

Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree

The smith, a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands;
And the muscles of his brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands.

(HW Longfellow)

Following a family name genealogically becomes really rewarding when the work begins to bring out, in an almost personal context, the social environment of the people one is studying. An example of this has been finding a dynasty of blacksmiths, all related to one another under the same surname, strung across two centuries in villages all lying in a small area of East Anglia.

The hereditary nature of such a trade as smithing admits of a simple explanation. One's sons must be provided with a living; and as apprentices they are cheaper than strangers, readily available, and will work hard to ensure their patrimony. As small boys the work and magic of the forge must in any case have seemed powerfully attractive. As the narrative and tables will show however, for causes we cannot know, some stayed at the forge, some 'bettered' themselves, and some descendants fell out of what advertisers now call band C into band E and effectively out of view.

The name of Mortlock is highly local to West Suffolk and Cambridgeshire and it is here that we first see the glow and sparks of their fires and hear the hammer beating out horseshoes, gate hinges, hoes, keys for the church door or whatever.

The line starts with Michael Mortlock, who died in Hawstead, Suffolk in 1757, and who was of sufficient status to have a vote to cast in 1727 when an election necessarily followed the decease of King George I.

If a smith's son, by reason of frailty or illness - polio perhaps - did not have arm muscles as strong as iron bands, then something else had to be found. Michael's eldest son Michael (1723-84) became a peruke maker in Lavenham but clearly lived in poor circumstances; one daughter died of consumption and his wife ended up in widowhood as a pauper.

This Michael's brothers Henry (1734-1810), and James (1728-1810) however did train to be blacksmiths. The third brother Charles (1725-1814) moved to Freckenham, where he seems to have been a farmer. His son, another Charles (1753-1814), must have been doing quite well at one time as he had a hundred-sheep run and a hundred-acre farm under him in 1796, and he was a voter in 1790. However three of this Charles' sons (Michael (1777-1855), Henry (1781-1843) and James (1789-1865)) reverted to family tradition and trained as smiths. Another son Samuel (1787) became a shoemaker in Freckenham but by 1809 was insolvent; nonetheless three of his daughters managed to inherit a run of row houses in Marylebone so perhaps some assets escaped the creditors. He appears (from gaps in the birth order of his children) to be the Samuel transported in 1815 for stealing from a waggon [*IJ*] who was probably also the Samuel who escaped conviction for stealing in 1807 because no witnesses turned up; however in July 1809 he was back in Bury Gaol [*LG*]. He seems to have got his own back in one way as in 1843 he bankrupted Henry Chambers, a farmer in Ashley in Cambridgeshire, presumably a creditor [*LG* 18.7.1843].

Michael went to work in Isleham where he married, and then in Freckenham. As a 'lodger' there

he might seem not to have been established, but the Cambridge Chronicle recorded his apprentice absconding in 1820, so he must have been a fully qualified master smith. Henry became a smith in Bury St Edmunds, but perhaps did not own his forge: his son Benjamin, with his Moulton wife, had to leave Suffolk for London where he became a bricklayer in Stepney. James initially stayed in Freckenham where his son, another James (1822-87) combined being a master shoemaker with being the village schoolmaster and farming sixty acres. His descendants eventually settled into Worlington Manor Farm, except for one son, John (1844) who emigrated to the then Cape Colony in South Africa. 1789 James however moved to London, first between 1822 and 1827 to Holborn and then, still as a farrier, to Southwark, where his second wife, widowed, ended up as a laundress.

1734-Henry moved to Chippenham where a son, Michael (1756-1810), and Michael's son John Hart (1791-1829) followed him in his trade. Somebody had a drive on false weights in Cambridgeshire in 1813¹. Henry's second surviving son, another Henry (1758-1815) had set up in Wicken and was prosecuted there, as was John Hart back in Chippenham. In 1830 the same thing happened, catching (among others) Henry's widow Mary Abry and John Hart's widowed mother Sarah Hart.

