

An account of the history of the Hale family of Ruardean and Nailbridge, Gloucestershire

by Donald Hicks

Based on a record made March 1992 by Mrs. Mabel Beech from information supplied by Mr. Jim Hale and from extensive research carried out by Barbara Owen (Jim's cousin) with regard to the family tree.

The history of the Hale family follows the lives of hard-working men who strove to provide home and support for their dependants through three centuries. The family has been traced back to the years following the Civil War. In 1695 in Ruardean 'under the wood', i.e. just beyond the growing forest, Aaron Hale (born 1670) married Elizabeth who was to bear him five children. The population of Ruardean was then approximately five hundred, indeed the whole Forest area held only six thousand and ninety residents, concentrated in communities such as Ruardean, Mitcheldean, Littledean, Coleford, and Newland whose residents would have known each other well.

Like many local men, Aaron Hale was a collier, for coal and iron ore mining were the principal local industries. By hard work Aaron became a man of substance, acquiring enough collateral to necessitate making a will which is still in the County Record Office, Gloucester. Aaron Hale died aged 61 predeceasing his wife Elizabeth; the key succession was to one of the three sons, Isaac. (It was then common in the area to give children biblical names, sometimes one family favouring a particular name over several generations. However, by the early 1800s the Rev. P. M. Proctor, vicar of Newland, was complaining that the *then* local inhabitants habitually profaned the Sabbath with drunkenness, rioting, immodest dancing and were ignorant of the scriptures).

Isaac Hale was born in 1705/6 and followed his father as a collier. There is no record of either of them being free miners but this does seem a possibility. Isaac married Sarah in 1728 and like most Foresters of the period, continued to live in Ruardean. They had one child, Thomas, and lived into their 80s. During Isaac's life the last of the Mine Law courts was held at the Speech House (1777); in these courts free miners aired their grievances and sought justice from their peers. The abolition of these courts led to unrest during which the newly built Speech House was damaged, and was not resolved until the revision of the Free Mining laws between 1832 and 1838 when an Act was passed regulating the opening and working of mines and quarries in the Forest of Dean.

Thomas Hale was born 1731. There is no record of his occupation but, despite illiteracy, common at this time, he died at 78 leaving a considerable estate. He married Margaret Bennet when they were both 26 and they had five sons and four daughters; Margaret died at 61. Thomas' will made an equitable division of his estate, which included land, sheep and furniture as well as a house to each of his children who needed one. During

