

The Smith Family of Halifax, and the origins of Caledonia Wire Works

The tombstone of a significant Halifax citizen, and of the young children of a Mayor of Halifax, has just been uncovered at Lister Lane Cemetery, after decades under the surface.

Thomas Smith was born in Halifax on 16th November 1776, the eldest child of John Smith, shoemaker (1737-1828), and his wife Ann Fletcher (1746-1830). The family belonged to the Unitarian Chapel at Northgate-End, where the baby was taken for baptism. Among Thomas's paternal ancestors were two significant nonconformist ministers at Mixenden Chapel.

The family lived in John Street. In his youth, Thomas worked in his father's shoemaking business, and it seems likely that while there, he realised that leather had a different use of growing importance. At that time, the textile industry was expanding greatly, causing a rising demand for cards for carding the wool; cards were then all made with a leather foundation. Realising an opportunity could be opening up to make more money than by shoemaking, Thomas started a cardmaking business of his own. Fortunately, he had both caution and good business sense; he knew what he wanted, and soon made money. In due course, he was able to live well; and in social life he appeared as a debonair gentleman. An old account tells us "he looks out from his portrait, wearing a flawless white cravat, immaculate yellow waistcoat, and dark green cut-away coat," so Thomas appears to have been rather a dandy, as well as a businessman.

In August 1806, he was proposed for membership of the Loyal Georgan Society by Jonathan Illingworth and was duly admitted; his father had been a foundation member. From 1817 Thomas served on the society's Committee. In December 1815, Thomas, already initiated into Freemasonry, became a member of the local Lodge of Probity.

By 1816, Thomas operated from an address at Crossfield, near the current DSS building, and close to where his father lived. Having prospered, in 1818, he fell in love with Hannah (nee Broadhead), the young widow of William Ellis, cloth dresser, of Sowerby; she already had two daughters. Thomas and Hannah were married by Licence on 16th September at Halifax Parish Church. Four months later their first child, a boy named Matthew, was born, being baptised at Northgate End in March 1819.

Besides managing his own cardmaking business, Thomas appears to have also helped his aged father in nearby John Street, for he was described as a cardmaker in 1823, and as a shoemaker in 1824, when his younger son Frederick was baptised. About 1823, Thomas moved his own business to Northgate, occupying a building near the top of Wade Street on the north side, and at one time there was an alley just down that side of the street which was named Smith's Passage after him. This was approximately where today's pedestrian entrance to the Bus Station is.

When Hanover Methodist New Connexion Chapel opened in 1836 (the building occupied by today's Halifax Playhouse), the Smith family started to go there, but a change soon occurred, and by 1839 Thomas was a teacher in Sion Congregational Sunday School (Wade Street, part of today's Bus Station complex); and his connection with Sion Chapel would last for the rest of his life. He conducted open air temperance meetings on Savile Park, and was later one of the founders of Sion's *Band of Hope*. At the time of his death he was chapel treasurer.

Robson's Commercial Directory for 1840 records amongst Halifax cardmakers, 'Thomas Smith, Lilly Lane,' so we know that by then he had moved his works again. At that time, a few factories had been established in Lilly Lane, yet it led to a fashionable residential area. The baths there, fed from a spring of pure water rising in Greece Field, were described in 1845 as the finest in Yorkshire.

On 18th January 1852, Thomas, who had been retired for several years, died at his residence in Bath Parade, near Lilly Lane; he was 75 years old. Four days later he was buried in Lister Lane Cemetery (grave number 3118). His widow survived until 1864.