Why blacksmiths were thought the authorities likely to be giving short weight is not clear. These were difficult times in the countryside, with poor harvests - caused in part by the effects on the world's weather of a volcanic eruption in the Dutch East Indies - or, after 1814, from the sudden cessation of government orders for 'bread' (actually hard biscuit, which would keep forever) for the army and navy. By 1830 at labourer level the distress in the South was provoking the Swing riots; but these were in part provoked by the introduction of machinery, which was a business opportunity for the village blacksmith².

Meanwhile the original Michael's Hawstead smithy continued, under his son James (1728-1810), who married a month after his father's death. James' sons James (1758-1842, Samuel (1768-1839), and Charles (1774-93), Samuel's Michael (1805-51) (who came back to Hawstead after first marrying and settling in Great Whelnetham) and Michael's sons James Michael (1836), Josiah John (1832-71), Samuel Joseph (1838-1910) and Henry (1848-1933) all trained as smiths. Ultimately Josiah John and 1848-Henry had to leave Hawstead and find work elsewhere. Josiah John went to Nowton but that was the end of that line as smiths; work as grooms, gardeners and labourers was the best that befell his immediate descendants. In 1875 Henry was pumping his bellows in Bury St Edmunds, but by 1881 was hammering away in Long Melford and in 1901 was working as a farrier in Barnet Vale, Hertfordshire, which suggests that he was an employee and not an owner. However he and his Lawshall wife were able eventually to retire back to Suffolk to Bury St Edmunds.

Samuel Joseph acquired a taste for soldiering in the West Suffolk Militia. Swarthy and with dark hair, 5'8" and described as a blacksmith, he enlisted in the Coldstream at Bury St Edmunds in 1858 and served until 1886, emerging with a Long Service and Good Conduct medal and becoming a Yeoman warder of the Tower of London. His Suffolk links were effectively broken and his children were Londoners although one of them, Harry Edward R moved to Portsmouth in order to

¹ Suffolk County Record Office, Bury St Edmunds, *Bury Post* for 1813 & 1830

² See *The Village Labourer*, JL & Barbara Hammond, 1911, Guild Books no.239, Longmans 1948

be easily confused with Henry Edward Romeril Mortlock who also lived there but who was from quite a different (South London³) family.

Incidentally several of the blacksmith Mortlock daughters' spouses (see the detailed table attached as an appendix) seem to have been picked from skilled tradesmen. They included a stonemason, a wheelwright who was the son of a wheelwright, and a pharmacist who was the son of a woodcarver.

Now let us go back to the James of 1758. After sharing premises with his brother Samuel, which they rented and which were sold up in 1803, he moved to Lawshall and by two marriages begat anything up to seventeen children, of whom two, Michael (1798-1853) and Skipper (1811-98) followed him as smiths. Michael was a master smith employing two men. He and his wife had three daughters and one son, Henry (ca.1828) who in about 1883 left Suffolk for London where he became a farrier in Islington. There is a distinction between a farrier and a blacksmith. A blacksmith could and would make any article in iron that could possibly be needed in the village he served. A farrier, ancestral to the vet., wore a split apron (more convenient when shoeing), specialised in working with horses, and also medicated them. Some frightening recipes, chiefly consisting of pouring 'spirits of nitre' (nitric acid) down their throats to 'clear their tubes' survive from a Lincolnshire farrier, William Holmes (1807-?1892), the tools of whose trade are in Lincoln museum. Sadly, Holmes' complete recipe book, put out for show at a family history fair, was stolen by the sort of person who blights family history research by stealing for personal use what ought to be available to us all. Research into this article would have gone more smoothly if the same sort of person had not helped themselves to several of the parish register microfiches in bury St Edmunds CRO. But I digress!

Skipper remained in Lawshall (although he took a London bride). Incidentally his name may seem like a nickname but was his mother's maiden name; it is not uncommon surname in West Suffolk.

