

F. W. HARMER & CO - NORWICH

The First Hundred Years 1825-1925

Before I was contacted by the late Stanley John Harmer in 1978 at the start of the HFA I had no interest in family history, but I had from time to time seen the "F. W. Harmer - Norwich", label in jackets and wondered if I was in anyway connected to the business. I suppose these labels must have carried the Harmer name around the world and in this article I shall attempt to record the first 100 years' history of this famous Norwich firm. Like so many businesses its roots can be traced back beyond the company to the individuals who carried on a family tradition, but as the demands of the ever growing population changed the opportunity was taken to develop from a cottage industry into one which served the country in times of peace and war.

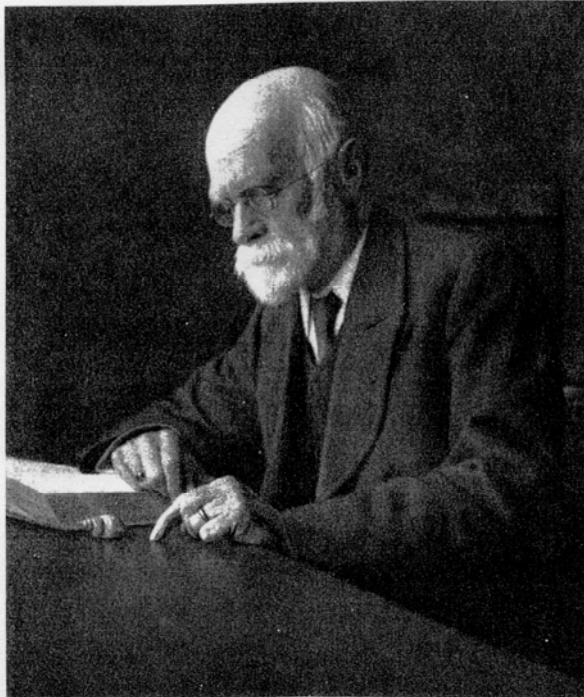
The early Norfolk Harmers can be traced back to William Harmer of Antingham, who died in 1517 and his descendants stayed in Antingham until his great-great-grandson Richard, who in his will dated 1638, is described as a yeoman of North Walsham. Richard's uncles began to spread the family into other parts of Norfolk and some of them migrated to Norwich where between 1688 and 1925 a total of 37 became Freemen of the City and many of them were described as Worsted Weavers, Wool Combers, Yarn Makers and Merchants.

However, the particular family line we are following didn't arrive in Norwich for three generations. Richard and his wife Susan had five children, two boys and three girls. Their son Thomas is described as a grocer in his will proved in 1686. The next two generations of Harmers, Samuel who died in 1751 and Thomas who died 1780 are both recorded as Gentleman of Denton. It was Thomas and his wife Elizabeth Corsbie who moved the family home to Norwich as their four daughters and one son were all born in Norwich. Their only son Thomas who became a Freeman of the City and was described as a merchant had a son William who was born in 1778 and went on to marry Mary Colman a member of another famous Norwich family, the Colmans of mustard fame [see HFA Newsletter Vol.5 No.4 - Mary Coleman (nee Harmer) of Norwich by Gill Price for more about the Harmer/Colman connections.]

William was the joint founder of the business in 1825 when he entered into partnership with a Mr Rivett. The two partners traded under the name of Rivett and Harmer and when William's son Thomas joined the business not long after the formation of the partnership the name was changed to Rivett, Harmer & Son.

In the course of time William retired from the business and the name reverted back to Rivett & Harmer. In 1825 the business was mainly concerned with the sale of Manchester and Bradford Piece goods. It was Thomas Harmer who would periodically set off by stage coach for Yorkshire and Lancashire to buy goods which in due course would be sent to Norwich either by sea or horse-drawn wagons. In 1850 a third member of the Harmer family became involved in the business, Frederic William, and it was this Harmer who played a leading role in expanding the business.

