhere in the country.

It is thought that the first family to adopt the Ashwell Christian name – the Cranes of Sidemoor – were staunch Methodists. The answer may be that the first Ashwell was not named after a Methodist preacher as was first thought, but after one Benjamin Yate Ashwell, a man born into a Birmingham brass founding family who became a Church Missionary Society missionary to the Maoris. In 1867, he returned to England for a short time. Did he preach in the local area during his visit and make such an impression that babies were named after him?

Leather

Man has worn and used leather since the beginning of recorded history. Thousands of our ancestors were employed in the trade – from medieval times until the 19th century. Craftsmen developed skills associated with different aspects of the trade. Some still exist today but others, such as the cordwainer and currier, do not.

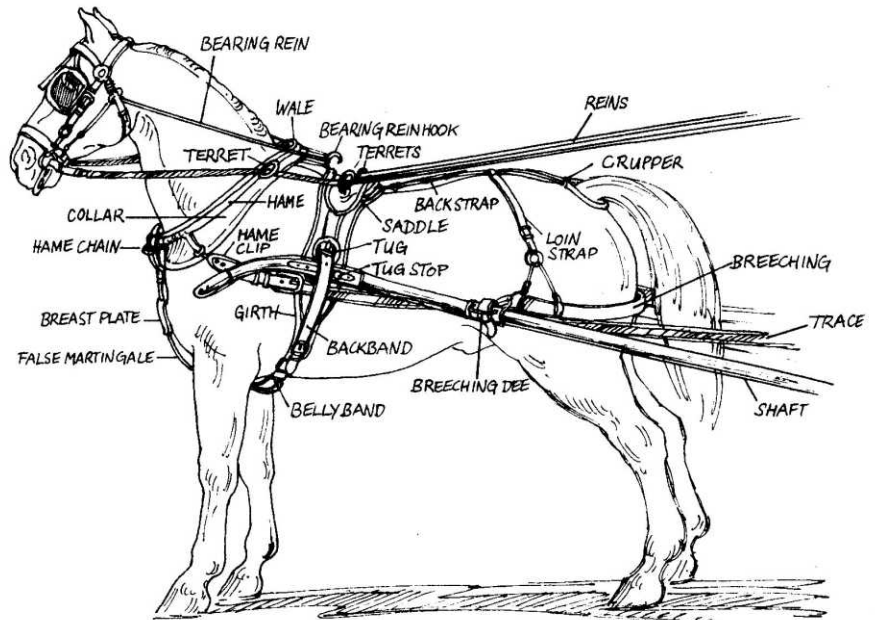
Following the early stages of the leather making process, including tanning, the unfinished leather was passed to the currier whose craft was to turn the stiff material into a pliant, workable product for the final craftsman to transform into the finished goods. The art of currying leather was hard manual labour needing great skill and a range of special hand tools. The currier worked on a variety of hides, including ox, cow, calf, goat, sheep, pig and deer.

Samuel Beech was a currier. He was born in Staffordshire around 1819, although there is as yet no actual

record of his birth. By 1841 he had moved to live in Longsmith Street, Gloucester, presumably following his specialist trade. On Christmas Day 1841 he married Mary Ann Wood, a 20-year-old Gloucestershire girl, and the couple had nine children: Henry (b. 1848), Charles (b. 1851), Edward (b. 1853), Eliza (b. 1858), Albert (b. 1860), Francis (b. 1861), Giles James (b. 1864), Louisa and Samuel.

Samuel junior is an enigma. According to the Beech family history notes of Dorothy Cotton² there was a Samuel but she believed that he had emigrated to Australia. However, there is no obvious record of his birth, nor any mention in successive census returns. One possible answer to the puzzle lies in a story, which is also told by Dorothy.

Samuel senior's peripatetic trade



This diagram shows the complicated nature of a single horse harness and collar

seemingly took him to Ireland sometime after the birth of his first child, Henry, in 1848. The young family lived there for a number of years as both of their next two children, Charles (1851) and Edward (1853) were born in Dublin. But the timing of their move to Ireland had been awful. They arrived just after the worst of the Irish potato famine (1845-1849) and the economic aftermath in Ireland remained severe for some years. Life would have been very harsh even for skilled tradesmen like Samuel Beech. Sometime between 1853 and 1858, therefore, Samuel and Mary decided to return to England.

buried at sea that she told no-one about the death until they arrived in England. Dorothy Cotton relates that according to her grandfather Francis Beech (Samuel's son) the child was buried in the small cemetery close to Snow Hill Railway Station on the outskirts of Birmingham city centre. Perhaps, then, this was young Samuel, and the circumstances would explain why he is not to be readily found in UK records.