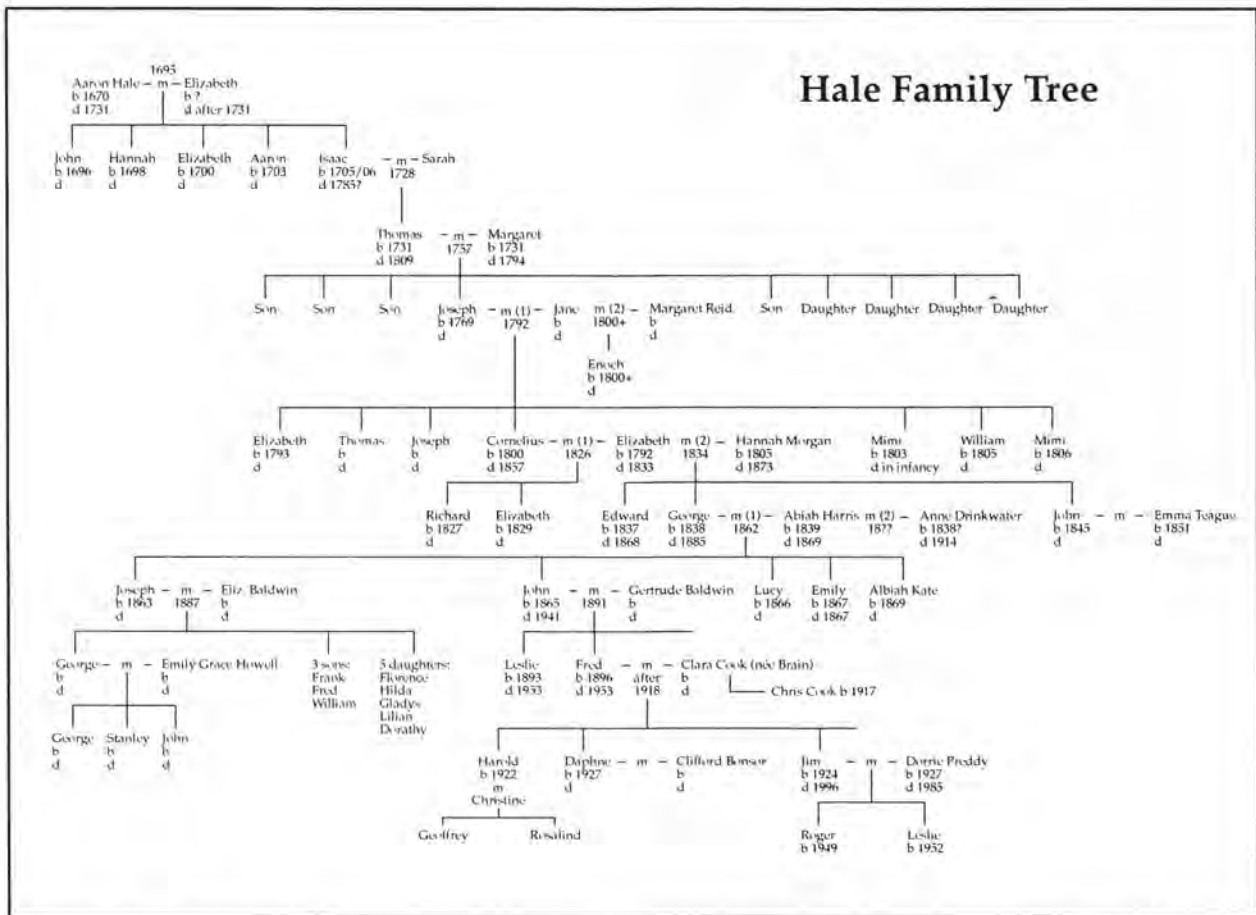
Thomas' life the war with France led to a shortage of corn so serious that many Foresters came near starvation. Thomas Yemm and Thomas Rosser of Ruardean, caught robbing grain from a trow at Newnham were hanged as an example despite having previously good characters, but the Crown did then distribute 1,000 worth of grain to distressed Foresters.

The Hale line can then be traced to Thomas' fourth son, Joseph, born in 1769, another collier. There were many small local pits, some with unique, imaginative names. In Ruardean coal with a distinctive blue sheen led to the pit being named True Blue; another pit was known as The Windmill. Joseph married Jane in 1792; four sons and three daughters are recorded, the first girl, Mimi, dying in infancy, giving her name to a later sister, the last child borne to Jane who died less than three years later while the family was still young. Joseph continued in Ruardean, marrying again, Margaret Reid, who gave him only one child, Enoch.

Joseph's third son, Cornelius, born 1800, and his half brother Enoch broke from the family tradition of coal mining to become blacksmiths, a trade in constant demand by the collieries and to maintain horses for transport. Cornelius started business in Nailbridge and Enoch in the Morse Road, between there and Ruardean. Cornelius' original blacksmith's shop still stands between the present-day Hale & Co. showrooms and the row of cottages.

Like his forebears, Cornelius saw many changes in his lifetime. Discontent among the many non-Foresters who had come into the mines of the area about the privileges exclusive to the free miners forced the establishment of a Commission to investigate the Coal Mine Awards. This resulted in drastic changes in the rights which up until then had been the free miners' prerogative only. Now rights became a saleable commodity. As before, every mine had to be applied for by a free miner of the Forest but, with the change, after acquisition he could sell it to anyone. Cornelius also saw discontent over the enclosures of Forest land which ended in the transportation to Australia of one of the ring-leaders, Warren James. However, the progress of the industrial revolution led to good business for Cornelius Hale with the additional work provided by tramways and later railways.

