

THE CHAMPIONS OF THE VALE

by Constance Cuff

Champion was a fairly common name in Gloucestershire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This study is confined to the Nibley-Dursley family with its branches near Frampton Cotterell.

William Champion and his family lived in North Nibley in the time of Elizabeth I. Probably the family worked on the land or took up allied trades; Daniel Champion of Dursley (died 1723) was a broadweaver. William's son, John, and grandson, Christopher, and their families continued to live in Nibley, but the next generation - John Champion (1680 - 1731) and his family moved to Stinchcombe, and later Upper Cam. It appears that the family increased and prospered because there are several imposing table-tombs with this name in the churchyard of St. George's Church, Cam.

John's elder brother, Joseph, is described as 'husbandman of Dursley' in his will dated 1699, but it was John's son, William, who saw a great improvement in the family's fortunes during his long life of 90 years (1714 - 1804).

William married twice; to Rachel Jones of Cam in 1736; and to Rachel Bendall in 1764. (The Bendalls were hatters in Dursley.) William had fourteen children of which nine survived him. Eight of the sons reached adulthood, so it is likely that they moved out into the villages of the South Vale to find employment.

James, the eldest, went to Berkeley; Josiah (who married Hester Rudder of Uley) may have stayed locally; and John (b.1748) probably started farming at Alveston where the Champion family have continued farming to this day.

The eldest son of William's second family was Samuel, and in his will of 1803 William left to him the management of his estate, including the saddler's shop in Parsonage Street, Dursley, which he had founded in 1778. (Other members of the family had prospered in this trade also.) William Champion owned houses and land in Cam and Dursley, some of which remained in the family till 1932. William was described as a 'Yeoman of Dursley'.

Samuel continued to carry on the saddlery business in Dursley, and lived next door. He became an important citizen of the town and was Bailiff in 1808. His brother, Peter, followed his mother's family trade and became a hatter with a factory in Frampton Cotterell. The hats they made were of generally high class, some made of felt, some from rabbit skins. In 1789, Peter married Hester Goulding of Frampton Cotterell and they had ten children, three boys (William, George and Samuel) and seven girls.

A Criminal Son

William followed his father's trade, but unfortunately he was tried in Gloucester in April 1823 for receiving stolen goods (hat blocks) and was sentenced to fourteen years transportation to Australia. He was twenty-two at the time and left a wife and baby daughter behind. They must have followed him soon after, because a son, William, was born to them in 1827. William and his family settled in Hobart, Tasmania, and he established himself as a hatter, making hats from silver-haired rabbit skins, but this did not prosper, and he became the owner of a brewery and public house which he called 'The Jolly Hatter's Inn'.

In 1834 William's father and mother, Peter and Hester, and his two youngest sisters, Theresa and Milcah (later called Thirza and Mahala), came out from England to Hobart. Hester died in 1838, and Peter in 1852. William's wife (née Maria Mann from Bristol) died in 1855 and he came home to England to marry his cousin, Elizabeth Champion, in 1856. She did not accompany him back to Hobart, where he died in 1871. William is still gratefully remembered in Hobart for establishing the first ring of bells in Trinity Church and introducing change-ringing to the southern hemisphere.

Meanwhile another small hat factory had been established by Peter and Anne Champion of Winterbourne. It seems likely that they were related to the hat-makers of Frampton Cotterell. Similarly, John Champion and his family were living in Stone in the 1760s.

Champion's Enterprise

Samuel Champion's motto was "Nothing but the best". He expanded the business at 48 Parsonage Street to include twine and rope-making. His rope-walk extended from the back of the shop to Prospect Place. Dursley was a centre for rope-making and there were several other rope-walks in the town. They employed boys part-time - ten years old and upward - who were so untidy and dirty that Mr. Talboys, the National Schoolmaster, gave them a good scrubbing in 1878.

Samuel's first wife was Mary Godwin of Dursley who died at the age of twenty-one in 1795, with her infant son, William. Then Samuel married Ann Long of Stroud in 1796, and they had two boys and four girls. The elder boy, John Long Champion went to live in Stroud. Later his son, also John Long Champion (1832 - 1902) kept the village store and post office in Frampton Cotterell. He had four daughters, the eldest, Elizabeth, married A. F. Bailey.

