

Iron, Coal and Beer

Ashton, Smith and Roberts Families of Tipton and West Bromwich



Mary Amelia Skidmore (nee Smith) date unknown, probably taken in England before marriage. Source: Enid Skidmore

Mary Amelia's ancestors

Mary Amelia Skidmore's parents were **Mary Ashton** (1843 - 1890) and **James Roberts Smith** (1843 – 1890). They married on December 9th 1867 at St. James Parish Church, West Bromwich, Staffordshire. The original church building no longer exists.

Living in the 'Black Country'

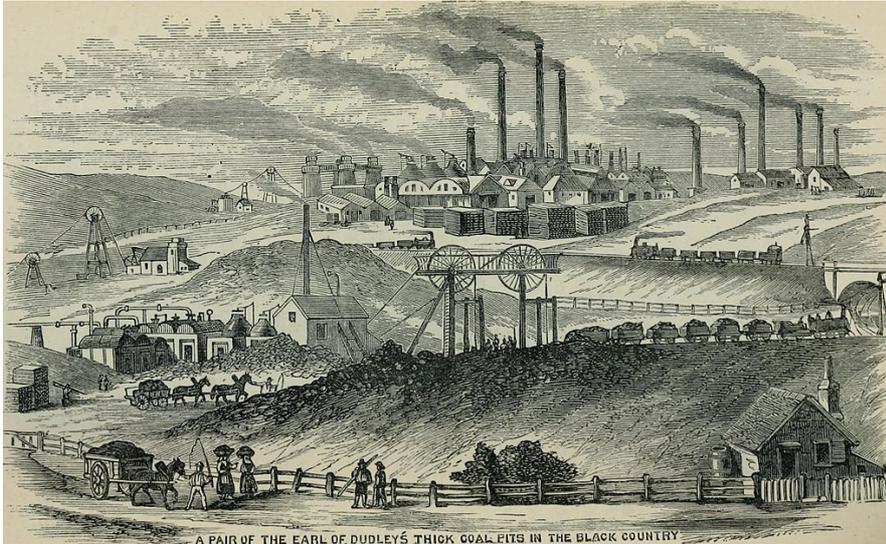
Due to the rich natural resources of iron and coal, West Bromwich, along with other parts of the west midlands (nearby Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Walsall and Dudley) experienced rapid industrial and population growth in the 18th and 19th centuries. Everyone, from worker to manager, lived amongst the myriad of collieries, iron foundries, nail works, brick and tile works, gas works, tube works, glass blowing works, saw mills, tar works and gravel pits. Lots of employment, but noisy and polluted - not called the 'black country' for nothing. Local governance had not kept up with the rapid population growth and many aspects of civil life had been impacted negatively, for example health, roads and public services. Here is a description from the *Midland Mining Commissioners' Report 1843*:



The 'Black Country' of South Staffordshire. Source: Wikipedia

'.....the houses for the most part are not arranged in continuous streets, but are interspaced with blazing furnaces, heaps of burning coal in process of coking, piles of ironstone calcining, forges, pit-banks and engine chimneys; the country being besides intersected with canals, crossing each other at various levels and the small remaining patches of the surface soil occupied with irregular fields of grass or corn, intermingled with the heaps of the refuse of mines or the slag from the blast furnaces. Sometimes the road passes between mounds of refuse from the pits, like a deep cutting on a railway; at others it runs like a causeway, raised some feet above the field on either side, which have subsided by the excavation of the minerals beneath.....'¹

So, this was the landscape our ancestors inhabited.



A Pair of the Earl of Dudley's Thick Coal Pits in the Black Country. An idealised view of a 'black country' scene. Source: Griffiths' Guide to the Iron Trade of Great Britain 1873

Inns and iron

James Roberts Smith (eldest son of **Samuel Smith** and **Hannah Roberts**) was born in 1843 at Dudley Port, Tipton (a parish next to West Bromwich). He earned his living as an iron roll turner, and would have worked at one of the local iron foundries. A roll turner rolls iron and steel to shape or mould it, and then creates objects (eg rails for the railways and various tools and engineering components). It was hard, hot and dangerous work.

