

HENRY FISHER SEXTON

Background and Early Life

Henry Fisher Sexton was born 8 October 1832, the third son of James and Jane (Curtis) Sexton. He was baptised at St. John Timberhill Parish Church in Norwich 6 days later (NRO, Norwich, St. John Timberhill, PR). The name Henry was probably selected by his mother Jane in honour of her grandfather (or her brother) Henry Curtis; whereas the name Fisher was doubtless chosen by his father James to memorialize the latter's grandfather Fisher Tench.

All indications are that Henry was born into poverty. His father James' occupation, given at the time of Henry's baptism above noted, was "weaver". Weaving was a declining industry, and wages were then at starvation level (Wade Martins, 1984). It must have seemed almost a foregone conclusion to the parents that their son would be doomed to follow in his father's footsteps, as was typical of the time (Edwards, 1984). It is doubtful that James and Jane could have then envisioned that this tiny infant, born in humble circumstances, would grow to become a major industrialist and one of the largest employers in all of East Anglia.

Circumstances soon conspired to further jeopardize the chances of Henry living, let alone thriving. When he was less than one year of age, likely before he could walk or say his first word, his mother, then only 24 years old, died. She was buried 15 October 1833 in the churchyard of St. John Timberhill Church, where both she and her son had been baptised (NRO, Norwich, St. John Timberhill, PR). About 7 months later, on 30 May 1834, the widower James Sexton married Margaret Jackson at Lakenham (NRO, Lakenham, PR), and thus Henry and his two brothers now had a step - mother.

During the interval between 1833 and 1834 James moved the short distance southwest from St. John Timberhill to a newly developed working class suburb just outside the Norwich City walls. It is likely that he moved to Lakenham because his father John Sexton (a silk weaver) and uncle Benjamin Sexton resided there. Benjamin appears to have been relatively "well - off". For example in the 1841 census Benjamin was listed as a "shopkeeper", and in the 1851 census as a "landed proprietor" (PRO, Census of England, 1841, 1851, Lakenham). Curiously, in 1834 James appeared to take temporary work as a "drover", returning to his previous occupation of "weaver" by 1836 (NRO, Lakenham St. Mark, PR), as recorded at the baptisms of two sons born to James and Margaret. Since Henry Fisher Sexton grew up in Lakenham, the area will be described in order to infer how it may have influenced his development.

Growing Up in Lakenham

The Sexton family resided in the "Peafield" area of New Lakenham. The development here began about 1820, and was composed of rows of small houses in the L.4 to L.8 annual rent range built for working class people (Muthesius, 1984). Here, in 1851, some 2000 people had to make do with a mere "eight pumps and two draw wells. If one pump was out of repair, the others were locked to prevent their use" (Pound, 1984, p. 61). The population here were also living "without any sanitary provision". Under these conditions diseases such as "typhus, typhoid, and diphtheria - were then endemic" (Green & Young, 1981, p. 30).

At the time of
the 1841 census, James was living in Harmon's Building in Lakenham (PRO, Census of England, 1841, Lakenham). While Henry's brother Thomas was then working in a yarn factory, Henry, then 10, was probably in school. There was an "infant" school in Lakenham, established in 1825, supported by the Evangelical wing of the Established (Anglican) Church (Smith, 1984). *Curiously, it is noteworthy that* James had changed occupations in the interval between 1841 and 1851. The 1851 census notes him as being "Collector of Cattle Market Money" (PRO, Census of England, 1851, Lakenham). This role must have required some commuting since the Cattle Market was in his former parish of St. John Timberhill, about 3/4 mile from Lakenham. It seems likely that his position resulted in at least a modest improvement in the standard of living for the family.

In 1846 Henry's paternal grandfather John Sexton died under questionable circumstances *in Lakenham*. The cause of death, upon a coroner's investigation, was certified as a "Visitation of God" (GRD, Certificate of Death, Norwich, Mancroft). *There are* Unfortunately, *no coroner's records pertaining to this year, and there is nothing relevant reported in the local newspapers (Norwich Mercury; Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette, 6, 13, 20 June 1846).* Henry probably attended the burial of his grandfather, which took place in the churchyard of St. Julian Parish Norwich, on 17 June 1846. *It was also here that Henry's great-grandparents, James and Mary (Butler) Sexton, were buried (NRO, Norwich, St. Julian, PR).* In 1851 Henry Fisher Sexton, then 18, was not living with his father, step-mother, and youngest brother Joseph. He was instead residing in nearby Trory's Building (Trafalgar Road, Lakenham) with his widowed grandmother Ann (Tench) Sexton, a lodger Charles Roper, Henry's brother James, and brother Thomas with the latter's wife and young son (PRO, Census of England, 1851, Lakenham). Both Henry and his brother James were listed as "cordwainers", which is a term synonymous with "shoemakers" (Swann, 1986).