Whether Cornelius ever joined forces with his half-brother Enoch in their business ventures is not known. However, he is known to have married in 1826 and a son Richard, and daughter were born before his wife, Elizabeth, died in 1833 aged only 41. The next year Cornelius married Hannah Morgan, born 1805, who



A Hale family portrait. Seated are John and Gertrude and behind stand their sons Fred on the left and Leslie. John was born in 1865, the son of George and Abiah Hale. In 1891 he married Gertrude Baldwin and in 1893 Leslie was born, followed three years later by Fred. Fred took over the family business after the First World War whilst Leslie emigrated to Canada.

The Hale Collection

bore him a further three sons. He died aged 57, leaving all his possessions, including the blacksmiths shop, to his wife, with instructions that, at her death the estate was to be divided equally amongst their children.

Until the 19th century there were no churches in the Forest of Dean. Ancient churches had been built at Ruardean, Littledean, Mitcheldean, Abenhall, English Bicknor and Staunton. The 'Forest Church' at Quarry Hill, subsequently Harry, now Harrow Hill, was built 1816/17 near to Cornelius Hale's blacksmiths shop at Nailbridge, the opening service being held in February, just eight months after the first stone was laid. A Mr. Cinderey of Nailbridge gave the stone from his adjacent quarry free of charge save for the cost of transportation; sadly this caused a family rift, not all his relatives agreeing with his generosity.

The church was used as a school until 1861, when a specially built church school was opened in Drybrook. The incumbent at Forest Church in the mid 19th century was the Rev. H. G. Nicholls, bachelor son of a Baronet who was looked after by his sister. In 1866 the living passed to a Rev. William Barker, remembered for carrying a stick, pulling boys ears and sometimes giving children sweets. The vicarage had a full staff of servants, including the cook Anne Drinkwater.

Returning to the Hales. George, Hannah's second son, took charge of the blacksmiths at Nailbridge, his elder step-brother, Richard, being already established in the same trade at the Morse, near by, perhaps with, his uncle Enoch. George too was at that time a worthy man and financed his younger brother, John to go to university. On his return to the Forest, John Hale became the first headmaster of the new Bilson School in



A view of Harrow Hill with the Hale's business premises in the foreground. The low building with the open doors is the blacksmith's shop where Cornelius Hale started business. Behind and to the left is the sawmills started in the early 1920s by Fred Hale, son of John, who decided to diversify from the traditional blacksmithing of the family. This turned out to be a very wise move.



John Hale stands proudly outside the blacksmith's shop, a business he took over in 1885 when twenty years of age. On his left is an assistant and, presumably, the rest are customers.

The Hale Collection

Telegrams :
HALE, SAW MILLS,
DRYBROOK.
ALL GOODS sold subject to
being unsold on receipt of reply,
Breakdown, etc.

SAW MILLS,
DRYBROOK, Glos.,

Partners :
F. G. HALE,
J. HALE.

192

FROM HALE & CO.,
ENGLISH AND FOREIGN TIMBER MERCHANTS.

Converters of Railway Wagon Scantling, Mining Timber, Plank, Rafter, etc.

INTEREST CHARGED ON OVERDUE ACCOUNTS.

STOCK.

FENCING.



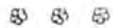
**FIELD GATES
AND POSTS.**



**DEALS, BATTENS
AND BOARDS.**



MATCH BOARDS.