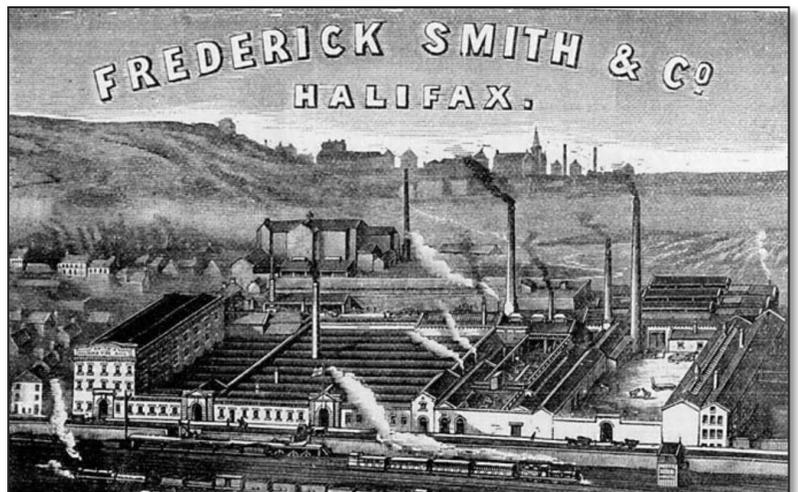
Thomas's elder son Matthew started work in the counting house of Messrs. Sharp and Brown of Bowling Dyke, wire manufacturers as well as cardmakers; their works were under the arches of the old North Bridge. About 1841 the firm decided to remove that part of the business to Birmingham, but Matthew was entrusted with the management of their Tintern Abbey Wire Works, so left Halifax for Monmouthshire.

In 1842 Matthew returned briefly to Halifax to marry Mary Sutcliffe Holroyd, the daughter of Richard Holroyd, a Halifax jeweller and watchmaker; the wedding took place on 29th October at Sion Chapel. The bride was said to have been the belle of Halifax. Together they returned to Tintern Abbey, where they remained till Matthew was appointed manager of Sharpe and Brown's Birmingham Works. He was back in Halifax periodically; in 1846 he joined the Masonic Lodge of Probity, and in 1848 he was admitted into the Loyal Georgan Society. While living at Birmingham, he took out his first patent for "Improvements in annealing pots and pans." His occupation was then recorded as bookkeeper, as it was when two of his young children, who died young, were brought back to Halifax from Birmingham for burial at Lister Lane in 1850 and 1854 respectively.

Thomas Smith's younger son, **Frederick**, born in 1823, did not enter his father's business either, but trained with another local cardmaking and wire manufacturing firm, James Royston, Son and Co. In due course he became their traveller, and in 1850 was authorised to draw bills for them and endorse them for discounting.

His first marriage was almost certainly the result of his commercial travelling. On 1st September 1851, Frederick got married in the village of Kintore, twelve miles northwest of Aberdeen; his bride, Mary, was the daughter of Alexander and Jane Abel, of Burnside, Kintore. Sadly, Frederick's wedded happiness was to be short-lived. Their infant son died on 26th April 1854, and a month later Mary too was dead, at the early age of 24. Frederick was desolate; and sent all the way to Aberdeen for a monumental tombstone of her native granite, which was erected at Lister Lane. When he came to establish his own business five years later, he called his mill 'Caledonia Works,' in her honour, and adopted the Scottish Thistle as his trade-mark. In November 1861, he joined the Lodge of Probity.

Frederick was high principled, cautious, shrewd and calculating; and following his bereavement, his chief determination was to succeed in business. In 1859, he proposed marriage to a widow twenty years his senior, Mrs. Ward Dyson Hitchen, nee Royston, sole proprietor of the firm for which he worked. Her refusal of Frederick's offer of marriage made him consider setting up in business on his own, and he managed to obtain the support of some colleagues from Roystons to assist.



Caledonia Works about 1890

That same year he founded Frederick Smith and Co., the first order being booked on 25th October 1859. His Scottish travelling must have been most productive, as later that year he received orders from both Edinburgh and from Dundee. Although he had invented and patented a continuous wire-drawing machine, more capital was soon required. So, Frederick began borrowing money from his brother Matthew, with the result that Matthew's eldest son, George, joined Frederick Smith and Co. in 1863. Early the following year, Matthew himself returned to Halifax, settling with his family at Bermondsey House, which I think was in Bull Close Lane. He immediately signed Articles of Partnership with Frederick.

