

THE MAKING OF A BERKSHIRE ENTREPRENEUR: MARTIN HOPE SUTTON OF READING: 1815-40

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SUMMARY

The seed firm of Suttons was founded in 1806 and moved from Reading to Torquay in 1976. For many decades, it was one of the best-known Berkshire firms, both nationally and internationally. Here its origins and the early career, to 1840, of its most celebrated entrepreneur, Martin Hope Sutton, are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Who was Berkshire's most noteworthy entrepreneur during the nineteenth century? George Palmer (1818-97) is a very strong candidate, for he established the world's first mechanised biscuit-making process and died almost a millionaire. William Exall (1808-81) was a highly gifted engineer; had the commercial side of his Reading Iron Works (Barrett, Exall & Andrewes) been as well run as the technical side, the firm might have been flourishing in Katesgrove Lane to this day.¹ Thomas Holloway (1800-83) made his considerable fortune in London out of patent medicines but spent his last years in Sunninghill. However, one entrepreneur who should by no means be overlooked is Martin Hope Sutton of Reading (1815-1901).²

If his trade of seedsman was less spectacular than the others', Sutton was undoubtedly the most interesting as a man. He kept no fewer than three diaries, to cover personal, business, and religious affairs respectively, and in sheaves of notes and letters revealed more of his life than is known about most

business men. We can, therefore, trace in some detail the way in which he launched himself on his remarkable career. The story to 1840 is recounted below.

I ORIGINS 1815-33

Martin Hope Sutton came of Berkshire forebears who had been for generations engaged in the corn trade. Charles Sutton (d 1750) was a miller of Newbury and the town's mayor in 1749. His son James (1744-89) moved to London, where he became a partner in the firm of Winckworth & Sutton, flour factors and mealmen of Queenhithe, near Southwark Bridge. He was remembered as a worldly-wise man of intelligence and good professional and personal judgment; these qualities made him comfortably off, but in 1789 he and his wife died prematurely.

They left five sons, the second and third being James (1776-1826) and John (1777-1863); both became apprentices in the firm, but then had to make a career elsewhere. In their early twenties, around 1800, they therefore moved to Reading in order to take over their inheritance, a mill or mills by the river Kennet. In 1806 John established a business as corn factor and miller in King Street, while James was running St Giles's Mill in Mill Lane. They both did well in the later years of the Napoleonic war when corn prices were high; they also married and started families. Then in 1814-15 three successive setbacks engulfed their lives. The return of peace in

1814 ended the long wartime agricultural boom; a succession of natural disasters, including the failure of the corn harvest, occurred later that year; finally, their bank collapsed.

The story of Marsh & Deane's Reading Bank has been told in an earlier issue of this *Journal*.³ The Sutton brothers had the misfortune to be among its largest debtors: James had an overdraft of £1450, while John Sutton's overdraft was £960. In January 1815 the bank, partly through Reading's misfortunes and partly through its partners' incompetence, had to close its doors. As one partner was Receiver-General of Taxes for east Berkshire, within days the government sent in Commissioners of Bankruptcy, who put severe pressure on borrowers to repay their loans. The hapless James had to declare himself insolvent. Apparently allowed to continue working as a baker, he died of alcoholism in 1826, aged 50. John was able to reach an accommodation with the commissioners, and continued his corn business on a much reduced scale. When his second son was born on 14 March 1815, he had the infant christened Martin Hope, the second name being given – in the recipient's later words – 'as an expression of faith that a bright future was in store for him'.

Martin has left a graphic character sketch of his father, a strict man whom he feared rather than loved, but as a child considered to be 'the wisest and best man in the town'. John Sutton (Fig 1) was 'always respected in rather an uncommon degree by the inhabitants of [Reading] where he had lived nearly thirty years a respectable tradesman. His word was really "as good as his oath"'. This upright conduct and others' good opinion of him became an 'idol' of his. A proud man, he 'could not believe the humiliating doctrines contained in the Christian religion' of the day. He worshipped at the Unitarian chapel in Reading until it closed for lack of funds in 1820. The whole family then attended St Laurence's church, where he 'entirely omitted those parts [of the liturgy] which he considered



Figure 1 John Sutton (1777–1863), c 1850
(Illustration courtesy of Suttons Seeds Ltd)

wrong, though very particular in repeating audibly as well as fervently praying in those parts which met his views'. Martin continued,

He was really a clever politician, being well versed in the history of nations and especially of England. The statesmen of the last forty years had been under his constant observation and their acts were all fresh in his memory, so that he could trace present evils and benefits up to their political authors many years back.