**MOULDINGS AND
SKIRTINGS.**



**CORRUGATED
STEEL SHEETS.**



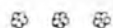
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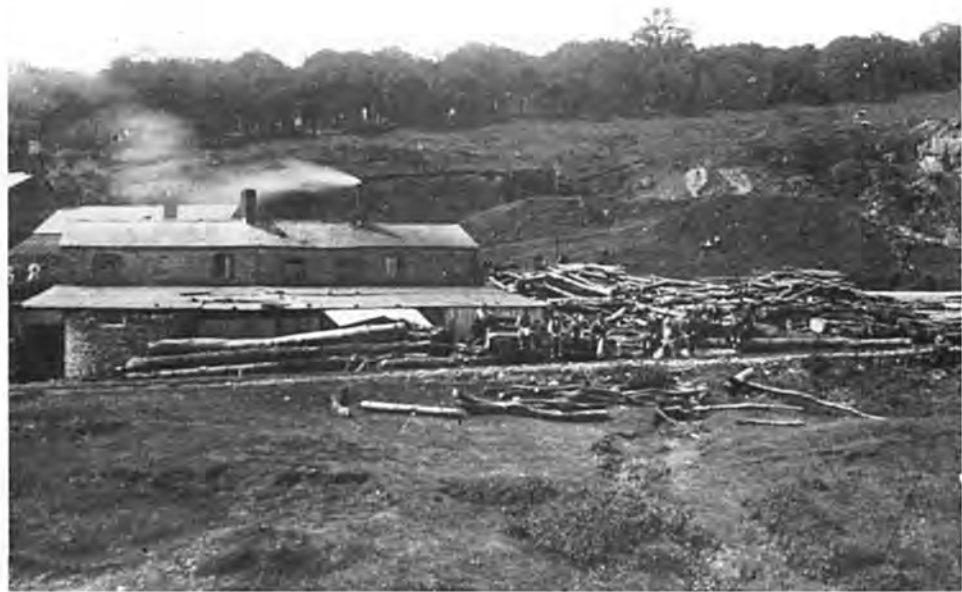
FELT.



NAILS.



**ALL KINDS OF
BUILDING
MATERIALS.**



Two views of the sawmills sit superimposed on a 1920s letterhead for Hale & Co. The letterhead is interesting in that it lists out the various products stocked and produced. The upper photograph shows a general view of the rear of the sawmills with a disused pit shaft walled around on the left. This is marked on the 1878 OS as Mitcheldean Colliery. The shaft was working Newbridge Engine Gale and in January 1876 The Mitcheldean Colliery Co. Ltd. was formed to work it but work had stopped by mid-1879. Also to be seen in this view, passing in front of the shaft and the timber stack, is Brain's Tramway which ran between Trafalgar Colliery and a railway siding at Nailbridge. The lower photograph is taken within the mill and contains two generations of the family. On the left stands John Hale and three from the left is Fred Hale. Both: *The Hale Collection*



Jim Hale stands within the sawmill. Together with his wife Dorrie, Jim pulled the business round and built the foundations of the thriving business which operates on the site today.

Cinderford, his wife Emma, the Bilson Infants school headmistress.

In 1862, George Hale, then 24, married Abiah Harris and set up home in a cottage under Harrow Hill to be near the shop. Abiah died aged 30 of toxæmia in 1869, having given him five children, Joseph in 1863, John 1865, Lucy 1866 who married a watchmaker and jeweller from Drybrook, Emily 1867 who died in infancy, and Albiah Kate in 1869, who married the station-master from Matlock in Derbyshire.

George took as a second wife, Anne Drinkwater, the cook at the Forest Church vicarage. Unfortunately Anne did not bring him happiness. There were no further children and George took to the bottle. Anne left him and remarried in 1892. George continued to work as a blacksmith but had to supplement his income by mortgaging some of his possessions. George died aged 57 in 1895.

George's eldest son Joseph, who became a tinsmith worker, was a good Christian man who never ate a meal without first giving thanks. In 1887 he married Elizabeth Baldwin; they had four sons and five daughters. The eldest son, George, married Emily Grace Howell, and fathered three sons of whom Stanley, the second, became Registrar for the Forest of Dean in 1965. Joseph's second son, Frank, founded the locally celebrated firm of Hale's Cakes, based in Clevedon across the Bristol Channel.

Grandfather George Hale's younger son John was apprenticed, aged 10, to a boilermaker, Mr. Cowmeadow. One of his jobs was to crawl inside a boiler needing repair, sometimes while it was still hot, to hold fast rivets while they were closed on the outside. At one time John repaired a link in chains restraining the dancing bears who brought infamy on Ruardean when they were killed in 1889. It is said that he remained teetotal and did not swear all his life. John took over the blacksmith's business at Nailbridge in 1885, age 20. In 1891 he married Gertrude Baldwin, a good, happy marriage. Gertrude's father, James, was manager of the local Slad pit for Sir Charles Illingworth M.P. James built four quality houses in the area. One, *Oakview* at Nailbridge, became the home of Roderick (Jim) Hale, of whom more later, and the others, all also having Oak in their name, at Steam Mills, Ruardean and Morse

Lane. The Slad pit may have provided some of the stone used in their building.