FAMILY MEMBERS OF F. W. HARMER & CO.
Father, Two Sons & Grandson



FREDERIC WILLIAM HARMER
1835 - 1923
(Life Story Newsletter Vol 20 No 2 - June 1997)



JOHN ALEXANDER HARMER
*Joined firm 1879 became
a partner in 1897*



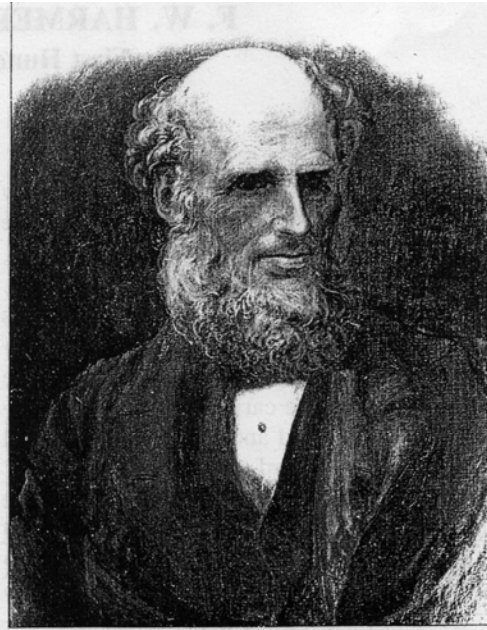
THOMAS BERTRAND HARMER
*Joined firm in 1888
Became a partner in 1897*



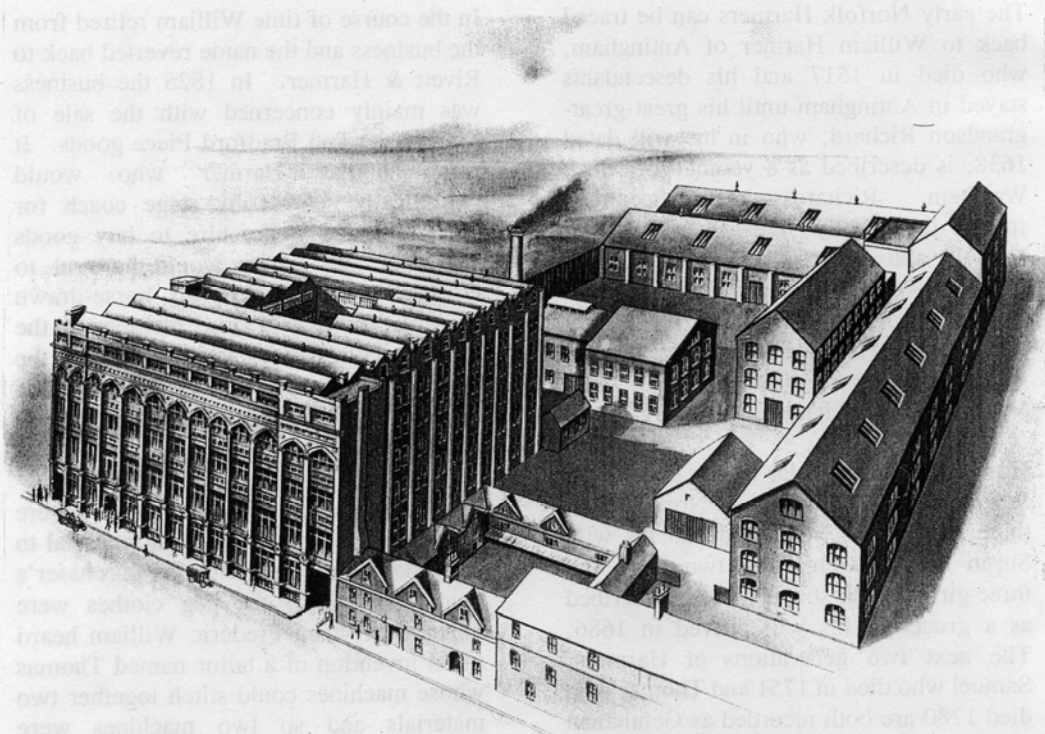
RUSSELL THOMAS HARMER
*Joined firm in 1919 became partner 1925,
5th generation to be involved - Son of
Sir Sidney Frederic Harmer - (Newsletter Vol 19 No 4 - Dec 1996)*



WILLIAM HARMER
1778-1852



THOMAS HARMER
1806-1875



ST. ANDREW'S WORKS, NORWICH

At that time Rivett & Harmer were merchants stocking and selling material to be made up into clothes by the purchaser's own tailor. Off the peg clothes were unheard of when Frederic William heard of an invention of a tailor named Thomas whose machines could stitch together two materials and so two machines were purchased. So well built were these machines that they remained in use until 1915 at least. Frederic claimed that these machines which looked like large fretsaws worked by treadles and were capable of 20 stitches a minute, were the first sewing machines invented. In fact, Singer patented his first sewing machine in 1851 and a very similar machine had been patented in 1846 by Elias Howe.