The following year, Frederick was elected a Liberal councillor for North Ward, in which sector of the town Caledonia Works was situated; he remained an energetic member of the Council until his death. In 1865 the firm joined the Chamber of Commerce.

In 1866, Frederick gave evidence to the Royal Commission on Rivers, which visited Halifax that year. He said that over 100 men and boys were employed at his works; and that they dealt with about 1,500 tons of wire per year. 90 tons of sulphuric acid were used to cleanse the wire when it arrived; then it was steeped in water and coated with lime water. A great deal of this went into the Hebble Brook!

Religious life also claimed Frederick's attention, and in 1865 he also became a deacon of Sion Chapel. His residence was at 76 Rhodes Street, but around this time was soon engaged in building a large house, later known as Savile Royd, in Savile Park Road, on land which he had bought from the Rothwell family.

In 1863 Frederick had married again, this time to a Yorkshire girl, Martha, daughter of Wilson Sutcliffe of Bowling, a dyer by trade. She was known as Patty, and the following year she gave birth to a son, Henry Sutcliffe Smith; but tragedy was around the corner. On 13th February 1868, Frederick suffered a stroke on coming home from a council meeting, and he died at midnight. He was just 44 years old, and his burial took place in the same vault as his first wife, at Lister Lane (grave number 726). Unfortunately, he died intestate. His estate was solvent, but there were complications as his widow asked for her late husband's interest in the firm to be paid out to her in full. As the company was not limited at that time, his brother Matthew, as executor and administrator, could not refuse. He paid out about £10,000 over four years. Savile Royd was sold to the Porter family, who completed and occupied it.

Shortly before his brother's death, Matthew Smith had moved to a house in Regent Street, the site of which was later occupied by the Halifax Courier building. In due course, he was elected as a Liberal councillor for North Ward in Frederick's place, and was soon appointed chairman of the Improvement Committee; he also became an Alderman. He should also be remembered for presenting the sundial in People's Park, in 1873. Matthew remained a very active businessman, and in March 1877 made an extensive continental business-cum-holiday tour with his daughter, lasting from March to May; the itinerary covered France, Italy and Switzerland.

On 9th November 1879, Matthew was elected Mayor of Halifax. On his installation the mover of the vote of thanks said the new Mayor was generally credited with a firm hand, but he also had a warm and generous heart. After this came the Mayor's lunch - eight sumptuous courses, with sherry, champagne, still hock, claret and port. Afterwards the "health of the new Mayor was drunk with enthusiasm."

Sad to relate, Mayor Matthew Smith did not complete his year of office. The following January he was taken ill with a "rheumatic affection of the chest muscles," and died suddenly at his Regent Street home on 31st March 1880, aged 61; the "Courier" reported the event as "an event of sad import to the whole town." He was buried at Stoney Royd; his widow died in 1885.

Besides his widow, he left behind five sons and four daughters. The eldest son was to become Mayor of Halifax in 1895 himself, and figures in Halifax's history as Sir George Fisher-Smith. Another son, Michael Holroyd Smith, became well known as an inventor. Another Mayor of Halifax, and a distinguished 20th Century artist, Sir Matthew Smith, also feature among the descendants.

Frederick Smith's only child was to become Chairman of the Bradford Dyers Association, and also of the Colour Users Association; he was knighted in 1929, as Sir Henry Sutcliffe Smith. He lived latterly at Ingerthorpe Grange, Markington, where he and his wife were visited by Queen Mary in 1935. Sir Henry died suddenly at Cannes in 1938, and lies buried in Harlow Hill Cemetery, Harrogate.

The tombstone of Thomas Smith, and of the two children of Matthew Smith who died young, hidden for many years, is now visible again, having been uncovered by volunteers at Lister Lane Cemetery. The Aberdeen granite monument to Frederick Smith and his first wife is also viewable.

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