

The History of the Hale Family of Ruardean and Nailbridge

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with additions by Sam Hale.*

The history of the Hale family is truly fascinating. It follows the lives of hard-working men who strove to provide a home and support for those for whom they were responsible.

The family have been traced back to the years after the civil war and their story begins in the late years of the seventeenth Century. In the year 1695 in the small ancient township of Ruardean which stands "under the wood" of the Forest of Dean a certain Aaron Hale married and his wife, Elizabeth was to bear him five children. It is uncertain but his father may have been Isaac Hale.

At the time when Aaron Hale married the population of Ruardean would have been about five hundred. Indeed in the whole of the Forest, with the population concentrated in the communities such as Ruardean, Mitcheldean, Littledean, and places on the East side such as Coleford, Newland etc. there were in fact only six thousand and ninety inhabitants in all. So the people of each small settlement would have been well known to each other.

Aaron Hale was a collier like many of his fellow men. There was very little alternative employment for the energies of the men were all directed to the business of wresting the minerals from beneath the soil of the woodlands and this was not only coal but also iron. It was a hard life with often very little reward for hours of heart and back breaking toil. Even so Aaron Hale was to be a man of some substance. He did acquire enough collateral to necessitate the making of a will. This can be found at the County Record Office in Gloucester.

Born in the year 1670 Aaron lived to the age of 61. His wife, Elizabeth outlived him. Of the two daughters and three sons of Elizabeth and Aaron the son we must follow is Isaac.

There was, in the Forest of Dean, a peculiar tendency for parents to give their children biblical names. Not only did they give them such names but often a certain family would favour a particular name. This name would often appear over and over again in the records of various families. This is strange because early in the nineteenth century we find the Rev. P. M. Proctor, Vicar of Newland complaining about the inhabitants of the Forest were habitually profaning the Sabbath-day with drunkenness, rioting, immodest dancing etc., and with an ignorance of the scriptures!

Isaac was born to Elizabeth and Aaron in the year 1705/6. Like his father he was a collier. In the year 1728 Isaac Hale married a lady called Sarah. They continued to make their home in the Parish of Ruardean. Foresters usually had deep roots firmly implanted

in the village of their family and birth. By some strange chance Isaac and Sarah only had one child. It was a boy and they named him Thomas.

Both Isaac and Sarah seem to have been born about the same time, and, despite the harsh times in which they lived they were certainly a hardy and resilient couple. They also must have enjoyed good health as Isaac lived to about eighty and Sarah to be eighty-six.

Isaac Hale certainly lived through eventful times. Because of the isolation of the Forest of Dean, in those far off days things which happened within the forest were of major importance to those who dwelt there. Although there is no record of any of the Hale family, here mentioned, having been free-miners, there is a strong possibility that they were. Certainly there were men bearing the name on the roll of the free-miners. During the lifetime of Isaac Hale in the year 1777 the last of the Mine Law Courts was held at the Speech House. This was a court where miners aired their grievances and sought justice from their peers. Isaac would have also been aware of the disturbances which caused serious damage to the newly built "Speech House", as it is now known, for during those years of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the Forest of Dean was in a state of great unrest. This was to culminate in the revision of the free mining laws which took place between the years of 1832 and continued until 1838 when an Act for regulating the opening and working of mines and quarries in the Forest was passed.

Thomas Hale the only son of Isaac and Elizabeth was born in 1731. There is no record of how Thomas Hale earned his living but it is fairly safe to assume that he, like his forbears, was a collier. Like his father before him Thomas was to live through unsettled times in the Dean. This did not in anyway stop Thomas from being a careful and very prudent man. In the year 1757, at the age of 26, Thomas Hale married. He took for his wife a certain Margaret Bennett who was exactly the same age as her husband. There were nine children of this marriage. Five sons and four daughters. At that time women often aged prematurely worn out by the labours of child bearing and rearing and the burdens of home making. Many died young. Margaret Hale died when she was sixty one.