However, James had tried another profession, albeit briefly. In 1871, a few years after he and Mary Ashton married, although in the census James still describes himself as a roll turner, he had taken over the licence of the *Swan Tavern* in Eagle Road Great Bridge Tipton, from Mary's father Job Ashton. This was their address when the census was taken that year, Job having retired and moved to nearby Dudley Road. Also living at the same address were Mary's youngest sisters Emma and Harriet, and



Transition in Tipton. This drawing *Tipton Old Church* shows an ironworks amidst the ruins of a medieval church 1837. Source: William Salt Library

Mary and James's first baby, 1-year-old Edwin Alfred. Perhaps the sisters helped in the pub and with the new baby.

James only had the licence for one year, then returned solely to iron roll turning and moved back to John Street West Bromwich, the street where he had lived before marrying. There were numerous iron foundries in the area, many producing rails and other machinery for the South Staffordshire Railway Company (amongst other local and export industries) who were to open a new station at Great Bridge. *Griffith's Guide to the Iron Trade in Great Britain* (1873) lists 28 iron puddling furnace companies in West Bromwich and 14 in Tipton alone. Most of these running multiple puddling furnaces, mills and forges, one in the same street as the *Swan Tavern* on Eagle Lane.

1890 - a big change in the family

James only lived to 47 years of age, dying of heart disease in August 1890, and sadly for Mary Amelia and her siblings, their mother Mary had died only six months earlier, at the age of 46. Both are buried in the Heath Lane Cemetery, West Bromwich. From that time Mary Amelia and her siblings were living under the guardianship of her eldest brother, 21-year-old Edwin Alfred, now a carpenter and joiner. The 1891 census shows he was head of the family: his sisters Hannah 20, who would have been the main housekeeper, cook and substitute mother, Mary Amelia 12 a scholar, Emma Louisa 7 a scholar, and brothers James Roberts 18 an iron moulder, Arthur 14 also an iron moulder, Harold Augustus 11 a scholar, and 4-year-old Samuel. Perhaps they may have had some help from their only living grandparent Samuel Smith, now a widower living with his three unmarried adult daughters in High Street not far away.



Heath Lane Cemetery Gates c1900 from a postcard. Mary and James Roberts Smith were buried here in 1890. Source: Paul Swift flickr.com

Smith and Roberts - problems with common names

Mary Amelia's grandfather, Samuel Smith born c1822 in Tividale (a village of Tipton), may be the son of **Sarah and John Smith**, a coal miner. Mary's grandmother Hannah Roberts, born c1823 in Tipton, may be the daughter of Hannah and James Roberts, also a coal miner. There are so many Smith and Roberts families in the same area, working in similar occupations, it is difficult to know, from the available records of the early 19th century, who is who.

The marriage record of a Samuel Smith (engineer) and a Hannah Roberts marrying at St Mary's Handsworth in 1840 is not conclusive. If these are our ancestors then the 1841 census of Samuel Smith apprentice engineer and Hannah Roberts, both living with their respective parents and siblings, is another Samuel and Hannah. Either the marriage record, or the only census record I could find, show a different couple. Records show several Samuel Smiths as coal merchants or dealers in Staffordshire, but I can identify our Samuel, Hannah and their family partly due to the use of Roberts as the middle name of some of their children (often erroneously being transcribed as Robert, being a common middle name) and also by cross-referencing siblings' records and working backwards from 20th century documents.

Coal master

What is certain is that our Samuel eventually became a coal merchant and coal master, the latter being defined variously as a person in charge of a coal mine, owner of a coal mine or lessee of a coal mine. Census records show that in 1851 he is an engineer, 1861 a colliery clerk, 1871 a colliery clerk and agent, 1881 a coal merchant, and in 1891 and 1901 a retired coal master probably of one of the many small collieries in the area. But he was retiring at the right time as far as this industry is concerned, for the second half of the 19th century saw the gradual decline of coal mining in West Bromwich.