But in politics as in theology he was a free thinker, and though he would scorn to join with those who would talk of a republican government, universal suffrage etc., knowing as he did that monarchy was the least tyrannical, yet he was constantly speaking of the great French revolution as the effect of the priestcraft the people were formerly under, and the abuses of our constitution equally the consequence of the influence of the bench of bishops in the upper and the members of rotten boroughs in the lower house. And although my father was a loyal subject and only a moderate, quiet Whig I became an ultra-radical . . . I never joined publicly in political meetings, but took great interest in the cause of civil and religious liberty.

As a chip off this particularly gnarled old block, Martin (Fig 2) was his father's favourite



Figure 2 Martin Hope Sutton, c 1870
(Illustration courtesy of Suttons Seeds Ltd)

out of three brothers and three sisters, and was fully drilled in his idiosyncratic views. 'If he took a walk I was with him, and if he was pleased with a book, he was not satisfied till I had read it, and my taste for poetry and for deep things pleased him.' Martin was given a good formal education. In 1820 he left Miss Paget's infant school and joined a boys' day school, run by a 'near relation of the original Huntley biscuit baker'. That must have been Joseph Huntley, a former schoolmaster who had taken up teaching again in Church Street to make ends meet after running into insolvency, thereby shocking his fellow Quakers. As Martin remained a pupil until 1825, Joseph must have kept the school going even after he had opened the Huntley biscuit and cake shop in London Street during 1822; his son Thomas, a journeyman pastrycook, was in the bakery while Joseph kept the accounts. Thus, in a small way the Suttons helped the

struggling biscuit business to survive over the first few difficult years.

At the Huntley School Martin learnt English, Latin grammar, and arithmetic. In 1825 he went on to the Castle Street academy, run by Thomas Greathead. There the same subjects were taught, and he later regretted that he had learnt no history, little geography, and no science. To make up for his lack of French, he subsequently spent his early mornings and evenings in copying out William Cobbett's *French Grammar*.

John Sutton had no wish for his sons to follow him into the corn trade. Instead, they were to take up professions; the elder was already planning to study medicine at Guy's Hospital. However, by 1827 the business was running down so fast that Martin had to come in, despite his tender years. Both parents were in poor health, and his invalid mother had to be away from home for long periods at a time. He was put to work in the granaries, under Leaver the foreman, at 6d (2½p) a week. He never forgot his early mortifying experiences there. In his words,

Four or five men were employed by my father with his corn in Abbey Mill Yard, Abbey Square and Hookers Green. His object in sending me to work with the men was principally that they might have some check [placed] on them while he rested in the afternoon, smoking his pipe. This had been going on for fully seven years, and being but a boy they overcame my desire to act as a check on them, by prevailing on me to accompany them and the Abbey Mill men, about 4 or 5 o'clock every afternoon, to the Broad Face, Saracen's Head [public houses in the High Street] or to a rather dark and distant corner room in the Mill itself, meeting each day at one or the other places.

On one occasion at the Broad Face one of the millers, who had accompanied our men as usual, remarked that they did not see the fun of having this youngster always with them, and Leaver answered, 'Love me, love my dog, I say', which remark appeared to me very humiliating and probably helped to bring about the discontinuance of this practice.

When in 1829, at the age of 14, he was transferred to the counting house, it was none too soon. His father's unsure grip on the business had put it in financial jeopardy, and in the following year John Sutton had to borrow money from a Mr Fergusson, not

fully paid off until 1841. Friends repeatedly urged him to have Martin apprenticed to an engraver or artist, for at Herbert's evening school the boy had shown great talent in both engraving and ornamental writing. But he was far too useful to be spared, and he employed his gifts instead in closely examining the business and seeing what could be made of it.