There is no doubt that Thomas Hale was a very methodical man for he left a most explicit and detailed will. Couched in language and spelling that makes present day interpretation rather difficult it was obvious that he was at great pains to have his wishes carried out the last letter even though he himself could not write!

Thomas Hale had to make no provision for his wife in his will, because he outlived her by some fifteen years dying when he was seventy eight. At his death, and as shown in his will, he had a considerable estate for a man who must have had quite a lowly paid job. He left a house to each of his children who needed one. He had land to dispose of, and like many men of the Forest he had sheep and also furniture. He made an equitable division of his property.

Because Thomas Hale did not die until 1809 he would have known the two men from the small community of Ruardean who were hanged. For in these troubled times to add to the problems of the much exploited Foresters there was a shortage of corn. England was at war with France and all available provisions were being sent to the fighting men across the sea. This had such a dire effect on the people of the Forest that many were on the point of starvation. So serious did this matter become that men took the law into their own hands and a trow carrying grain was boarded at Newnham on Severn. The corn was taken away and when the military arrived two men from Ruardean, who were involved, were arrested. Even though these men were of previous excellent character the two—Thomas Yemm and Thomas Rosser were made an example of and hanged. Even so, shortly after the execution of the men the Crown did cause £1000 worth of grain to be distributed to the distressed Foresters.

Having been well looked after by their prudent father the children of Thomas Hale continued to live in the locality of Ruardean. The fourth son, Joseph, is the one who was to carry the line through to the present day family at Nailbridge.

Joseph Hale was born in 1769. He worked as a collier. There would have been many small pits around the area of Ruardean where Joseph could have worked. Many of these pits were to bear quite unique and imaginative names. In Ruardean itself there was a small colliery which was called "True Blue" simply because the coal which was mined there had a distinctive blue sheen, and for some unknown reason there was a pit just outside Ruardean which bore the unlikely name of "The Windmill". There were many pits where the Hale men could have found employment.

In the year 1792 at the age of twenty three Joseph married Jane. From this union there were seven children who are recorded. There were four sons and three daughters. Two of the girls both had the unusual name of "Mimy". The first born in 1803 died in infancy before her sister was born in 1806.

There is no doubt that child bearing did take its toll on the women of that time. It is no surprise that shortly after the death of his first wife Joseph married again. He had been left with a family of six the youngest child being under three years old.

For his second wife Joseph married Margaret Reid. Still the family lived in Ruardean. By this second marriage there was one son, Enoch.

The third son of Joseph and Jane was named Cornelius. This Cornelius and his half brother Enoch were to break away from the Hale family tradition of being colliers to become blacksmiths. This was a trade constantly in demand in the Forest of Dean where horses were the main means of transport and the collieries were always in need of the skills of the blacksmith.

Enoch Hale was to start his Blacksmith's business in the Morse Road, an area between Ruardean and Nailbridge, but Cornelius started up his business at Nailbridge.

In this action of moving away from the place where the family had been so deeply for so many years Cornelius was to begin the Hale dynasty of Nailbridge.

Born in the year 1800 Cornelius began his Blacksmith's business in a building alongside a row of cottages. Today this is still easily identifiable standing between the present-day Hale and Co., showrooms and the row of cottages and is currently undergoing some internal changes so it can once again be utilised, this time for the kitchens and bathrooms department of the business. The anvil, vices and huge bellows still remain. Cornelius Hale was to see momentous changes taking place in the Forest of Dean. The discontent which had been simmering in the lifetime of his grandfather Thomas and of his father Joseph finally had to be resolved during Cornelius' lifetime. So many "foreigners" had infiltrated the mining industries of the Forest and there was so much discontent amongst these outsiders about the free mining privileges which were the exclusive rights of men born and bred within the Hundred of St. Briavels that a commission was finally set up to investigate the Coal Mine Awards. This was to result in drastic changes in the rights of the free miners for up to this time the right to work a mine had been the sole prerogative of the free miners. With the reversion of the rights, which was instigated by one of these "foreigners" the mining rights of the Foresters became a saleable commodity. It meant that, as before, every mine had to be applied for by a free miner of the Forest but once having acquired the mine the man could then sell it to anyone he chose. An Aaron Hale, a free miner leased Lydbrook Deep Level to Edmund John Scott, a gentleman from London for a term of 1000 years from 29th July, 1816. David Mushet of Coleford claimed through Free Miners. He leased the Old Furnace Level Gale for 500 years from the 1st October 1821, granted by Aaron Hale and Edward Baldwin, free miners.