The *Jubilee Colliery*, West Bromwich in 1893, one of the many South Staffordshire collieries near the Smiths in West Bromwich. Source: jubileecolliery.wordpress.com

James's siblings

Samuel and Hannah lived all their lives in parts of West Bromwich, including Swan Village and Carter's Green where Samuel is recorded in Kelly's Directory² as a 'coal master'. Hannah was busy raising their eight children: James Roberts being the eldest, then Elizabeth Roberts c1845, Lucy c1847, Esther Roberts c1851, John c1853, Samuel c1855, Hannah 1858 (baptised at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, West Bromwich), and Sarah Mary Ann c1860. At least one of the sons, Samuel junior, was not initially employed in the iron or coal industries. He became a schoolteacher, but possibly was later employed as a coal merchant like his father, as evidenced in Samuel senior's probate record. Samuel senior died in July 1901, had been retired for at least ten years, and was looked after by his unmarried daughter Esther, his wife Hannah having died sometime in the previous decade. Their daughter Elizabeth married Thomas Hill, a rate collector, Lucy married David Arkinstall, an iron galvaniser, and Sarah Mary Ann married her cousin Albert Ernest Roberts, a manufacturing chemist.



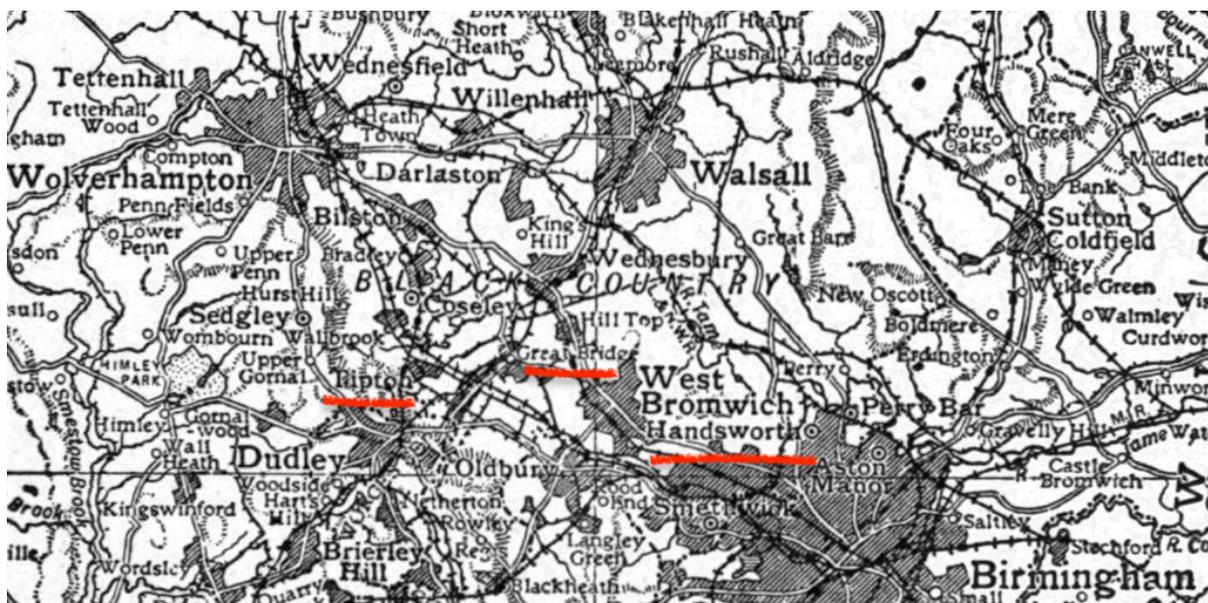
Graves of two of James's sisters: far left: Sarah Mary Ann, her husband and parents-in-law at Heath Lane Cemetery; and left: Lucy and her husband's grave at Yardley Cemetery Birmingham. Source: findagrave.com

An abused wife

Their other daughter, Hannah, married an engineer Herbert Alfred Ault, but in 1909 after a nine-year marriage, she was granted a separation on grounds of cruelty. The case in the West Bromwich Police Court was reported in the *Birmingham Gazette and Express* of October 30th 1909 under the headline 'Kissing a visitor'. The article described how the husband had taken a seventeen-year old girl (that Hannah had introduced into their house) out to 'entertainments' and kissed the girl in front of his wife and friends. He claimed he had his wife's permission. Hannah however reported that her husband had 'on one occasion stripped her (Hannah) and thrashed her like a child'. Her husband admitted this, but said she had made up the case about the girl because she wanted to get away from him. Thankfully and due to witness statements, Hannah was believed by the court.