The machines did allow the firm to begin to make up their materials into suits and sell them at prices less than the customer would pay if they had the material made up by hand. So Frederic built a small factory in Bethel Street for the manufacture of made-up suits. His innovative idea proved to be a great success and soon other machinery was added such as band knives and before long a boiler and steam engine were added to provide the energy to drive the equipment and the factory building itself underwent an almost continuous process of change and expansion. It was one of the first, if not the first, to use steam to make clothing and a brass plaque over the doorway "**STEAM CLOTHING FACTORY**" proudly bore witness to the fact.

Frederic William had a great many other interests, see HFA Newsletter Vol.20 No.2, and so John Alexander and Thomas Bertrand, two of his four sons, joined him in the business. By 1887 when Frederic was Mayor of Norwich the factories at Bethel Street were inadequate and there was no further room for expansion so Frederic purchased a large site in St. Andrew's Street which would not only provide sufficient room for the current needs but would leave space for future expansion. At about the same time he expanded the London branch of the firm and in 1891 moved it from Milk Street to 126-127 Wood Street. This was the last major involvement Frederic had in the day-to-day management of the business as he handed over the reins to his two sons.

It was in 1909 that the Government sought to regulate a number of industries through the Trade Boards' Act including the wholesale clothing trade, and so Thomas Harmer took an active part in the formation of "The Wholesale Clothing Manufacturers Federation (Great Britain). In due course he was appointed its first Chairman serving from 1910 to 1913, a critical time as a great deal of negotiation with the Board of Trade was needed to make the Act both practical and effective.

Soon the First World War was upon the nation and everybody's lives were changed. F. W. Harmer & Co, like all patriotic firms, played their part in the war effort. They already had various War Office contracts and were used to making uniforms and meeting Government specifications so they were able to step up the output to the new levels required. On average during the War they supplied the Government with two tons of uniforms daily and made in total a million khaki garments, in excess of a million cardigan waistcoats for the army and a large quantity of socks. Not all the Government contracts were straight forward. The hosiery contract for example shows the difficulties and financial risks that the firm took as at first the Government placed small orders easily within the capacity of the firm but then they were approached to see if they could expand the knitting department. Consequently one of the Harmers visited the Midlands to take up options on new knitting machines and then failing to find any Leicester spinners who could supply him with the quality of yarns he would need, he travelled on to Yorkshire. Here he set up a temporary office in the Midland Hotel, Leeds, until he was able to place an option on half a million pounds of yarn. With the options in place the Assistant Director of Contracts at Pimlico was phoned and advised that if a large enough order was placed with an adequate lead time then the firm was able to expand its knitting department. The order was placed over the phone with a promise that a written contract would follow. So the options were taken up and £50,000 was invested in the expansion projects.

The contract was received on 17th October 1914 for completion in 8 months, but as the machinery was not due to be delivered until February 1915 the Company wrote to the Government advising them that they could not possibly complete the order on time. In due course the reply was received saying that the contract would be cancelled if not met in full by the due date. Further negotiations took place and in the end the firm made over a mile of knitted fabric a day until 1919 when the War Office telephoned to say that all deliveries were to stop immediately.

The consequence of this was that in one of the factories every employee lost his job at a day's notice. This must have been a bitter blow both to the employees and to the Harmer family who had worked so hard for the war effort. Within three months the factory was once again humming with the noise of machinery and people as new markets were found. In particular with the manufacture of outer garments for both men and women, meeting the peacetime needs of the population. The end of the War saw the fifth generation of Harmers join the firm in the person of Russell Thomas Harmer. By 1925 the factory at Norwich had a floor space of nearly two and a half acres, the sewing machines had progressed from 20 to 3000 stitches a minute and the knitting machines could produce complicated patterns at the rate of 20,000 stitches a minute and were even faster with plain patterns. Mechanisation had reached such a stage by then that they were even using machines where yarn was fed in one end and finished socks came out the other end!

Although the Company only sold to wholesalers and most of their production was standard bulk items, they also offered a hand-made special order service which required a great deal of individual skill. Fortunately many of the employees in 1925 had forty or more years service and some were still working for the firm after 50 years. Such was the loyalty to the Harmer family who very much ran the business as a family concern, one hundred years after Thomas Harmer went into partnership with Mr Rivett.

If any reader has any "Harmer" clothing complete with the label, I would be very pleased to hear from them.

Michael Harmer

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