Cornelius Hale was also to live through the time when the discontent of the Foresters over the enclosures of Forest land became so heated that it ended, in 1831, with one of the ring leaders of the dissidents, a certain Warren James, being transported to Australia.

At that time the Forest was just experiencing the early tremors of the industrial revolution which was beginning to sweep the country. Cornelius had chosen the site for his blacksmith's shop well. Around Nailbridge were several small collieries which would have required his services. Nailbridge was also near the main road which went from Mitcheldean through the heart of the Forest to Coleford and also at that time tramroads would have needed the services of a blacksmith as well as the railways which were to later supersede these early forms of transportation.

Whether Cornelius and his half brother Enoch ever joined forces in their business ventures is open to conjecture. In the year 1826 Cornelius married Elizabeth, who was eight years his elder. There is no doubt that they lived, if not adjoining the blacksmith's shop then in very close proximity. Elizabeth only lived for seven years after her marriage. In that time she bore a son and a daughter. The son was named Richard and it is interesting to note that he eventually became a blacksmith and his business, like that of his uncle Enoch, was in the Morse Road.

One year after the death of Elizabeth Cornelius remarried. His second wife was Hannah Morgan. At the time of marriage she was thirty. She was to bear him three sons. Cornelius having founded the business at Nailbridge lived until he was fifty seven, dying in 1857. Not only had he lived through stirring times but he had also seen the building of a church. Up to the nineteenth century in the Forest of Dean there were few churches. The only places of worship were all on the periphery. "Under the wood" or just beyond the growing Forest. Ancient churches had been built at Ruardean, Littledean, Mitcheldean, Abenhall, Bicknor, Staunton—but the Church which was to serve the people of the Forest proper was the Church at Newland. This was considered to be the church for the Foresters. There is small wonder that the people of the Forest showed a reluctance to attend church when they were expected to make a journey far beyond Coleford to attend a place of worship. But Cornelius had been alive to see a Church built within the Forest Area. It was a church built very close to the blacksmiths shop at Nailbridge and there is no doubt that Cornelius would have watched the building of this church with great interest. Who knows perhaps he was called upon to use his expertise in some way in the necessary work at that Church.

The building of the church actually commenced in June 1816. The speed with which this "new" church was erected leaves one quite breathless for no way could anything in any way be built so quickly in this day and age for—the first service to be held in that church was in February 1817—just eight months after the first stone was laid!

The stone from which the church was built came from a quarry close to the site—for at that time the place where the church was built was called "Quarry Hill". The owner, a Mr. Cinderey, from Nailbridge, gave the stone, from his quarry for the building of the church free of charge save the cost of lifting it from the quarry face. Sadly his act of generosity was to cause a serious family rift—perhaps his family did not have his liberal tendencies!

This church was consecrated in June 1817. Although it was dedicated to the "Holy Trinity", because it was thought that this was the first church to be built within the Forest, it was to be known as the Forest Church.

Cornelius was a man who not only worked very hard but he was also a man of integrity. In his will he left all he possessed, including the blacksmiths, to his wife. He also left instructions that on her death the estate would be shared equally amongst the children.