The main trade was in corn, flour, malt, and hops, but Martin did not believe that that could be developed in any way. The firm also marketed turnip and other agricultural seeds, but very much as an unprofitable sideline. Without a systematic knowledge of the subject, Martin had a layman's interest in botany, and he resolved to begin selling garden seeds. His father maintained that they would not be lucrative, and insisted that all study of botanic books, sowing seeds in the garden, and putting them into packets must be done outside working hours. This Martin did, having to use his own money to buy in seeds from Mrs Conning's shop in the Market Place, 'running across ... for an ounce or two at a time as wanted'.

Then in 1831 he opened his first account with a London wholesale seed firm, Beck, Allen & Shearman in the Strand. As he was only 16 and legally a minor, the account had to be in his father's name. He also began the practice of making long trips, mainly on foot – during which he read books – to nurseries at Slough, Brentford, Knaphill near Woking, and Bagshot: roughly a 20-mile triangle which probably represented the distance he could adequately cover there and back in a day. Occasionally he took three or four days in going further afield.

II SUCCESS AND SETBACK 1832–3

Martin Sutton's growing influence can be seen in three small but significant developments which he introduced during 1832. In May he drew up the first balance sheet, which reveals its modest size. The credit balance was

£248, of which £118 represented goods in stock, and the liabilities were £202, mostly Mr Fergusson's and others' loans. That left a net balance of only £46. Clearly any further expansion would depend on widening the market, and that year he produced the first ever catalogue, a printed broadsheet. This was by no means the first in the trade, but was ahead of the rival James Carter & Co of London, which did not begin issuing catalogues until 1837.⁴ Martin also began putting notices in the local press, the first advertisement in the *Reading Mercury* being in the issue of 3 December 1832. That year also his father, after 'incessant supplication', provided him with a small garden in the Forbury.

At the beginning of 1833 he wrote, 'I was now in ecstasies with my employment', for the seed trade was beginning to take off. However, the exceptionally demanding work and the very long hours were sorely straining his none too robust constitution. As an infant he had been so sickly that whooping cough and measles were expected to carry him off. Through his mother's efforts, he had gained strength; however, in January 1833, when not quite 18, he was spending in his garden all the time he could spare, laying out plants. In the shop he insisted on having the doors open, to allow passers-by to see the bags of early peas and beans, while he stood at the counter exposed to the draught for most of the day. Not surprisingly, he went down with pleurisy and inflammation of the chest. He tried to struggle on, but was forced to stay in bed, and his doctor, Mr Harris of King Street, seriously doubted if he would recover. 'After much blistering and leeching I got up again, but was only partially in the shop.'

By May he was still so weak that he went to stay at the White Hart by Caversham Bridge. There he remained until July, thin and nervy, but finally able to walk three or four miles at a stretch. Mr Harris was so dissatisfied with his condition that he issued a blunt warning: Martin would not survive unless he went right away to the seaside. A holiday at Southsea followed. Yet when he

returned home in late August, he found himself far weaker than he had anticipated.

Even John Sutton accepted that the youth would have to change his job, and because of his skill in draughtmanship, he was to become a surveyor. He joined F Hawkes & Sons, estate agents, auctioneers, and surveyors of West Street, in September 1833, at 16s (80p) a week. In fact, Mr Hawkes had no intention of giving him a systematic training. Well aware of his exceptional diligence, he simply wanted to use Martin as a clerk, to keep the books and attend auctions. Perhaps something was said to him, for after three months, he announced that his own son was coming into the office, and at the end of December Martin returned to the Sutton shop.

The county of Berkshire, and the seed trade generally, need to recognise Hawkes as an unwitting benefactor. Had Martin become a qualified surveyor, he would have been an outstanding one, but at the expense of the Sutton business. The third son Alfred Sutton (1818–97) had joined in 1832 when he was 14 and managed the seed and bulb trade during Martin's absence. Having returned to the shop, Martin resolved not to leave again 'without ill health or some other very great inducement'. He remained a seedsman for the rest of his active life.

