

## *THE DURSLEY SADDLERS* *by Connie Cuff*

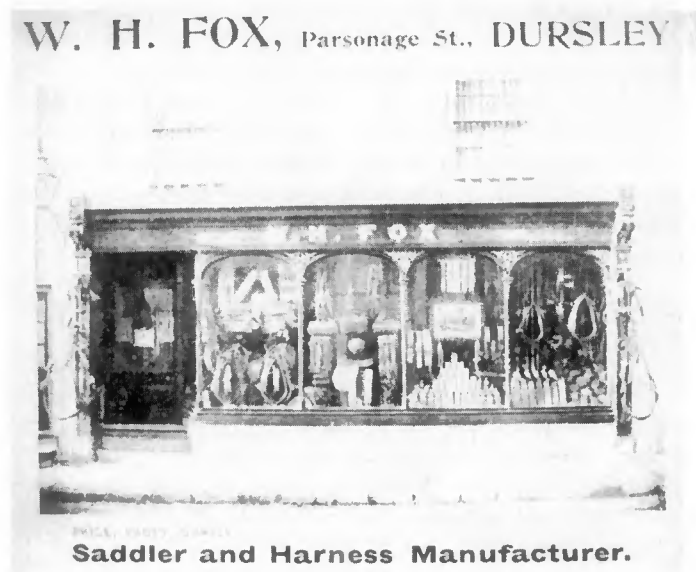
In past centuries farming was an important occupation in the Cam Valley. Horses provided the power, and the farm cart was the most common vehicle for general use. A 1906 Directory lists 23 farms in Uley and Owlpen, 17 in Cam, 20 in Coaley and 22 in Cambridge and Slimbridge. In Dursley there were seven and nine in Stinchcombe and 19 in North Nibley. Each village had its wheelwright and blacksmith, but for saddlery and harness repairs the farmers went to the small country towns in their vicinity, such as Dursley and Berkeley.

Dursley had two saddlers in the nineteenth century, both in Parsonage Street. The 1859 Directory records that Daniel Cramp was a saddler and probably this business was taken over by Alfred Summers. This shop closed in the early part of this century, but may be remembered as Mrs. Summers' sweet shop (now part of Baileys Newsagents). The saddlery business at 48 Parsonage Street was founded by William Champion in 1778. It was carried on and expanded by members of his family throughout the nineteenth century. The Champions became leading citizens of the town and Samuel and John Benjamin were bailiffs.

There are nineteenth century graves of the Champion family at St. George's Church, Upper Cam so the family may have come from Cam, and also had connections with farmers in North Nibley and Slimbridge. Samuel (son of the founder, born 1776) carried on the business and left it to his son William (1810-1872). William had four children, two daughters and his eldest son Samuel, who died young, and John Benjamin Champion (1843-1930) who transferred the business and became a leading industrialist in the town.

### *RETAILING AND MARKETING*

In 1865 Champion & Son advertised as Saddlers and Harness Makers and also manufacturers of Waterproof Wagon Cloths, Rick Cloths, Sacks, Sackings, Ropes, Twines, Hair Cloth, Hair Cider Cloths and so on with sacks let on hire. At this time they must have been using the Rope Walk behind 48 Parsonage Street which reaches to Prospect Place. That address was the



Taken from an advertisement in  
WHITMORE'S ILLUSTRATED FAMILY ALMANAC & DIARY  
WITH LOCAL DIRECTORY. 1906

family home and John Benjamin's mother lived there until she died in 1886. Obviously more room had to be found so John Benjamin and his father acquired the site of the Dursley Old Brewery in Long Street and built the Reliance Works where they continued the manufacture of rope, matting and twine and later carpets and rugs. The Parsonage Street rope works were not used after 1870 and then about 1890 were taken over by William C. Talboys who made rick cloths and, later, tents.

In 1892 the saddler's shop was sold to Walter Harry Fox who had been working there for the previous twenty years. Mr. Fox, who was unmarried, did not have the benefit of the dwelling house and only took over the lock-up shop with its cellar underneath, reached by an iron staircase. John Benjamin Champion and his family continued to live in Parsonage Street as he owned the premises next door, No 46, later Mr. Gullick's diary and dwelling house.

Before the First World War the saddler's shop prospered. Mr. Fox employed two journeymen and took on apprentices. Accommodation was basic: at one end of the shop Mr. Fox had his desk and there was a small fireplace. The heavy workbench ran along the length of the shop behind the window and here the workmen sat on high stools and with clamps and awls plied their trade. Also some of the repair work was done in the cellar. They were especially busy on the last Friday in every month when the Board of Guardians met in the morning, had lunch at the Workhouse and then met as the District Council in the afternoon. These worthies left their horses at the Bell & Castle and the Old Bell hotels, and their harness had to be attended to. The gentry each kept a carriage and pair, the clergy travelled by pony and trap; the horse was the accepted way to travel by all the well-to-do.