The blacksmiths shop was taken over by George, the second son by the second marriage. This could seem a little strange in that the eldest son was also a blacksmith. He seems to have carried on his trade at the Morse, perhaps with his Uncle Enoch. Even so it is George who is to continue the line we must follow.

George Hale was a good man. He worked very hard to provide the money for his younger brother John to go to university. John was to become the very first headmaster of the new Bilson School in Cinderford. His wife, Emma Hale, was to be the Headmistress of the infants school at Bilson.

In the year 1869 George married. He was aged twenty four. He and his wife Abiah (Harris) made their home in a cottage tucked under the hill, now known as Harrow Hill, then called Harry Hill. It was in very close proximity to the blacksmiths shop and not far from the Forest church.

Abiah in the seven years of her marriage had five children. Joseph b. 1863, John in 1865, Lucy 1866, Emily 1867 and Abiah Kate, to be known as Kate in 1869. Sadly after Kate's birth she developed toxæmia and died. She was just thirty when she died.

Poor George was left with four motherless children. Daughter Emily died in infancy. George's mother was still alive but at the age of sixty four may not have been willing to cope with the children. George would have been very conscious of the Forest church. Until 1861 it had been the place where children, who had had parents inclined to give them some sort of education went to school. After a time a church school was opened in the village of Drybrook.

The incumbent at the Forest church until 1866 had been the Rev H. G. Nicholls. He had taken time and trouble to write a very comprehensive history of the Forest of Dean. Then because of ill health this man, who had never married, but who had been cared for by his sister (was the son of a Baronet and came from a most genteel family) left and died shortly after.

The next Rev was William Barker. Remembered for the fact that he carried a stick, pulled little boy's ears and sometimes gave children sweets. He ran the vicarage as a fine gentleman's house. There was a full staff of servants resident. One of the staff was a cook. At the time when George Hale lost his wife the cook at the Forest Church vicarage was a certain Ann Drinkwater. She must have seemed, to a man needing a woman to make a home for his family, a woman with outstanding credentials! So one year after Abiah's death George married Ann. It was not a happy marriage. Why Ann failed to bring George happiness will never be known but George was so very unhappy that this hard working man began to find solace in the contents of a bottle—he took to drink!

There is no doubt that the children would have been made unhappy by the tensions in their home. Perhaps there is some indication of the unhappiness of the marriage in that, even though Ann was only thirty one when she married there were no children of the union. However the children from the first marriage grew up to be highly creditable citizens well known for their courtesy and respectability.

The eldest son, Joseph was to be a tinsmith worker. He was known throughout his life as a good Christian man who never ate a meal without giving thanks.

In 1887 Joseph married Elizabeth Baldwin. They had five sons and five daughters. The eldest son, George, was to marry Emily Grace Howell and by that marriage they had three sons. One of the sons, Stanley became the Registrar for the Forest of Dean.

The second son of Joseph was Frank. This gentleman was to found the celebrated firm of "Hale's Cakes" which was based in Clevedon—some distance from the beginnings in Ruardean. The products of that business were to be on the same par as today's Mr. Kipling's offer. The familiar Hale's Cake vans were well known in the forest and many a Sunday afternoon tea party was enhanced by the joys of these delicious confections. It has since been taken over by Lyons.

The other three children of George and Abiah's marriage certainly did them credit. The eldest daughter Lucy was to marry a watchmaker and jeweller from Drybrook, Jeremiah Hufton and they emigrated to New Zealand. Abiah Kate married the stationmaster from Matlock. The youngest son John also left his mark.

George Hale carried on his work as a blacksmith all his life. Sadly to get money for drink he mortgaged some of his possessions. He died at the age of 57.

John the youngest son of George and Abiah was thrust into the world at the tender age of ten. He was apprenticed to a Mr. Cowmeadow who was a boiler maker. Being small one of John's jobs was to crawl up inside the boiler needing repair, often when it was still hot!, and hold the rivet on the inside that Mr. Cowmeadow tightened on the outside.