III INTO ADULTHOOD 1833–8

Back in harness, Martin strove hard to build up the business in garden seeds. In 1832 those had represented only 2% of total stocks (sales figures have not survived). That year he and his sisters made 8700 brown paper bags and wrote out all the labels by hand. By 1839 garden seeds accounted for no less than 42% of stocks, which had risen in value from £190 to £350. During the early part of 1834 his health gradually improved; a definite sign of recovery was the interest he began to take in the Reading Horticultural Society, of which he became a member in May.

His work for the Society undoubtedly helped to broaden his outlook. Although not an exhibitor at its first show that year, he was allowed to help with the preparations. He proved so useful that he was invited to lunch with the judges, and at the Society's dinner that September made a speech to 'return thanks'. He was a judge – of the dahlia entries – at the Berkshire Horticultural Society's show at Wallingford town hall. However, these outside activities were not allowed to interfere with his work in the shop. A minor landmark occurred that June, when he began selling White Warwick peas, from Richard Webb of Stourbridge. These were specially singled out in many subsequent advertisements, and must therefore have been a lucrative line. He was by then extending his connection with the London wholesalers: having at first been merely a buyer, he now sold some of his strains back to them.

Martin was by then quite a personable young man. From the age of 16, he later recalled, he had been touchingly 'fond of dress and very vain and fond of being admired'. Although during the week he was so run off his feet that he had to save up business correspondence until Saturday nights – when he would work until 1 or 2 am and sometimes continue later on the Sunday – he liked to spend part of the sabbath, after church, 'walking in meadows etc.', partly for exercise but also to show off his fashionable clothes. Then in his late teens he began to show 'more commonsense and what is sometimes called philosophy'. However, he was deprived of one recreational outlet that might have done him much good, entertaining at home. John Sutton, a widower from 1834 onwards, strove hard to restrain his children from company; since people were not invited socially to the house, none of his daughters ever married.

By 1835, what with exhibiting at the various shows, dining with the committees, drinking healths, and being drunk to, he felt himself in danger of 'becoming addicted

to drinking and feasting'. He was then co-secretary of the Reading Horticultural Society; his fellow secretary was 'very amiable and popular, but he died mad from drinking'. Martin, much involved by then in flowers, notably tulips, asters, pinks, and dahlias, was still nominally his father's employee. Not until midsummer 1836 was he at 21 made a partner in what then became Sutton & Son.

In the initial partnership year to mid-1837, credit balances were for the first time in three figures, assets being £904 and liabilities £780. On the evidence of this and other similar businesses in Reading – including the Huntley biscuit shop – few such firms were doing more than covering their household expenses year by year. Surplus funds were just not being generated for any future expansion. This did not deter Martin from spending money where necessary. When the tenant of 7 Market Place suggested that the Suttons should take over his shop, Martin at once accepted. As Figure 3 shows, this shop was double-fronted, with



Figure 3 The Sutton shop in Market Place, Reading (from 1837 onwards) (Illustration courtesy of Suttons Seeds Ltd)

large windows on each side of the entrance. There was besides plenty of room for the family in the two upper floors. The rent was over double that of the King Street shop, £50 a year as against £23, but it was in a far more prominent position, overlooking the Saturday vegetable and general market.

Removal in January 1837 had its plentiful difficulties. Because of the severe weather and his uncertain health, John Sutton was packed off into lodgings while all the upheavals were going on. Then Martin, far too occupied to look after himself properly, went down with influenza, and had to be carried over in a hospital ambulance, wrapped in blankets. Even so, early in February he was able to attend the annual general meeting of the Horticultural Society.

Over and above the burden of keeping two shops going – the King Street premises were not vacated until September – his mind was preoccupied by flowers and their seeds. In his religious diaries he spoke of the 'danger I was in from my fondness for tulips, which at this time I used to be thinking about and at times attending to on Sundays'. He soon acquired some nursery grounds in Queens Road, and bought his first greenhouse for £48. In mid-1838 he began selling greenhouse plants. Many of his bulbs came from local nurseries, but some also from Holland.

