A S.M.C.S. EXTRA

Here's To You, Mr Robinson

BY JENNIFER AND MARTIN GREGORY



Jennifer Gregory, like Owen Robinson, was born in Desborough and it was this link that encouraged her to research the life and interests of the prolific Victorian SM inventor and manufacturer, best-known for his sought-after 'Little Treasure' domestic hand machine. Her husband Martin chipped in with useful mechanical data.

INVENTORS seem to be born rather than made, driven by their fertile imaginations to delve, fiddle and play with ideas that often conflict with their more inflexible fellow travellers.

Victorian SM manufacturer Owen Robinson, born 28 October 1833 to a small-time farmer and general jobber connected with weaving machinery was such a man. Newly married (to a Miss Coleman) and still in his early 20s, he invented many improvements which brought him into conflict with his fellow workers in the dying silk trade.

This caused him to say: 'I have tried to bring trade to the town by the introduction of new principles, but as you have drummed me out I shall destroy the improvements I have made by fire, and in less than five years, the weaving trade will leave you.'

Owen started working as a six-year-old boy with J Biggs, a farmer, and moved on, aged 10, to velvet weaving in the Queen Street, Desborough factory of B Riley. He returned to farming at 14 and earned 4/6d per week as principal man for Mr Tailby doing ploughing and mil-

king, but returned to Riley's weaving business four years later.

As there was no school in Desborough during his boyhood, Owen's grandfather gave him what education he received. Biggs took an interest in the boy and also a Mr Herbert Crick who was interested in astronomy. Robinson seems to have helped make a telescope at this time to further their studies.

As a result of a chance meeting with the Rev J P Mursell, Minister of the Fuller Baptist Church, Robinson moved, in May 1853, to Kettering and found employment in August at the Works of Messrs Walter and Sons. It was during this period he began inventing the improvements for looms that brought such bitter opposition from the Walter's workforce, including one which produced two pieces of cloth at once which, unfortunately, he did not patent. It seems to have been similar to the loom invented and patented by Samuel Lister of Manningham.

After leaving the dying silk trade, a series of abortive forays into other trades led eventually to a successful clock and watch-repair business in Dalkeith Place, Kettering. In 1856 Frederick Wallis set up a clothing factory using three Grover and Baker Machines in a vacant silk mill and Robinson took over their repair and maintenance. (The association between the two firms continued for half a century.) Two years later Wallis took John Linnell as a partner. In 1864, when the mill burned down, they replaced it with a new factory. The firm finally closed in the 1970s and the building (Burleigh House) is now a warehouse.

The introduction of the SM into the clothing industry was largely responsible for its enormous success. For instance, by 1871 Wallis & Linnell had branches in Burton, Latimer, Rothwell, Brigstock and Cottingham and by 1906 employed upwards of a thousand workers at Kettering and in six outlying factories.

The boot and shoe trade did not show the same easy acceptance of the SM. Charles East (brother of Alfred East) introduced the first machines into the closing process and met considerable opposition. He is said to have slept with the first models under his bed when the hand workers threatened to destroy them. (His factory, in Northall, was last used by Walkers for last making. It was pulled down in 1984 to make way for sheltered housing.)