It was John who was to follow in his father's footsteps in the blacksmith's business at Nailbridge. John could recall that he had repaired one of the links on the chains of the celebrated dancing bears who were when they were killed in 1889, to bring such infamy to the village of Ruardean!

John was a deeply respected true gentleman. Perhaps because of his childhood experiences during all his long life he never touched a drop of alcohol and he never uttered a swear word.

John was just twenty when he took over the blacksmith's at Nailbridge. In 1891 John married Gertrude Baldwin. In the year 1892 the stepmother who seems to have brought John's father so much unhappiness re-married another local man. Luckily John found happiness in his marriage to Gertrude. Gertrude was the daughter of James Baldwin, a local coal mine manager. He managed the Slad Pit for Sir Charles Illingsworth M. P.

James Baldwin is best remembered for the fact he built four quality houses in the area. One named Oakview was to become John's home and stay in the family. The three other houses, one near Steam Mills school, one near Ruardean, and one in the Morse lane all have the word "Oak" in the name. It is said that some of the stone from which these houses were built came from the slag pit.

John and Gertrude had two sons—the eldest Leslie and the younger one was Frederick born in 1896.

Leslie went into the business at Nailbridge after working at a sawmills in 1912 near the high street in Cinderford. By this time Nailbridge was a real hive of industrial activity. The tramway still went under the causeway which now bears the A 4136 road and continued through the present site of the Hale and Co., business premises. The railway from Cinderford then ran at the back of what are the storage bays of the company. There was a weighbridge near the road from Nailbridge leading to Drybrook and in close proximity to the blacksmiths shop was a colliery. New Bridge colliery, which has since been filled and capped. The buildings for which, once stables then offices, were used as the sawmills, a later venture.

Frederick the younger son was to be one of the first pupils at the new Grammar School in Cinderford. He had natural business acumen and this was to stand him in good stead in the years to come.

In 1915 Leslie became disenchanted with life in this country and decided that he would go and live in America. Frederick was left to carry on the Hale family business at Nailbridge.

There were problems. When Leslie left for America the steam engine which was being used in the business gave up the ghost and so young Fred and his mother took up a mortgage of £90 to buy another steam engine. But Fred, as he was known, was to learn a hard lesson, the steam engine began to leak badly, and so in desperate need of a cheap remedy he used a real countryman's recipe for such things. He would collect cow dung add it to water in the boiler and it made a natural sealant. Today Hale and Co. would sell you a well known product to do this job.

Fred learnt from his mistakes and as soon as he got established he was never ever to have anything for which he could not pay. Also, like his father before him he knew well the unhappiness caused by excesses of drink and he never touched alcohol or used profane language. It would seem that Fred had a little, unofficial, motto much loved of many of his generation—"Pay and be paid".

Meanwhile in America Leslie joined the army and was soon sent back to Europe with the fighting forces. On his way back to America after the end of the war in 1920 he came to see his family at Nailbridge. He also came back to marry his sweetheart who lived in Drybrook, Miriam Blear(s). The two returned to America, where Leslie set up a business breeding Airedales. They had a daughter called Winifred. Leslie kept in contact with Fred and John, the letters are still kept today.

Fred also married. He had a happy marriage. His wife was a lady widowed in the 1914/18 war. She was Clara Cook, nee Brain and she had one son Chris.

By the marriage of Fred and Clara they had two sons and a daughter. Harold the eldest became a school teacher. The daughter Daphne married Clifford Bonser and also became a school teacher.

The youngest son, Roderick James, (Jim) went into the family business at Nailbridge, after being a Bevan boy down Northern United in the Second World War. Later he was to be joined by his half brother Chris Cook, who still opens up in the mornings.