The saddlers did all the leather work for the Pedersen bicycles which were made at the factory in Water Street. This required tool bags in three sizes, and straps, corners and coverings for the unique hammock saddles. When R A Lister was working on his new milking machine at the Downhouse Farm of his friend Joseph Bennett, one of Mr. Fox's apprentices attended to measure for the webbing belt required. This relationship with Lister's continued for many years the saddlers providing straps belts and other work whenever they were required.

### **CHANGE OF OWNERSHIP**

After the War, during the depression years of the 1920s and 1930s business was poor. Mr. Fox employed one man, often only part-time, until 1935 when this man, Hubert George Cuff, took over the business. Over 100 local farmers brought their work to the little shop smelling of leather and polish. Usually they collected it, but work for Nympsfield and Wotton had to be sent back by carrier, costing 3d (1p) or 4d (1.5p). Most of the work consisted of repairs, usually to cart harness, and costing between

6d (2.5p) and 4/- (20p). A frequent entry in the day book was 'flocking collar 5/-' (25p). It was important that the collar the horse pulled against was kept in good shape and should not rub. A new cart collar cost between £1.8.6 (£1.42) and £1.15.0 (£1.75) in 1936. Time was charged at 10d (4p) an hour and this gives some idea of weekly pay. As well as cart collars, cart saddles and bridges, the harness consisted of a large variety of straps depending on the vehicle being pulled; many repairs involved double-handed stitching with waxed thread. A new pair of reins, 7 ft x 1¼ ins with brass cost 5/- (25p); two pairs of plough traces 13/6 (67p); a pair of driving reins 29.5ft x 1 inch cost 19/6 (97.5p) in 1938.

At times harness was also required for cattle, goats and a pig! Binder canvases had to be mended by replacing the ash strips and straps and buckles. Early cars had new celluloid windows put in and other repairs carried out. The saddler could turn his hand to repairing almost anything in leather, and also sold pieces



C.1909 L. TO R.: H. G. CUFF, W. H. FOX, R. ARTHURS AND H. PULLIN

of leather for people to mend their own shoes. He supplied oils, soaps, brushes, sponges, polishes and many things needed for the care of harness and the horse. Supplies came from wholesale companies in Walsall and Bristol.

Some farmers rode round their farms on horseback, and so needed the repair and replacement of riding harness, as did the hunting fraternity who kept horses and rode to hounds. These were the local gentry and also a number of retired Army officers who lived in Uley and Dursley between the wars. As well as repairing all the hunting paraphernalia, Mr Cuff repaired their luggage and their motor cars. At the outbreak of the Second World War, this riding for pleasure came to an end.

### **CHANGING MARKETS**

But there was another source of income; some of the farmers had milk rounds, and most of the local traders (bakers, grocers and the Co-op) delivered their goods by horse-drawn van. Cash bags needed repairing quite often. Van harness was usually repaired, but occasionally the trader bought new. A new set of handsewn brown harness for Walters & Son (bakers) cost £13 in 1939. One baker bought a new van saddle with reins, back hand

and collar for £5/7/0 (£5.35) and paid back 5/- (25p) a time when he could (it took three years). Generally it appears that traders liked to keep their horses and vehicles well turned out.

tractors. Inflation caused prices to rise and Mr. Cuff was charging 1/6 (7p) an hour in 1944. The saddler did all sorts of leather repairs from footballs to cabin trunks and, increasingly, the leather work required by the industrial concerns in the town. Mending and supplying new machine belts was often undertaken. Hundreds of leather straps were needed by Listers and these, with the assembling of thousands of air filter felts, continued to provide employment after the saddler's shop closed in 1945. The property and the dairy next door was converted into a grocer's shop by Burtons of Nottingham.

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As traders turned to motor vehicles there were fewer horses on the roads and less saddlery was needed as the farmers used

### SOURCES

Recollections of Mr. L.G.Ayliffe (the Champion family) and Mr. W. Noad, who worked at the shop 1912-1916

Trade Directories

Day Book of H G Cuff, 1935 - 1945

*Indenture Witnesseth That Hubert George Cuff of Cambridge  
the County of Gloucester, with the consent of his father William Cuff  
do himself Apprentice to Walter Harry Fox of Beersley in the said County of Gloucester - Saddler  
& Harness maker  
in the said trade or business and, with him, after the Manner of an Apprentice, to serve from the day of the date hereof  
and Term of Five Years and from thence next following to be fully complete and ended During which Term the  
said Master faithfully shall serve his secrets keep his lawful commands everywhere gladly do he shall do  
said Master not see to be done of others but to the best of his power shall prevent or forthwith give warning  
of the same he shall not waste the Goods of his said Master nor lend them unlawfully to any he shall  
rely his said Master may have any loss with his own goods or others during the said Term without Licence of  
said Master shall neither buy nor sell nor absent himself from his said Master service day or night unlawfully But in all  
the said Term he shall behave himself towards his said Master and all his during the said Term And the said  
Fox in consideration of such services to be rendered to him by his said Hubert  
during the said term herein before mentioned*

### Part of Hubert Cuff's Indenture