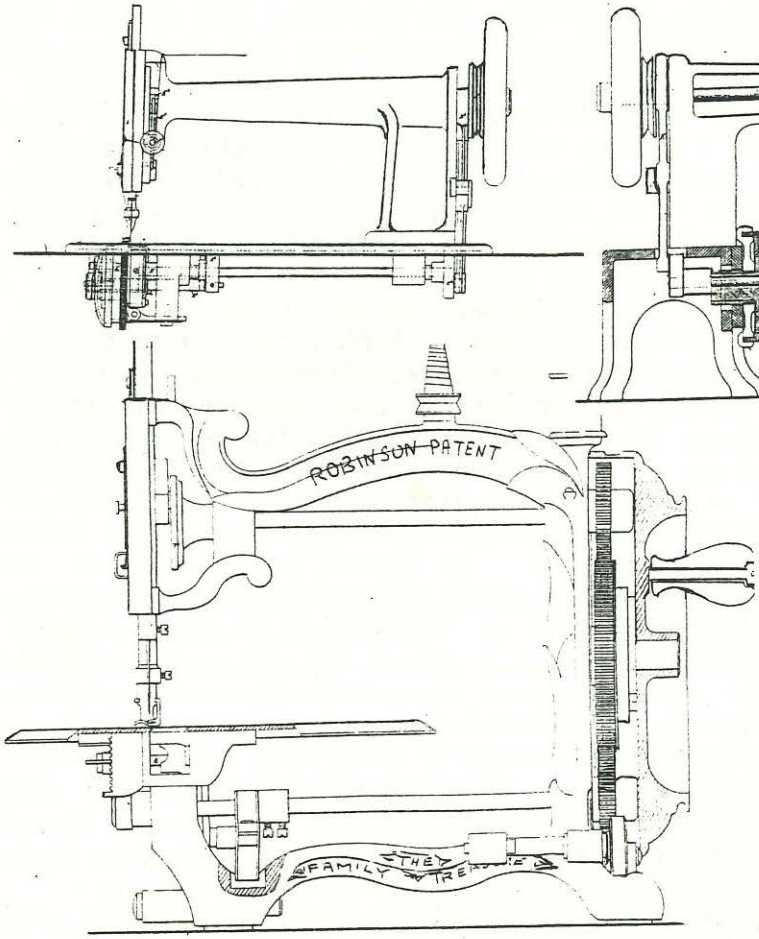
Early in 1858 Kettering shoemakers agreed that there would soon be too many workers chasing too few jobs if the SM were allowed to replace hand stitching in the closing process. For more than a year the anti-machinery movement obstructed its introduction into the trade of the town. Despite this opposition to SMs which lsted until 1859-60, Robinson introduced (about 1857) 'an improved

closing machine which,placed in competition with those of other makers, soon won the title of "Champion"'. He was granted seven patents relating to SMs, the first in 1865, the last in 1886.

Between 1857 and 1881 he enlarged his factory premises three times, spreading into nearby Queen Street, and building a new factory there in 1861 (later occupied by Messrs Lewis & Sons). Nothing remains of these works. In 1872 he built the Champion Works in Victoria Street.

All three sites are quite close, and an 1874 Trade Directory gives the address of the Champion Works as Dalkeith Place, where he lived, suggesting office accommodation there.

The Victoria Street site gave him the space to manufacture much heavier machines for the boot and shoe trade and in 1882 he apparently decided to abandon SMs in favour of the highly-successful



Above: Fig. 1 and 2 showing Robinson's final two patents of 1885 and 86.
Left: Fig.3, the Family Treasure. Lowest serial No. found so far is 10563 and the highest 11129.

heeling, lasting, sole-levelling and attaching machines, and presses for the expanding footwear industry of the area. However, the Directory of Engineers, Iron & Metal Trades, still lists 'SMs for all purposes' in 1886.

By 1892 the Champion Works were the largest machinery works in Kettering. Everything was done on the premises: pattern making, iron and brass smelting, planing, moulding, casting, milling, boring, turning, screw-cutting and finishing.

A very large number of machines were invented and made by the firm: the 'Cutlan' heeler, the 'Robinson' heeling and attaching machines, the 'Cutlan' lasting machine and various presses. At the turn of the century the works covered three-quarters of an acre and employed some 150 hands.

An advertisement in Slater's Commercial Directory for 1862 claims for the Champion Lock-Stitch SMs that they are adapted for all kinds of family and manufacturing purposes, and that they will sew any kind of thread, twist or cotton, or any kind of material from the finest cambric to the heaviest tailoring or leather goods.

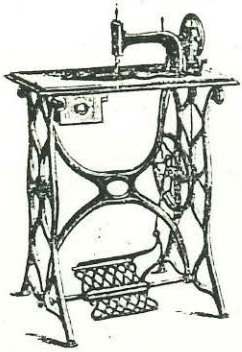
'For boot and shoe closing, tailoring or dress-making they are unsurpassed; their speed being equal to any offered to the public.' An advertisement in the 'English Mechanic' of 1867 claims that his machines are 'the cheapest and best for boot-makers, tailors and domestic use'.

Another advertisement lists six machines: the Family Treasure (a hand lock-stitch machine patented in 1874); the 'twist stitch' hand machine; the Kettering (a swan-necked Jones, which may have been a 'badge-engineered' machine rather than made in Kettering); the No.1 Family and the No.1 Medium (both of which may also have been bought in) and the No.1 Champion ('embodies the same principles as their world-renowned boot closing machine', but looking like a Howe Machine Co. treadle machine).