In this rather hectic atmosphere, late in 1837 he drew up a list of 'Own Resolutions and Rules of Life'. Acutely aware that the current well-being and future progress of the firm depended entirely on him, he needed to organise his own life as rationally as possible: his father could hardly cope at all and the 19-year-old Alfred, although nominally in charge of the nurseries, required constant supervision. While making the best possible use of his time, Martin felt he must try to escape from the business for a short while every morning 'for other pursuits'. As an upwardly mobile member of local society, one other matter troubled him:

As from weakness of body and the total occupation of my time in business ever since a very early age, I have

neglected the common acquirements of good breeding, and finding now that they are really valuable to a man who has his own way to make, I am determined to acquire these accomplishments which I used to think so contemptibly of; and having little time to spare from my business for such company as would most quickly teach me, I must make up that deficiency by practising minutely in my everyday work or occupation.

Having such a deficiency of scientific knowledge, and so little time for reading, I must take every opportunity of turning the conversation to such topics, and must read such thing every odd few minutes that I can spare for it.

I find dressing cleanly and tastefully with strict absence of foppery pleases most people ... and as dressing carefully costs no more (except the time) than slovenly, and requiring to be done every morning, will of necessity introduce a habit of regularity, I will certainly bear it in mind.

[I must] converse with intelligent and businesslike neighbours.

Elsewhere he prescribes 'rules' for himself, of a directness worthy of Dr Johnson:

I will go to bed and rise early.

I must break myself of my fondness for niceties in food.

Must not think of business anxiously at any meal time.

As I am so apt to eat too much, and find it almost impossible to be moderate, I must be abstemious, and I find that easier than moderation.

Among the 'abstract pleasures' he notes are:

Country walks before business in the morning, or on Sunday.

Reading at night. [At the bottom of the list of, mostly theological, works is the single work of 'Pickwick', then a bestseller, but it is not known if he ever read it, or what he would have made of it.]

Being invited into good company, especially that of the - - - - -s. [the name has unfortunately been cut out.]

A ball; public dinners; the theatre; reading; travelling; good clothes, particularly boots that will keep out the damp.

Being looked up to with confidence by the rest of the family for advice.

IV TOWARDS SUCCESS 1838-40

By 1838 the 23-year-old Martin Sutton had established an agreeable routine of work in the shop, planting and propagating out of doors, and occasional travelling. However, he did celebrate Queen Victoria's coronation day, on 28 June. He was aroused at 2 am by the sound of the guns on Forbury hill being

fired, the bells of all three parish churches being rung, and a fife and drum band parading noisily through the entire town. In the afternoon, a monster banquet for 2200 Sunday and charity school children was held in the Market Place; he had already decorated his shop-front with the royal initials 'V.R.' executed in flowers. Not only did he set out flower arrangements on all 15 tables, but he also presided at one table, carving the roast beef and dishing out the plum pudding.

The following month he showed his initiative in curing his 61-year-old father of half a lifetime's affliction. As a young man John Sutton had been advised by his London doctor to take at least two or three glasses a day of fortifying drink: hence by the mid-1830s he needed a glass of porter at 11 o'clock, several glasses of wine with his dinner, and a stiff gin and water in the evening. It is no wonder that he had needed a rest and a smoke in the afternoon, and that his granary employees had so easily exploited his indolence. Martin, too, felt the need of a glass of porter at dinner; that was literally on tap, being brewed once a year in the house by an itinerant brewer.

Father and son were, therefore, constantly ailing, John Sutton being always bilious, never entirely well, and often so irritable as to upset the family. Martin therefore brought matters to a head after attending a public lecture in the town about the evils of drink. He did what became a family custom over the next century or so: he composed a long letter which he left to be read overnight. That bluntly pointed out that John Sutton was incapable of doing a proper day's work; he could neither help with cultivating the tulips nor attend the various shows, since he no longer recalled correctly the names of the varieties and was therefore too embarrassed to converse with the gentry as they would expect him to do. This letter struck home, and John Sutton resolved to become a total abstainer.

