

SUPPLEMENT TO THE **HISTELEC NEWS**
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MASSINGHAM FAMILY IN THE BRISTOL AREA

by Peter Lamb

This is the story of how Henry Collyer Massingham settled in Bristol and subsequently his family made a considerable mark on various industries in Bristol and the South West. The information contained here has been acquired over a number of years, in combination with a family member, Clifford Massingham, and more recently Haydn Morgan, researching their family history. Our interest relates to Henry Collyer's son Henry George being the most adventurous electrical entrepreneur in the South West in the 1880's. Recently more information, found by Bob Martin of BIAS, has prompted this article, which has also been reprinted in BIAS Journal 2002.

In 1835 when Henry Collyer Massingham was 15 he wanted to go to sea, but his father declined to provide the funds for his kit as he considered he would be in danger from the elements and surrounded by sin and depravity! So by the time he was married to Sarah Charlotte Meen in 1839, he was learning the trade of shoemaking.

His first shoe shop was at 7 Mansion House Street, opposite the London Mansion House and was stated to be one of the finest around. By 1850 they had three daughters and had moved to Guildford, where they had large premises in the High Street. Henry was employing 40 men, with five servants living in and trading as the British Shoe Company. At this time in 1851 their, son Henry George was born, but more about him later.

Henry's first wife died fairly young and perhaps this motivated him to sell up and move to Bristol in 1853 at the age of 39. He acquired a large property in Old Market Street, where he established a boot manufacturing business. He then moved the factory to Fishponds in 1859. The house was known as Fishponds House, being large with one hundred rooms and situated on a large site bounded by Oldbury Court Road, Elfin Road, College Road and Fishponds Road. It had been an asylum, being known

locally as the "Mason's Madhouse", the last one closing in 1859. He remained there for ten years; during which time, he was very interested in

the welfare of his large workforce. He started brass and fife bands for the men, buying all the instruments himself and paying the Bandmasters. Singing classes were arranged for the women and girls. He then became financially over stretched and sold the Fishponds factory some ten years later. (We believe that the house was demolished about 1880).



Fig.1 Fishponds House Boot & Shoe Factory

During his time with shoemaking in Bristol, he opened shoe shops throughout the South West, including Bristol and Bath. The shops were called Beehive Boot Stores and Henry was the first to charter a special steam train

for a staff outing. Customers would find the following notice on the doors:-

“The bees have flown on the wings of steam
 This day from toil they borrow
 Kind friends to show that you approve
 Please call again tomorrow”.

Henry C. married his second wife, Emily Hunt, in 1871, when he was aged 51 and she was 26. At about this time, he also retired from the shoe trade. The “Family History” states that he sold the business ten years after moving to Bristol and also that his son, Henry George, opened shoe shops at Cheltenham and Bath at the age of 20 (i.e. 1871). It is highly probable that the son took over the business around that time. Henry Collyer seems then to have turned his attention to other businesses, presumably happy that his son is looking after the shoe trade.



Fig.2 Henry Collyer Massingham

He first started the “Royal Library” at 51 Royal York Crescent, Clifton with 50,000 volumes. Then he took over the Clifton Steam Laundry with premises at Southmead Road, Westbury-on-Trym. The special features of the Laundry were advertised extensively such as “The Disinfecting Hot

Air Chamber” and open-air “Drying Grounds” pictured and described as “being situated several hundred feet above sea level and sloping gently, subjects the clothes to ozone-laden breezes from the Channel”

When he retired in about 1880, he moved to Nailsea. In the 1881 Census, Henry is aged 60 and described as “a retired librarian”. The house described as “Nailsea House” was rented from the owner of a Tannery, who presumably had supplied Henry with leather, when in the shoe business. So it is not surprising that he should have started a library in Nailsea also. Henry Collyer Massingham was certainly a man with an entrepreneurial flair and a keen family man, siring four children by his first marriage, three daughters and a son, Henry George and three children by his second marriage. I will give the birth dates of these last three, since they would have still been at home upon his retirement at Nailsea – Emily 1872, William 1873 and Charles 1879 – and he would have had to support them at that time.

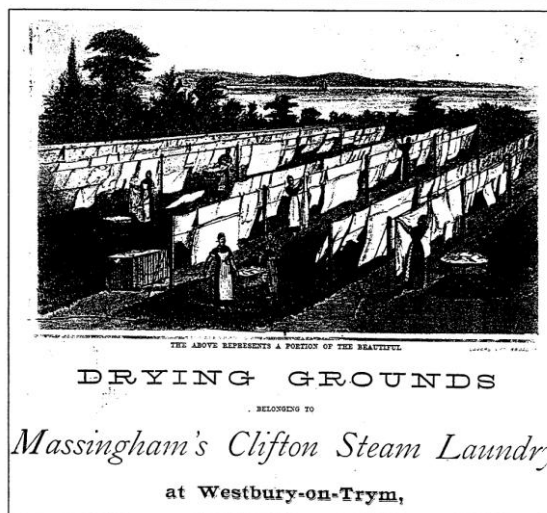


Fig.3 Clifton Steam Laundry

It would appear that he was still running the Steam Laundry in 1885 from his Nailsea retirement home in 1885, since the staff of 150 presented him with a silver cup on the occasion of his 65th birthday.