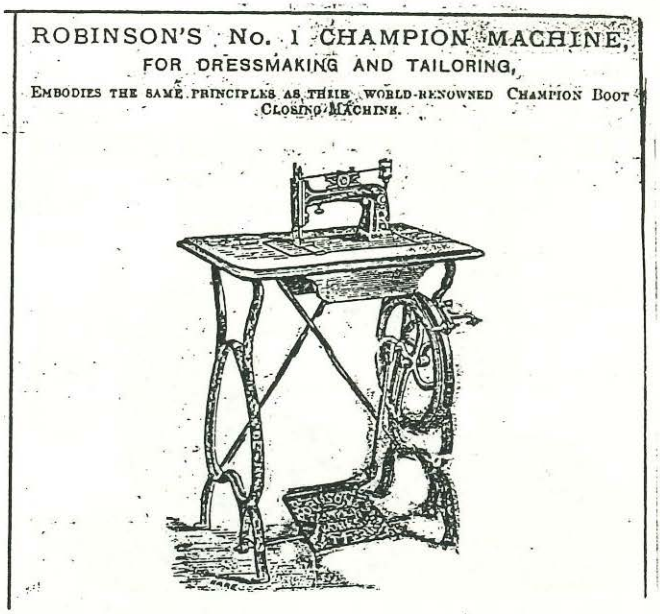
This advertisement dates from about 1880. 'O Robinson & Co have now manufactured SMs for 23 years .. recognised by all who have tried them as being superior to all others for neatness, adaptability to the work for which they are intended, plumpness and neatness of stitch, strength and durability.'

By 1910 no claim to SM manufacture is made, and shortly after that the business was sold, many of the patents for footwear machinery being bought in by the Perfecta Engineering Works of Timson, Bullock & Barber, the last two having had their training at the Champion Works.

While engaged in watch and clock repairs Robinson (and his wife)



Above: Fig.4, a slightly down-market version directed to the family user.



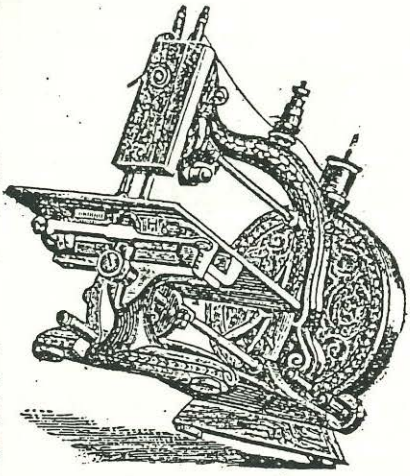
Right: Fig.5, the No. 1 Champion machine aimed at the tailoring and dress-making market.

signed the pledge. He was one of the original members of the Kettering Temperance Band for which he assisted in arranging music. In 1864 he started (with Charles Pollard and John Freer) and evengelical mission in the Temperance Hall soon after it was built. He was actively connected with the Fuller Baptist Church throughout his time in Kettering, preaching and conducting a Young Men's Bible Class. He was a member of the Burial Board and served for many years on the town's Board of Guardians.

Robinson was a convinced anti-vaccinationist. The compulsory clauses of the Vaccination Act (1857) came into force the year before the birth of his eldest son. On account of a case of death after vaccination at Desborough, he was determined that none of his children should be vaccinated. He was summoned and fined many times. He was a Radical and a stalwart Chartist.

Owen Robinson celebrated his diamond wedding in 1915, lived into his nineties and was finally found dead in a slipper bath at Kettering Public Baths. Only four of his 12 children survived infancy (five died at Dalkeith Place and three at Queen Street 'through sewer gas') and two sons went into engineering, one designing an air-cooled car in 1907. The 1885cc engine was cooled by using the exhaust gases to direct air onto finned cylinder heads.





Above: Fig.6, a worm's-eye view of the Family Treasure.
Left: Fig.7. Robinson's Jones/Pradbury look-alike.