The Ashtons

Mary Amelia's mother was Mary Ashton. The Ashtons were also employed in the coal, iron and related industries in the early to mid 1800s. Mary's parents were **Job Ashton** b.1810 and **Hannah** b.1813 both from West Bromwich. Hannah could be the Hannah Perry who married a Job Ashton on May 30th 1833 at St Mary's Handsworth. Our couple had nine children, but Job and Hannah suffered what many parents did in those days - child death - so common in these times. The death of two daughters within a very few years was just one of life's trials to be expected. An infant daughter Mary died in 1838, and their 2-year-old daughter Selinah died in 1841. All the others lived into adulthood: Sarah b.1835, Hannah c1842, Mary c1845, Eliza c1847, Joseph c1849, Emma 1851 and Harriet c1855.



1911 map of the West Bromwich area with Tipton, Great Bridge and Handsworth underlined.
Source: Wikimedia

Beer seller of Tipton

Most men living in West Bromwich and surrounds were employed in the coal, iron and related industries at some point in their lives, and Job was no different. He was recorded as being a caster (probably an iron caster/castor) in 1841, then a coal merchant in 1851, transitioning from manual work to running his own business over this period. From 1855, through the 1860s he was listed in several trade directories as a beer retailer or proprietor of the *Swan Tavern* (mentioned earlier) at Great Bridge,

Tipton. The 1861 census records he was living with his wife Hannah and seven children in Eagle Lane Tipton, the address of the *Swan Tavern*. His occupation is described as a 'victualler' (provisions dealer/inn-keeper).



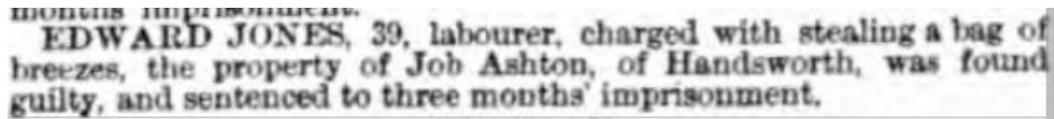
The *Swan Tavern*, Eagle Lane Tipton in c1908 now gone. Job Ashton was the licensee from c.1860 -1871 followed by his son-in-law James Roberts Smith. Source: Hitchmough's *Black Country Pubs* 2014

Inquest at the *Swan Tavern*

Pubs were not only for drinking and dining, but also played the role of more serious community centres. In the days when there were few other suitable venues, public houses, being conveniently located large indoor spaces, were often used for auctions, petty sessions' hearings and coronial inquests. On at least one occasion the Ashton's *Swan Tavern* provided the space for an inquest into a death. On Sunday July 8th 1866, the body of a new born baby girl was brought to the *Swan Tavern*. She had been found in a 'privy'³ in Eagle Lane by a 12-year-old boy who reported it to the police who retrieved the body and brought it to the tavern. The body would have been kept in an out building or maybe the cellar of the *Swan*. An inquest was conducted at the *Swan* on the following Saturday where the surgeon who had conducted the post-mortem testified that the child 'had never breathed'⁴ (stillborn?). The poor mother said she didn't know what to do with the child's body, and obviously distressed, desperate and lacking support, handed herself into the police. She was charged with 'concealment of the birth of her child', but the magistrate having some sympathy for her predicament thankfully decided to allow her to be released without a trial, pending any further evidence that may come to light.