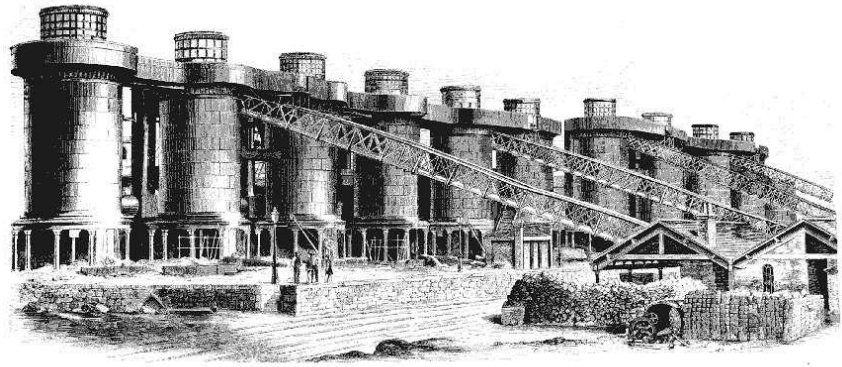
Samuel Beech returned to his county of birth and finally settled in Walsall, a town synonymous with leather and the centre of the UK's leather industry. Horses were an essential part of Victorian economic and social life, and provided a huge market for Walsall's manufacturers. The working horse was still the chief means of power on most farms, and in total there were some 3.3 million horses in late Victorian Britain. In the last decades of the 19th century the Walsall leather trades entered a period of unprecedented prosperity. Exports boomed and Walsall firms sent their products to most parts of the British Empire. Foreign wars provided a particularly lucrative source of trade.



Francis and Clara Beech with their children, taken around 1910 at 101 Mary Vale Road. Top row, left to right: Sam, Frank, Bill and Ted. Second row: Floss, Mona, Em, Clara and Nell. Front row: Irene, Prince the dog and Fred.

It was during the sea crossing that the couple's fourth child – a baby still – tragically died, possibly as a result of the hardship suffered by the family in Ireland. Mary was so frightened that her child might be

Despite its prosperity the late Victorian leather industry in Walsall remained, in essence, a mass of tiny and often primitive backyard workshops, intermingled with a handful of factories each employing perhaps two or three hundred people. The report of the Sweated Trades Commission of 1889 detailed allegations of “sweating” in Walsall and showed that hours for these often highly-skilled workers were long, wages were poor and conditions for women were especially bad. Typical earnings for a male saddler at this time were about 28 shillings (£1.40) for a 55 hour week. Women would earn a half or a third of this. Unlike male employees, who were paid by the hour, most women were paid by the complete item. When orders were scarce they would be laid off without wages.



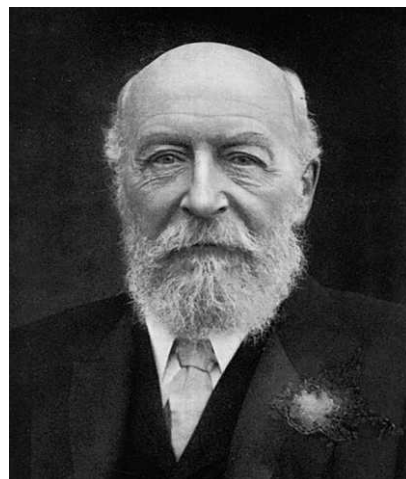
Blast furnaces at Barrow-in-Furness, around 1870

Chocolate

As the 19th century came to a close huge societal and economic changes were taking place in England. By the spring of 1901 Walter and Harriet Troth had already made their move away from the hardship of nail making in Bromsgrove. They now lived with their still substantial family at 65 Mary Vale Road, Bournville, south Birmingham, and the home of Cadbury's chocolate factory. Indeed, the houses in Mary Vale Road were constructed in 1895 (the Troths would have been among the first tenants) as part of George Cadbury's philanthropic vision to create a unique community adjacent to the Bournville factory³.