FOR THE RECORD

ROBINSON TOOK OUT seven patents for SMs. To date we have seen three patterns of machine made by him, only one of which is covered by any of his patents. His first patent, No. 766 (1865) relates to a wheel feed for SMs used in the boot and shoe trade. Two versions were envisaged, one for 'closing the uppers' (sewing the leather uppers together on a flat-bed machine) and one for 'goloshing the uppers' (sewing the uppers to the welt on a cylinder-bed or free-arm machine). The patent was provisional, has no details or diagrams, and was never sealed or accepted.

Nine years later, in 1874, he patented 'The Family Treasure', a small hand machine for the domestic market (figures 3 and 6).

His later patents cover machines of which no example has come to light. No.3774 (1877) details various cams and eccentrics for needle and shuttle drives. No.1583 (1884) contains improvements to the feed mechanism of a hand-stitch straw-hat machine patented by William Walker of Dunstable a year earlier. Perhaps Robinson hoped to manufacture the machine but it was not a success.

In 1885 Robinson produced his own design for a hand-stitch straw-hat machine with two included needles. Figure 8 shows how it made

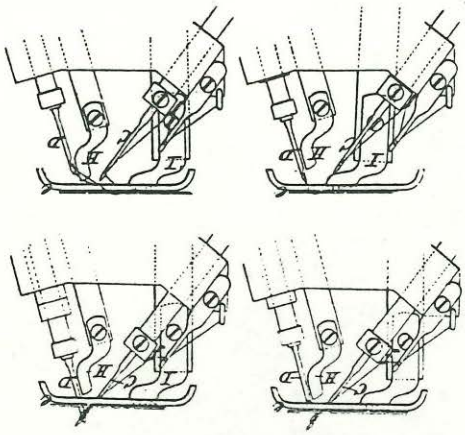


Fig.8. This series of diagrams from the 1885 patent shows the Robinson design for a two-needle straw-hat machine.

its stitch. His last two patents (in 1885 and 1885) cover a rotary-feed, rotary-shuttle machine in both platform (closing) and free-arm (goloshing) versions (figures 1 and 2).

An advertisement in Kettering Museum shows a hand machine like a Jones (called The Kettering) though different in detail and they have a later derivative on a square cast-iron base with a 'Champion' medallion. The advertisement also shows a machine called the 'Champion' looking like a product of the Howe Machine Company. Their example of this machine has the serrated wheel feed of a closing machine and is of heavier construction than the normal domestic machine. It has a prominent R cast on the overarm and the treadle plate is badged with his name. Also advertised are 'Family' and 'Medium' machines of which we have not seen examples.

From this surviving sample, what place has Owen Robinson in the history of the SM? His small domestic machine (The Family Treasure) is typical of such machines of the 1870s and was no great breakthrough. He did not invent the serrated wheel feed -- Singer and others had used that years before and his surviving 'Ketting' and 'Champion' machines are really copies of existing designs.

His technical innovations were his hand-stitch straw-hat machine and the rotary-shuttle machines of 1885/6. Let us hope that examples of these will turn up. He will be remembered for establishing the use of the SM in the boot and shoe trade and for the manufacture of other machines for boot and shoe making.

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Kettering Revisited, Kettering Civic Society, 1984.
Northants Evening Telegraph, March 16, 1872
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Slater's Commercial Directory, 1862.
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Missing references:
Kettering Leader, 16; 23; 30 June, 1905 -- obviously an important series of articles.
Boot & Shoe Trades' Journal, ?1892.

Artifacts:
Westfield Museum, Kettering:
- Family Treasure SM (10563).
- Instruction Book.
- Poster.
- Champion SM.
- Patent (1877) and seal.
- Miscellaneous shoe trade machinery.

As far as it is known there are four Family Treasures owned by members of the Society. The owners are: the Gregories, Maggie Snell, Carol Head and Bernard Williams.

FOR A FEW MINUTES I once thought that I had discovered a really rare Robinson. We've all heard of bottom feed, needle feed, walking-foot feed, but how about walking-table feed.

A Robinson turned up, in pretty sad condition, but it was the first one I had seen. When the wheel was turned, the cloth table operated exactly on the walking-foot principle.

Only after a lot of dirt had been removed was the solution clear. The holding-down screws had long-since disappeared a table rusted to its under-mechanism was oscilating as the handle was turned.

So I'm still looking for the first table-feed machine -- it could be out there somewhere. GF