The younger boy was William who married Sarah Hill, daughter of William Hill of Slimbridge; they had two boys and two girls. At the time of the 1851 census, eleven members of the family lived at 46 Parsonage Street. Samuel died in 1851 so William carried on the business. He was town Bailiff in 1847. When he died in 1872, the firm was making rick cloths and sacks in addition to ropes, twine and saddlery, so more room was needed. In 1865 they moved to a site at the railway station and then

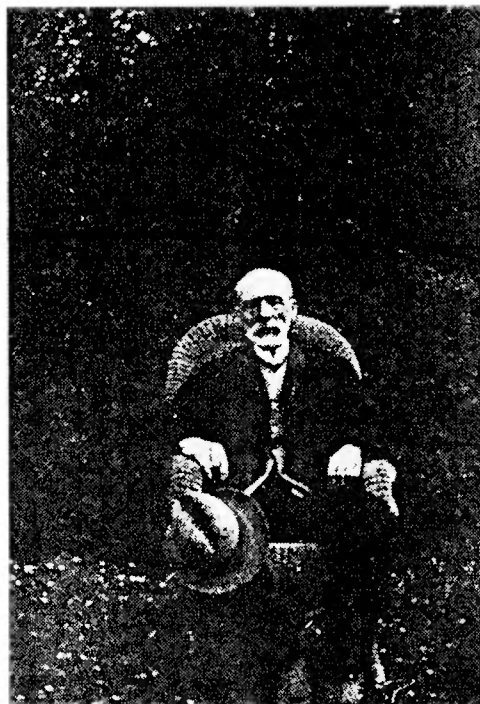
acquired the Dursley Old Brewery in Long Street where they built the Reliance Works, and added cocoa matting to their list of products. The saddlery business was sold in 1892.

Family Connections

William's sisters continued to live in Dursley. Caroline married William Iles, a farmer in Chipping Sodbury, and Elizabeth (1802 - 1883) married her cousin, William Champion from Hobart, Tasmania (1856) but did not go back to Hobart with him. She was known in the family as Aunt Betsy, and was looked after in her later years by Elizabeth, the daughter of John Long Champion of Frampton Cotterell. Mary Ann (1797 - 1881) did not marry. The three sisters are buried in the same grave in St. Mark's churchyard, Woodmancote.

The eldest of William and Sarah's children was Sarah Ann (1837 - 1924) who married George Ayliffe, the proprietor of the Old Bell Hotel. She was able to send meals for her mother from the hotel to 46 Parsonage Street when the old lady was not able to manage herself - the child running this errand being rewarded with *1d* or $\frac{1}{2}d$.

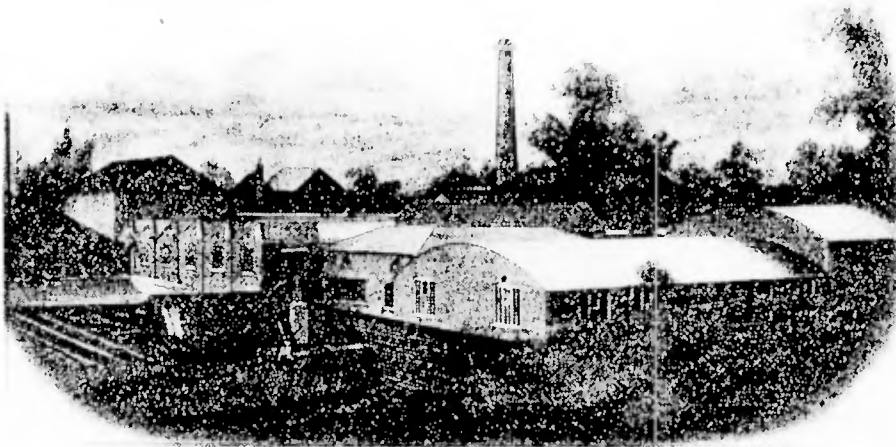
The next daughter, Esther Maria (1840 - 1909), married Henry Thomas Foster Carter. Their son (same name) married his cousin Caroline, the third



MR JOHN B. CHAMPION, J.P.
Taken at Uley, Gloucestershire,
on his 80th birthday, May 24th, 1923.

daughter of John Long Champion of Frampton Cotterell.