John and Gertrude had two sons, Leslie, 1893, then in 1896, Frederick, Fred to all. Leslie joined his father in the business at Nailbridge. At the time this was a hive of activity; the tramway ran under the causeway which now bears the A4136 and continued through the present-day site of Hale and Co. The railway from Cinderford ran behind Hale's storage bays and there was a weighbridge near the road from Nailbridge to Drybrook and a mine near the blacksmith's shop.

About 1917 the steam engine at Nailbridge gave up the ghost and (was it coincidental?) Leslie went to live in Canada. His younger brother Frederick, who had been one of the first pupils of the new Cinderford Grammar school, took over the Hale family business, including the early installation of a replacement steam engine purchased for £90, financed through a joint mortgage with his mother. However, when a serious leak developed, Fred realised that he had stretched his financial resources too far. He was able to effect a cure by adding cow dung to the water (today Hale and Co. would sell you a well known proprietary product to do this job!) but thereafter never made a purchase with borrowed money. Fred, like many of his generation, had an unspoken motto: 'pay and be paid'; also, like his father, he avoided alcohol and profanity.

Both Leslie and Fred married after the 1914-18 war. The former had fought in Europe but called in on his way back to Canada, to see his family and marry his childhood sweetheart from Drybrook. They lived happily ever after. Fred married Clara Cook, née Brain, who had been widowed in the war.

While his father continued with the blacksmith's business for as long as he was able, Fred diversified. There was a constant demand for timber for the Dean collieries in the early 1920s and Fred received the first load of timber imported locally into the railway siding near the blacksmith's shop. His business acumen enabled Fred to overcome potential competitors and Hales became the only company selling imported timber in the area. Coal was also sold. He was able to buy a pony and trap, a joy to his young family, the receipt for which, a family memento, shows that it was purchased from Mr. Gwilliam at English Bicknor.



One of the houses that James Hale built was *Oakview* at Nailbridge, close to the sawmills. The house can be seen in this view and was to become the home of Jim and Dorrie Hale.



Jim and Dorrie Hale.



Local handymen proliferated with the spasmodic nature of work offered by the collieries, and Fred perhaps started the DIY trend by stocking small hardware items, nails, screws, cement in small bags. He supplied everyone, including Teague and Chew, the Forest business known for over a century, and Fred Munn of Cinderford who sold blasting powder to local mines. A bicycle shop was opened in Fred's own premises at Dunklèy's Corner, which also sold candles, carbide for miners pit lamps (local mines being considered safe for such lamps), torches and even petrol! As the business prospered, the pony and trap was replaced by a Model T Ford car, though the first lorry waited until 1937. The major purchase of 1938 was an electric saw, costing £86.

Fred and Clara Hale had two sons and a daughter. Harold the eldest became a schoolteacher. Daphne also became a teacher; she married Clifford Bonser. The younger son was James Roderick Hale, Jim, who joined the family business at Nailbridge. Jim was joined later by his half-brother Chris Cook.

Jim succeeded his father on the latter's death in 1953, taking on a diminished business with two corrugated iron sheds, the original blacksmith's shop and just one employee. Fortunately Jim had married 1948 Dorrie Preddy from Collafield and, along with their sons Roger (born 1949) and Leslie (born 1952) she proved to be a great help to him in building up Hale and Co. again to the thriving business we see today. Sadly, Dorrie died in 1985, a loss felt by the whole community. Jim continued to run the business until his death in 1996. Jim's sons, Roger and Leslie now run the business with Roger in everyday control.

Thanks are due to Roger Hale for supplying photographs from his late father's collection to illustrate this article.

Left. A view of Nailbridge with Harrow Hill behind showing the early extent of the business.

Below. Taken in 1996 this aerial view of Hale's yard shows the extent to which the business has grown, particularly in the last 20 years. The old blacksmith's shop still stands but behind all has changed. New showrooms and offices occupy the saw mills site whilst beyond them are the new store sheds. The whole of the trackbed of the Mitcheldean Road & Forest of Dean Junction Railway, which ran on an embankment through the site has been removed.

Hale & Co.