It is said that he had a second retirement moving to Ilfracombe in 1908. It must have been a short stay, even though he lived to a ripe old age of 92, dying four years later in 1912 presumably having returned to Bristol and his body was interred in the family grave at Arnos Vale Cemetery.

HCM's son Henry George, born in 1851, was no lesser "live-wire", excuse the pun, but although marrying twice did not have any children. He settled in Bath at Oldfield Road around 1870. He expanded his shoe business, purchasing the Taunton shop 22/23 Fore Street, from his brother-in-law, Samuel Elworthy. (featured in the December 2001 Supplement).



Fig.4 Mr. H. G. MASSINGHAM

He had witnessed the illumination of Bristol Cathedral by the electric light in 1878, which was illuminated for a special musical festival and hired the equipment taking it to Taunton for a demonstration to the Town Councillors there. With the help of the British agents, Laing, Wharton & Down, for the American company of Thomson Houston, he set up generating facilities in

the workshop of his shop at 22/23 Fore Street and commissioned the street lighting there on 1st May 1886, the first public electricity supply in the South West, beating Bristol's first public supply by seven years. The Taunton Electric Lighting Company's first customer was the Castle Hotel. In Taunton, he was considerably aided by two other businessmen in the Town; Henry Newton, who had an electrical manufacturing firm and Mr. Easton of Easton & Waldegrave, who made steam engines.

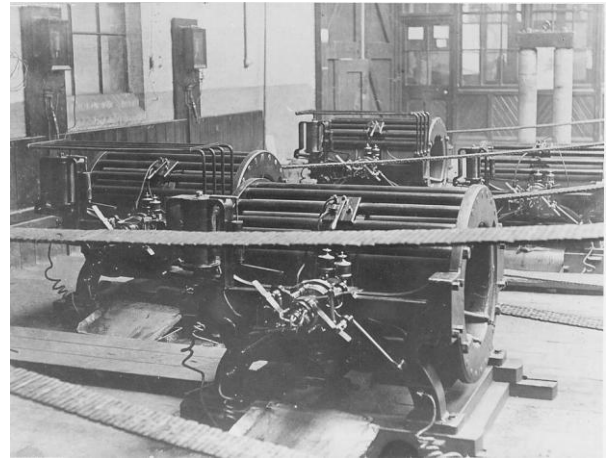


Fig. 5 Crude plant at Taunton

He was considerably struck by the electricity bug and managed to persuade the Councillors at both Exeter and Bath to let him set up electricity supply companies in the two cities and establish generating stations in 1889 and 1890 respectively. He had to get the city fathers' agreement, since they held the rights under Electric Lighting Orders. At Exeter the generating station was established at New North Road and at Bath at Dorchester Street. He was unable to persuade Bristol's Electricity Committee, since they were being advised not to be too hasty by their eminent consultant, William Preece (later Sir William), Chief Electrical Engineer to the GPO. The main reasons for this reticence so he stated, in the face of Massingham's private enterprise undertakings, were a number of factors. Firstly electricity was at that time six times more costly than gas per unit produced and also there was a considerable conflict nationally between the advocates of AC or DC. Also if one views the pictures of the

plant installed at Taunton with its belt driven equipment, one realises how crude this early installation was in comparison with the later Bristol plant involving directly coupled machines.



Fig.6 New North Road, Exeter Electricity Works

At Taunton due to the success, Massingham was forced to move the electrical equipment from his shop into new premises in St. James Street in 1889, but still we see, although larger the plant is still belt driven and the switch-board appears very crude.

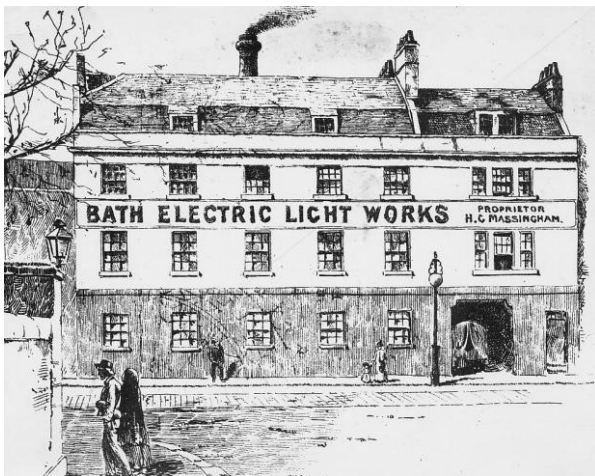


Fig.7 Dorchester Street, Bath Electricity Works

Due to a lack of capital to expand the undertakings, Henry George Massingham was forced to sell all three undertakings to their respective Local Councils after 7 years as laid down by the Act of Parliament. He subsequently set up an Electrical Contracting business in Exeter and Torquay, but by 1901 he was declared bankrupt. He did not give up his interest in electricity,

since he regularly gave lectures entitled “The Past and Future Developments of Electricity and Its Bearing on World Peace”, which were published in a book in 1925/29 by Hutchinson. One of his theories envisaged electricity being transmitted through the air! He had moved to Brighton for health reasons, but returned in 1935 at the great age of 85, to be the star guest at a 50 year Jubilee Celebration of the Taunton Undertaking.