Already described as a blacksmith, Skipper's eldest son James Leech (1847-1917) enlisted in the Royal Engineers in 1870 in Bury St Edmunds and served for over twenty years. Steady promotion through corporal (1881) and sergeant (1886) led him to Company Sergeant Major in September 1890 and he emerged with a Long Service and Good Conduct medal. He was later an engraver with the Ordnance Survey and then a superintending engineer in Bitterne, a suburb of Southampton. This shift to finer work and also to things military was reflected in his sons. The eldest, Frederick James, after starting as an engineer, became an optician, but was also a sergeant in the Territorials. The youngest, Arthur William, was a glass engraver in Shirley, Southampton, but put his engineering skills to use in the Kaiser's War, serving in the RASC in which he won rapid promotion to Warrant Officer.

Skipper's next son Frederick continued in Lawshall, where, almost uniquely for a Mortlock, he converted to Rome. His daughter Louisa became a nun in Boreham, Essex. His son Frederick (1872-1957) married in the Roman Catholic church in Cambridge; Francis (1874), however, reverted to the Church of England when he got married. I mention this because the Mortlocks were almost exclusively Protestant and if anything veered towards non-conformity.

³ However the origins of this family can be traced further back, to Clare in Suffolk and before that to the Denham near Bury St Edmunds (to confuse genealogists, there is another near Eye). So they may well be related.

Skipper's Frederick trained up three of his five sons to follow him - Francis, Frederick and James (1876). Of James we hear no more. Frederick jnr tried his luck in Ipswich, where he was a 'mechanical engineer' in St Mary Stoke in 1901. The blacksmiths were modernising.

Francis, after helping in his father's smithy, set up on his own in a forge on the Weller Poley estate in Lawshall in 1894. In 1920 he moved to Lavenham and set up as Frank Mortlock and Sons by the railway station. Besides other engineering work the Mortlocks were itinerant steam engine operators whose engines were used for driving threshing machines and ploughing.. Francis' son Frank Frederick eventually took over the firm and ran it with his brother Victor Robert Frank who helped with fitting and turning. When Victor died, Frank Frederick sold up. The records of Frank Mortlock & Sons of Lawshall & Lavenham, blacksmiths and engineers 1899-1975, are held in Suffolk CRO, Bury St Edmunds. They mark the consummation and conclusion of 250 years of a family tradition in engineering. In 2007 the red corrugated iron barn in Lavenham where these Mortlocks ran their business was removed, as 'Mortlock's Barn', to the Museum of East Anglian Life at Stowmarket.

Not included in the tables is **William**, a journeyman blacksmith who was born out of wedlock to Jacob Wright and Lucy Mortlock of Denham (who were wed subsequently). Lucy was from a different branch of the Mortlocks in Denham and Chevington. Perhaps, typically of the times, William was blighted by his irregular paternity; although someone gave him a training, he seems never to have become well established, moving as a journeyman between Chevington, Denham and Barrow before settling in Cheveley, Cambridgeshire. There were no apprenticeships for the four (out of thirteen) of his children who survived and they ended up as labourers or servants.

The reader will notice the many Michaels. Now outside this tree Michael was quite a rare choice of Christian name for a Mortlock. There are a couple of other Michaels who seem to be part of this family but so far I have insufficient data to prove that. These include one who died in 1815, leaving a 'Freckenham Peculiar' will for which Michael of Isleham was an executor; Samuel the Freckenham shoemaker's shoemaker son Michael, born 1822; and a Michael of Finstead End, 1752-1820 who was eventually buried at Somerton. There was another Mortlock family farming at Finstead End and at Hawstead, but they came from Glemsford and are not visibly related to the blacksmiths.

Other Mortlock blacksmiths eluding linkage to the tables are **Robert**, who died in 1650 in Worlington, **Thomas** (1647-1739) of Woodditton but originally of Saxon Street, and **Samuel**, born in 1794, who appears in the 1851 census of Norfolk in Long Stratton.