The Shoe Industry in Norwich 1840-1880

There is no documented *ion* indication ~~as to~~ why Henry decided to seek employment in the boot and shoe industry. It is clear, *evident*

It is probable that Henry had a clear sense of being expected to find a niche of professional work in the City of Norwich - a niche of professional work also manifest in his descendants at least some of

however, that following in his father's footsteps at this point in time would have been unwise. By 1850 the textile industry (the main industry in Norwich in the eighteenth century) was in a state of decline. The usually low wages had plummeted dramatically, making the industry unattractive to any ambitious young man capable of "reading the writing on the wall". At the very time that weaving was in decline, however, the boot and shoe business was in ascendance. Between 1841 and 1861 the number of workers in this trade had increased from 1,913 to 6,278 (Green & Young, 1981). Shoemakers earned 15s. to 35s. a week; while their counterparts in weaving made, at best, 10s. per week. It has been reported that while weavers seldom transferred to the leather industry; their sons were likely to ^{move in} ~~make~~ ^{direction} this decision and "swell the numbers seeking work in leather" (Edwards, 1984, p. 153). By 1870, shoemaking had become the "inheritor" of the textile industry in Norwich (Edwards, 1984). Most of the work was done on an "outwork" basis in the homes or workshops of the individual craftsmen. Also common in Norwich were the "garret masters" who typically employed a number of ^{persons} individuals, and who may be considered as business men having status in the industry a notch above the journeymen trades people who worked for them, but below the few men who were owners of shoe-making factories. ^(NMSIS, 1986) ~~By~~ ^{NP} ~~The~~ ^{1860's} the first recognizable factory was established in Norwich. This firm, Charles Winter, alone employed 800 - 900 shoemakers. Over time most facets of the industry began to gravitate to the north bank of the River Wensum where they concentrated on the export of women's fashion footwear. (Edwards, 1984; Norfolk Museums Service, Information Sheet, 1986). ^{during the 1860's}

~~NP~~ In 1856 the Singer sewing machine came to Norwich from the U.S.A. which was used in sewing the uppers; and in 1870 a large machine (5 foot 6 inches tall) was introduced to stitch on soles. The latter required steam engine power to drive huge overhead belts which ran these "Blake" machines. To house these "monsters" giant factories were needed. Thus began the switch from outwork to inwork which was to gain momentum as the century progressed (NMSIS, 1986). In 1874 the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives was established to serve the needs of those employed in shoe making factories (NMSIS, 1986). ^{NMSIS, 1986.}

Early Years as a Shoemaker

Probably sensing that opportunities lay in this growth industry, Henry Fisher Sexton secured employment in the shoe industry ^{about 1850} a fateful decision that was to have important ramifications for virtually all of his descendants to the present day.

During his ^(outwork) first years in the trade, Henry was probably working at home with his brother where they would perform tasks such as heavy stitching. Eventually he may have become a garret master enroute to becoming a factory owner. It is known that early in his career, on 15 December 1851, Henry Fisher Sexton of Trafalgar Street in Lakenham married Elizabeth Green (daughter of

New
Community.

John Green, a weaver, and Maria Thornley). While she made her mark he signed ~~indicating that Henry had received some schooling.~~ ^{of Lakenham St. Mark} the marriage took place at the Registry Office rather than the Parish Church. ^{Be that as it may} The reasons for this choice are not a matter of record, however. The following children were born to this couple: Elizabeth Green Sexton (b. 1852), Henry Walter Sexton (b. 1854), Emma Jane Sexton (b. 1857), Jesse Henry Sexton (b. 1859), Arthur James Sexton (b. 1862), Frederick Thornley Sexton (b. 1868). ^(eg; LSL, File of Sexton Newspaper clippings; APR, Will of 005)

Elizabeth Sexton, probate 12 November 1914. Apparently Elizabeth *→* In 1857, at the birth of daughter Emma Jane, the family was residing at Mill Street in Lakenham (GRO, Certificate of Birth, *Norwich*). Four years later they were also residing at this location. Henry's wife Elizabeth apparently assisted him in his work, as she is listed as a "shoemaker help" in the 1861 census (PRO, Census of England, 1861, Lakenham). By *the 1871 census* the Sextons had apparently moved from Lakenham as they are not listed here during *at this time* the census of that year (PRO, Census of England, 1871, Lakenham).

Since the epicentre of the business of making shoes was north of the River Wensum, the move from Lakenham may have been in order to be closer to the "action" ~~(avail himself of opportunities)~~. It would appear that he may have begun working for George White at about the time of his apparent move from Lakenham. In 1876 the firm of Hewlett and White built the "Norvic" factory in Colegate, Norwich. Apparently George White was a generous man and, "when Henry Sexton, one of his employees, set up his own shoe - making business; White gave him his first order" (Hale, 1984).

Shoe Manufacturer

Henry Fisher Sexton ~~was to take~~ ^{took} a bold step to leave the ranks of employees in the shoe industry, to become an employer ^{ing} moving from the working class to the upper ^{middle} class in a short span of time. ^{with the colony his birth.} This represented a leap of monumental proportions, and illustrates how the Victorian Age provided a climate where someone with initiative, luck, or whatever could ^{opportunities} surmount the class barrier and join the roster of the ruling elite in England by becoming an industrialist (Reader). ¹⁹⁶⁴ The circumstances which paved the way for this possibility are unknown. It is difficult to envision how Henry could have found the capital to ^{build} set up a major factory. ^{couple} Perhaps he had a patron who had faith in his ability. No data has yet emerged to support these or any other hypotheses. ^{extensive}

According to one source, ^{the firm of} Sexton & Sons was founded "about 1886" (Norwich and its Region, 1961); while a second gives the date of the firm's establishment at "c.1885 - 1888" (Northampton Museum, Index, Boot and Shoe Collections, 1987).

It would appear that Henry's father did not live long enough to see his son "make it big". On 3 May 1885 James Sexton, aged 78, was buried at Lakenham St. Mark Church (NRO, Lakenham St.