Breeze dealer

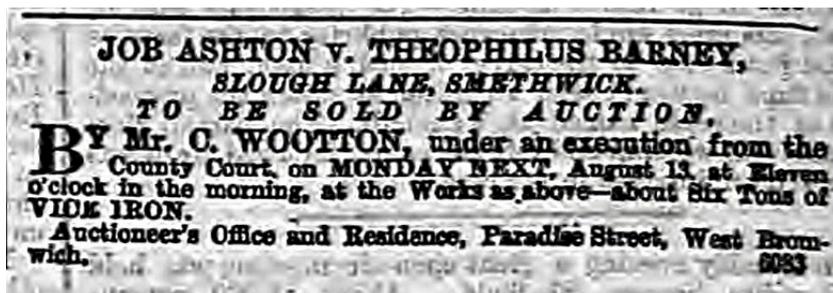
Running a pub was not the only way Job made a living. It is clear that he continued his trade in the coal industry at the same time. In the 1871 census he is referred to as a 'retired breeze dealer', breeze being the remaining ash from burning charcoal which was then sold on to brickmakers. In 1861 Job had been the victim of theft as was reported in local newspaper, the *Staffordshire Advertiser* of October 19th:



EDWARD JONES, 39, labourer, charged with stealing a bag of breezes, the property of Job Ashton, of Handsworth, was found guilty, and sentenced to three months' imprisonment.

Business troubles

On August 11th 1866, Job's name appears in a notice in the *Birmingham Journal* of an auction of 6 tons of iron under a county court order. It looks like Job and Theophilus Barney had some debts to settle:



JOB ASHTON v. THEOPHILUS BARNEY,
SLOUGH LANE, SMETHWICK.
TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,
BY Mr. C. WOOTTON, under an execution from the
County Court, on **MONDAY NEXT, August 13,** at Eleven
o'clock in the morning, at the Works as above—about Six Tons of
VIDE IRON.
Auctioneer's Office and Residence, Paradise Street, West Brom-
wich. 6083

Apology

A couple of years later Job got himself into more trouble, as was reported in the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* of September 1st:

TO MR JOHN WHITEHOUSE
OF ROUNDS GREEN, NEAR OLDBURY, CORN DEALER

Sir,

I am sorry for the mistake which I made in forcibly removing a Horse belonging to you from Smithfield Market, Birmingham, on Thursday 30th July, under the belief that it was one lost by me, and hereby APOLOGISE to you for so doing, and in consideration of your withdrawing the action commenced against me, I agree to pay the expenses to which you have been put, and the costs of publishing this Apology.

Dated the 24th day of August, 1868.

JOB ASHTON

Job the landlord

In 1861 Tipton Polling Books show Job owned freehold houses in Great Bridge. This qualified him to vote and gain further income by renting out his properties. However, being a landlord wasn't always smooth sailing. On November 13th and 26th 1862, the *Birmingham Daily Post* reported that a Joseph Partridge was charged with 'having removed his goods with the intent to defraud his landlord Job Ashton'. Job said 'the defendant rented a house of him at Falling's Heath, and that on the 5th of July, there being at the time £1 2s 6d due for rent, he removed his goods with intent to avoid payment'. Two witnesses testified to seeing Partridge do this. The report also stated that 'the case had been adjourned from time to time on various technical points' but that a further objection was over-ruled, and Partridge being unable to pay the £2 16s demanded by the court, was sentenced to 6 months' imprisonment with hard labour! However, Partridge appealed and his conviction was quashed a couple of months later.

A new wife and retirement

Sometime before 1871 Job's wife Hannah died. There are two possible records for this event: one in 1865 and the other in 1870. I hope it was not the latter as in the 1871 census, Job is married to a second wife Elizabeth. There is a record of a Job Ashton marrying Elizabeth Middleton in 1870 and there is another record of a Job Ashton marrying Elizabeth Matthews in 1868. Both events are in West Bromwich.

In 1871 Job and Elizabeth's address is Dudley Road West Bromwich, very near Eagle Lane, Great Bridge. Only one other person, a 12-year-old niece Harriet Tay Jones is living with them. Job is now a 61-year-old retired breeze dealer but the *Swan Tavern* is still in the family. His son-in-law, James Roberts Smith, married to his daughter Mary, briefly took over the licence in 1871 as mentioned earlier.