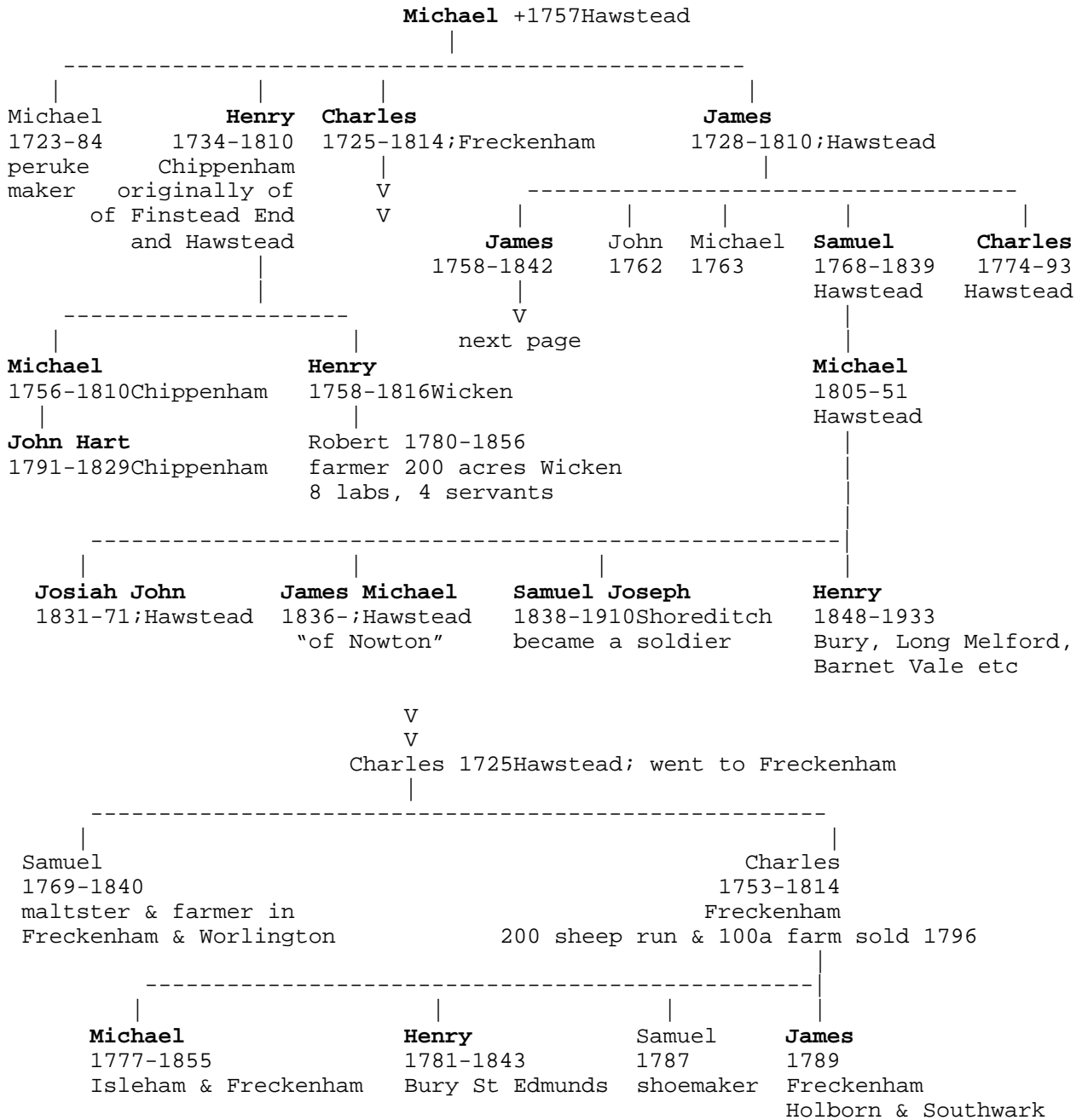
That makes over thirty Mortlock blacksmiths and (later) engineers, all but four provably members of the same family.

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This is an updated version of an article which was awarded the 2004 Eve Logan prize by the Cambridge University Heraldic & Genealogical Society.

Mortlock Blacksmiths in Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk(1)

(blacksmiths shown in bold type)



Mortlock Blacksmiths in Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk(2)

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