The eldest son, Samuel (1838 - 1863), died young so was not able to carry on the business; this was left to the youngest, John Benjamin Champion (1843 - 1930).



General View of John B. Champion and Sons' Works, Dursley

More Enterprise in Dursley

J. B. Champion became one of the leading industrialists of the town. He was Bailiff in 1874 and later became a member of the District and Parish Councils, a magistrate, and Chairman of the Board of Guardians. He was concerned with the plight of the poor people of the town in the 1890s, and in the winter of 1890 and onwards he arranged for children of the unemployed men to have breakfast at the Victoria Hall. In 1893 he gave 200 loaves of bread to the poor.

He lived at the family home, 46 Parsonage Street, with his first wife, Caroline Stafford (1847 - 1880) and their six children, and then with his second wife, Frances Ellen (1851 - 1897); their children were George and Frances Ellen. Finally, in 1900, he married Marion, the widow of Francis Woodbury Price, a brewer, and they lived at her house, The Larches, in Uley.

The firm's fortunes continued to improve and do well, and the number of products increased. They used flax, hemp, jute, coir, hair and cotton to make all manner of heavy textiles, such as ropes, twines, canvas, sacks, rick covers, and tarpaulins. Of the eight children, only Samuel Stewart, the eldest, and John William took part in the business. By 1905 both of them were married, so the firm had an outing to London to celebrate. They left Dursley at 4.30 a.m. on the first morning and returned at 7.30 a.m. the next day!

In 1907 the firm began to make carpets and rugs. The Dursley Reversible Rug, with pile and pattern on both sides, was an excellent product and became an important item of manufacture. The firm sent rugs to the British Empire Exhibition of 1925, and a complete set to Princess Elizabeth on her wedding in 1947.

Both sons worked at the Reliance Works till 1909 when there was a disagreement between them. In 1910, John William left the family firm and founded another Carpet and Rug Manufactory at Boulton Mills, Dursley. (This is the site of Elvey's Brewery at the bottom of Boulton Lane). This firm was called 'Champion and Hall'. In 1911 he patented Boultonia Oriental Reversible Rugs, followed by Seamless Axminster Carpets and Rugs in 1925.



Champion and Hall - a view of the carpet looms at Silver Street / Boulton Lane in the 1930s.

He married Laura Hooper of Bridgwater, and they had two children; John Russell (1908 - 1977), and Mary, who moved away from Dursley and had no dealings with the firm. In 1939 the factory was commandeered for the Army and a London Territorial Unit was billeted there. Mr. Champion declared himself bankrupt and retired to Bristol. Eventually he managed to pay off all his creditors with interest.

Samuel Stewart Champion continued his father's business. He spent thirteen years in the Army. In 1906, he was in command of F company of the Volunteer Battalion of the Fifth Gloucesters, with the rank of Captain. In 1914 he was promoted to Major, and also was made a Justice of the Peace. In 1903, he had married Beatrice Bide of Farnham, Surrey, and they had four children. Latterly, Major Champion lived at Weston-super-Mare and travelled daily to Dursley via the Berkeley Road Station. He died in 1933, three years after his father. Their estates were sold at the same time by the auctioneers Davis, Champion & Payne. Incidentally, one of the partners was Llewellyn Champion - probably one of the Stroud Champions. Major Champion's estate included three shops, one having dwelling accommodation and one lock-up shop let to W. H. Fox, Saddler.

Two of Samuel Champion's children survived him; Constance, who married Ralph Wills, and Evelyn, who married W. R. Wooldridge. Constance carried on the business under very difficult circumstances. At the outbreak of the 1939 War, the factory was commandeered for the K Battery of the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars.

Constance wrote - "Reliance Works in my lifetime had two major set-backs, the two Wars when vital work-people were drafted to Listers. During the Second War no rugs were made and after the War two



Samuel Stewart Champion of Dursley,
when appointed a magistrate in 1914.

faithfuls returned to start up the looms but were only allowed to make what was described as utility - with a clear mark. Two matting looms were allowed to be used as they turned out matting which was used on the landing beaches by tanks etc. on D-day onwards."

The firm closed in 1957. The factory remained empty and neglected for eight years, then eventually the site was acquired by F. W. Bailey Newspaper Group and a modern factory built, still called "Reliance Works".

Acknowledgements

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