It seems Job had tried to give up the *Swan Tavern* in 1869 as this advertisement from *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* of August 14th 1869 shows:

FREEHOLD OLD-ESTABLISHED AND OLD-LICENSED PUBLIC-HOUSE, AND THREE DWELLING HOUSES AND PREMISES,
Situate in EAGLE ROAD, Near the Great Bridge Railway Station, Tipton.
TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,
BY Messrs. POWELL and SON, at the Swan Tavern, Eagle Road aforesaid, on **TUESDAY**, the 31st day of August, 1869, at Six o'clock in the Evening, together, or in the following lots, as may be determined at the time of Sale, and subject to conditions then to be read:—

Lot 1.—All that Old-established and Old-licensed **PUBLIC-HOUSE**, known as the "**SWAN TAVERN**," with the Outbuildings and Premises thereto belonging, being No. 1, and situate in the Eagle Road, Great Bridge, Tipton, now in the occupation of the Proprietor, Mr. Job Ashton. Annual value, £86.

Lot 2.—All those Three **FREEHOLD MESSAGES** or Dwelling Houses, adjoining to Lot 1, and being Nos. 2, 3, and 4, with the three Washhouses, Yard, and Out-offices thereto belonging, now in the occupation of John Cartwright, Henry Willis, and John Lee, producing an annual rental of £31. 17s.

The Houses are in good repair and substantially built, and for business purposes are exceedingly well adapted, being in the immediate neighbourhood and also adjoining to large Ironworks, and opposite the Great Bridge Station on the South Stafford Railway.

The proprietor is giving up the business, and the purchaser may have possession of the Public-house in a fortnight after the Sale.

Further particulars may be had at the Offices of Messrs. E. and A. Caddick, Solicitors, New Street, West Bromwich; or at the Auctioneers', No. 60, High Street, Tipton.

8515

A busy life

Job's death certificate of September 6th 1876 shows he died at Dudley Road, age 66 from 'paralysis' (a stroke?) and his daughter Harriet Ashton was present. On his death certificate, Job's occupation was given as a 'house proprietor'. The various business activities Job conducted over his life show he was certainly trying to 'get ahead' - running a pub, dealing in coals and being a landlord - all at the same time. His son-in-law, James Roberts Smith was one of the executors of his will bequeathing his effects, valued at under £800.

Job's children:

Apart from our direct ancestor Mary, I have only been able to trace with certainty Job's daughter Hannah. I discovered she married William Baker in 1864, a railway station master and they moved to Stratford on Avon and had five children. But of the others I have found no definitive trace after the 1870s. There are many Eliza, Joseph, Emma and Sarah Ashtons of similar ages in the Black Country.

Ann Hurley

2020

See my story **Trade Unionist and Tiler** for more about Mary Amelia Smith.

hurleyskidmorehistory.com.au

Notes:

¹ (Source: The Black Country, Edward Chitham 2009)

² Kelly's Directory of Staffordshire 1872 (Ancestry.com)

³ Birmingham Daily Gazette July 11 1866

⁴ Staffordshire Advertiser July 21 1866

Other resources:

Birmingham, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1937 (Ancestry.com)

Black Country Society West Midlands UK <http://www.blackcountryociety.co.uk>

Black Country Towns <http://www.historywebsite.co.uk/articles/BlackCountry.htm>

British History Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk>

Chitham, Edward - *The Black Country* (2009)

England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1966 (Ancestry.com)

England Census (Ancestry.com)

England, Select Births and Christenings, 1538-1975 (Ancestry.com)

Griffiths, Samuel - *Griffith's Guide to the Iron Trade in Great Britain* (1873)

Hitchmough, Tony - *Hitchmough's Black Country Pubs* (2014)

Staffordshire County Council *Staffordshire Working Lives* (2010)

<http://www.staffspastrack.org.uk/exhibit/workinglives>

The British Library - *British Newspaper Archive* <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

Tipton Civic Society (2014-2017) <http://www.tiptoncivicsociety.co/>