But the story must go back to the days when Fred was running the business. His father, John, continued with the blacksmith's business for as long as he was able, but Fred thought it worth his while to diversify. He began dealing in timber. With so many collieries in the area in the 1920s there was a constant demand not only for the blacksmith's skills but also for timber. They would cut pit props and make packing boxes for tinplate.

There was a railway siding near the blacksmith's shop and into that siding Fred had delivered the very first load of imported timber to come into the locality. Of course it was paid for in advance. Although this was to cause some friction with another local timber company, Fred, because of his prudence, was to be the only firm selling imported timber anywhere in the area. Fred looked after his profits very careful, so in the fullness of time he was able to buy, from Mr. Gwilliam at English Bicknor, a pony and trap—what joys this was to bring his young family—and a careful person that he was the receipt, for this purchase was kept and is still amongst the family mementos.

Being a very astute man Fred was always on the look out for some commercial project that would pay dividends. He sold coal from the trucks. He also realised that with the spasmodic work available at the collieries at that time, the colliers had a lot of spare time. Thus many of the forest men used to do a bit of work around their homes. Indeed one must consider if they did not perhaps start the trend for D.I.Y? So Fred began to keep things that these men might need. Nails, screws, cement. He dealt with everyone as the volumes of receipts still kept show. He dealt with Teague and Chew the well known forest business which had strived for well over one hundred years. Fred Munn of Cinderford who sold the gunpowder to the local mines. Gradually Fred laid strong foundations for a highly successful business—on sheer integrity and fulfilment of need. In 1927 he and his father John who at that time called their business the sawmills, registered the name of Hale and Co.

After the pony and trap Fred bought a Ford Model T car. In the 1920s he opened up a bicycle shop at Dunkley's Corner, the building still stands today and a conservatory firm occupy it. It was named the Cross Roads Co. and also sold candles, carbide to fuel the miner's pit lamps, torches and even petrol.

So successful were his business ventures that in 1937 Fred was able to buy his very first lorry. A year after the lorry was bought and put into service, with the timber side of the business prospering he paid the princely sum of £86.15 for an electric saw.

With careful management Hale's of Nailbridge became a known establishment. The children were growing up and it was the youngest, Jim, who was to show interest in his father's business. So much so that when he left school Jim went to work for his father. He learnt the business well, starting at the lowest level he had to sweep the wood

shavings, generally tidy up, and do what might be asked of him. The young Jim Hale did have a very able teacher and he was to be a great help to his father.

So it was when Fred died in 1953, Jim took over the business. When Jim took over, the works consisted of two corrugated sheds—the original blacksmiths shop and just one employee.

The success of the business was not easily achieved. Indeed Jim and his wife Dorrie were to make many sacrifices to ensure the ultimate success. Jim had married a lady who was to give him tremendous help in his endeavours. She was, before marriage, Dorrie Preddy from Collafield. They were to have two sons. They were named Roger and Leslie. The business continued to expand, land was bought from the Forestry Commission and in the 1970s Jim managed to push through a redevelopment of wasteland covered with old cars and a stagnant pond despite opposition and extend the site to its present size of about twelve acres. The local people have seen the business of Hale and Co. expand. It seemed that, like Topsy, it "grewed".

There is little doubt that the Hale business thrived because it had an ongoing reputation for reliability and integrity and it supplied a need.

Great sorrow was felt throughout the area when, in 1985 Dorrie died. She had worked, with her husband, in the business and was well known to hundreds of people. At her funeral the Forest church was full to absolute capacity with people anxious to pay their last respects to this highly regarded lady.

The business kept Jim going and in 1994 he opened a new showroom and bathroom department. The business was his mainstay and despite later illness he refused to slow down. Sadly Jim died in 1996, a great loss. Once again the Forest church was full to capacity. His eldest son Roger took an active role in the management for a time but has since formally retired. Jim's youngest son, Leslie is now the managing director and Jim's grandsons have worked in their summer holidays over the years. In recently the shop and sales area were revamped and a plumbing, heating and power tool centre opened up. Future plans to reuse the blacksmiths and create a heating showroom are being developed. The business has shown little signs of slowing down. In 2007 it will be eighty years trading under the name Hale and Co. and roughly over one hundred and seventy five years since the blacksmiths was first set up.