By now Walter was 59. He worked

as a carpenter's labourer, probably for Cadbury's. Three of Walter's sons, James (aged 28), William (27) and Arthur (22) were all single and also worked as labourers of one kind or another. Ashwell (19) and Emma (17) worked in the factory on the production lines – Ashwell was a chocolate mixer while his sister was a chocolate fancy box maker. Thus began a long association between the Troth family and Cadbury's chocolate, with several generations working and living at Bournville. Walter's older son, Simeon, had also moved to the Birmingham area and was living at 73 Midland Road, Kings Norton – a mile or so from his mother and father. Simeon was a platelayer, probably with the nearby railway company, but his son Harold, by the age of 14 in 1916, had joined Cadbury's, where he stayed for the rest of his working life.



George Cadbury - chocolate maker and philanthropist

Two more of Walter's sons had escaped Sidemoor and nail making. George Troth, born in 1868, and his younger brother John both moved to Barrow-in-Furness looking for work in the town's booming steelworks. It was no surprise that they were tempted. The dramatic growth of Barrow-in-Furness in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was fuelled by the ready availability of Furness iron ore. Significant investments were made in developing the town to exploit this resource. The various ironworks, steelworks, foundries, shipyards and docks required a huge influx of population to support them. This in turn led to the rapid building of rows of good quality mass-produced terraced housing for the workers, and substantial sandstone villas for the management. The Barrow pioneers created wide tree-lined streets, imposing public buildings, extensive dock systems, and an efficient public transport system.

As Troths from Bromsgrove George and John they were not alone in Barrow. Their cousin, Rosa, had married Abel Troth in 1888 and the young family also quickly moved to the town in search of work. By 1911 they were living at 28 Exmouth Street with Abel and his 16-year-old son, Daniel, both working in the steelworks. Abel and Rosa had four other children: Florrie, 22, Rosa, 14,

Mona, 7 and one-year-old James.

George was living around the corner at 12 Keppel Street, with his wife Mary and sons Arthur (nine) and George (six). He was employed as a steelworks labourer. John though fared less well in Cumbria. By 1901 he and his wife Rebecca had decided to return to Birmingham and were living with his brother Simeon at 73 Midland Road. John and Rebecca had two children – Harriet (six) and Albert (four), both of whom were born in Barrow.

George and John were close – close enough to have a similar taste in girls, as they married sisters Mary and Rebecca Juggins whom they had met while growing up in Sidemoor. George married Mary, aged 22, in Barrow in 1889, while John wed Mary's younger sister in Barrow in 1894.

George and Mary remained in Barrow, but George died aged just 47 in the spring of 1911. That year's census showed Mary living with her sons Arthur and George, and with the temporary support of her mother-in-law, Harriet, and sister-in-law, Mary, who were visiting. Mary's sister, Rebecca, had also travelled from Bromsgrove to be with her.

There were big decisions being made

within the Beech family too and some made the move to discover more prosperous pastures away from Walsall. The reason was clear;



65 Mary Vale Road, Bournville

at the start of the 20th century Walsall was home to nearly a third of Britain's saddlers and harness makers. Indeed, it is for saddlery and harness that the Walsall leather industry remains one of the best known, yet from 1900 these trades began a long decline. One by one, the traditional role of the horse was challenged, and eventually supplanted, by the internal combustion engine in its many forms. The great age of the horse had ended and with it the artisan jobs that kept so many families fed

and clothed.

Samuel's son Francis (familiarily known as Frank) was a horse collar maker and he and his wife, Clara, were living at 88 Tantarra Street, Walsall, at the time of the 1901 census. His oldest son William, aged 19, was also a horse collar maker, while three other children, Francis (17), Clara (15) and Florence (14) all made or stitched harnesses. In 1900 there were a number of leather factories within a stone's throw of the Beech home⁴. Just a few doors away, at 83 Tantarra Street, was Walter Crowther's leather goods company, while around the corner in Eldon Street, there were two harness makers (where the Beech children probably worked): Fairbanks Lavender and Son and Thomas Horton.

Francis and his children were skilled workers yet they clearly felt that their future in Walsall was limited. Their lives could be bettered if they moved to the dynamic, and expanding, economies around Birmingham. It is believed the family moved to 101 Mary Vale Road, Bournville, shortly after the end of the Boer War in 1902 and, like the Troths, many Beech family members went on to work in Cadbury's chocolate factory.

References

¹ *White Slaves of England series, Pearson's Magazine, 1896.*

² *Dorothy Cotton, 1979. Great granddaughter of Samuel Beech. Copy of manuscripts contained in author's archive.*

³ *His vision was realised. A vibrant Bournville Village Trust still manages the area around the factory. Indeed, Mary Vale Road has been extensively refurbished since 2004.*

⁴ *Kelly's Directory of Staffordshire, 1900.*