Martin handled his father's withdrawal from dependence with his usual good sense. He stayed as much as he could by his side and

took him out for short drives and on coach and steamboat excursions. Even so, John Sutton at times gave way to spells of melancholia, which forced him to avoid 'evangelical writing and conversation': not the liveliest of topics. This conversion did not at once moderate Martin's own convivial habits, such as going to dinners and functions of his various societies or to other entertainments, for instance, a bachelors' party (where he played loo and whist), and a concert and ball. Then early in 1840 he had a complete change of heart. In January he played his last game of cards; as he wrote, 'I have lately attended more to religion and less to anybody than formerly'.

The reason was not far to seek: he had met an extremely devout and serious-minded young woman. That year the name of Charlotte Trendell, daughter of a watchmaker of Minster Street, begins to appear in his diaries. Yet for many reasons, including a long illness in 1842-3, his inability to spare much time for a normal courtship, and the meagre financial returns from the business, they did not marry until February 1844, when she was 26.

The inadequacy of Sutton & Son's income is shown in the first recorded gross profit, for the year ended June 1841. That was £577, or 32% of the £1800 turnover. Family expenses came to £325, including £68 for allowances to Alfred Sutton and his sisters; Martin and his father spent no more than £33 each. He had already decided to discontinue the unprofitable corn sales and cut down on the nursery trade. Almost half the turnover was in seeds, garden seeds being the largest single item at 21%. Two outside events, of great importance for the future, occurred in 1840. On 8 January he recorded in his diary, 'Folding and directing 128 country bills to be sent out on Friday [the 10th] when penny postage commences.' The penny post was later to transform his business from a mainly local into a national one, enabling him to develop the mail order trade on a massive scale. Each year he would be able to send out catalogues

post-free to enquirers; when they forwarded their orders, he ensured goodwill by fulfilling them on the day of receipt. As seeds were very light in relation to their value, they could be despatched by post at little expense. For remittances, money orders at post offices (from 1840 reduced to 3d [1p] commission on sums below £2) proved a cheaper and more convenient alternative to bank drafts.

As to the second innovation, at 6am on 30 March, Martin was at Reading station to see the first train depart for London. He also took the opportunity to sell flower seeds to spectators and to passers-by. The railway was to become important for bringing in large consignments of seeds, bulbs, and ancillary items, and sending off wholesale orders which were too heavy to go by mail.

Yet the penny post and the new rail transport were not to help the Sutton firm to become a fully national one for another decade or so. Meanwhile, it was providing the family with only a modest livelihood. The first 13 years of Martin Sutton's working life, from the ages of 12 to 25, had thus involved constant and unremitting toil, punctuated by periods of sometimes grave illness, without the breakthrough to success he clearly yearned for. How that breakthrough was achieved in subsequent decades will be narrated on some future occasion.

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NOTES

¹ For George Palmer see T A B Corley, *Quaker enterprise in biscuits: Huntley & Palmers of Reading 1822-1972*

(London, 1972), and for William Exall see *idem*, Barrett, Exall and Andrewes' iron works at Reading: the partnership era 1818–64, *BAJ*, 67 (1974), 79–87.

² The best general account is Alan B Cheales, *MHS, a few noteworthy incidents connected with the life of Martin Hope Sutton of Reading, gleaned from authentic public and private documents* (privately printed, 1898; a copy is in Reading Local Studies Library, ref R/TU SUT). Much of this 34-page pamphlet was written by Sutton himself,

who incorrectly believed that his grandfather had come from Blackheath.

³ T A B Corley, The earliest Reading bank: Marsh, Deane & Co. 1788–1815, *BAJ*, 66 (1972), 121–8.

⁴ John Harvey, *Early horticultural catalogues* (University of Bath Library, 1973), notes Carter's catalogues 1837–50, and gives brief particulars of the major British seedsmen before 1850. Unaccountably, he makes no reference to Suttons.

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