This brief history of the lives of the Hale family of Ruardean and Nailbridge reflects the tenacity and determination of this very independent Forest family and reflects on the hard work of people who live in the Forest.

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Forest of Dean Family History Pages
<http://forest-of-dean.net//>



John Hale with his apprentice and onlookers outside his Blacksmiths shop, which is still standing today



View of the Sawmills at Hale and Co. in about 1918, wooden boxes were nailed up by boys for packing tinplate, and a portable steam engine drove the saw. The plant was accommodated in buildings originally houses, then offices, and afterwards stables for the New Bridge Pits, the capped shafts of which are in Hale's yard



View of the saw mills at Hale and Co, Nailbridge, pit heads are seen in front of the sheds, the blacksmiths is behind the main building



Nethy house is to the left. The new sawmills and shops which join on to the accounts office where the sign Hale and Co is located, replaced the old sawmills which were demolished. The shop has now been recently changed again. The blacksmiths is to the extreme right obscured by the trees



The Hale family between 1910-1915

Back: Frederick Hale, Leslie Hale
Front: John Hale, Gertrude Hale
(Baldwin)



Leslie Hale's Wedding, he is sitting, the
bride is Mirium Blear

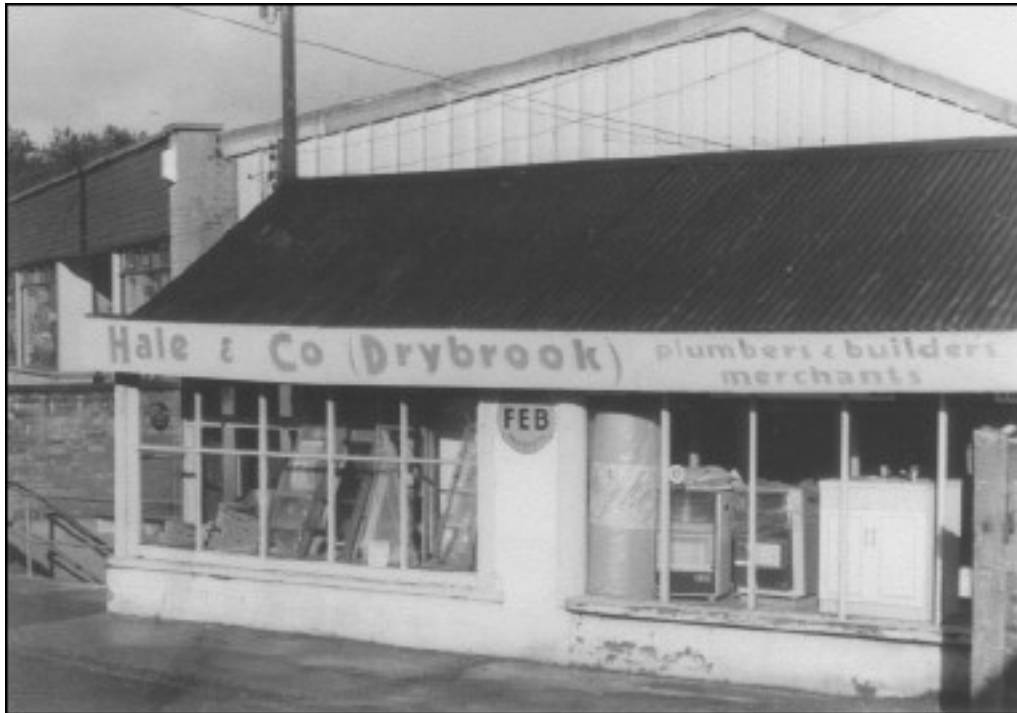
Standing behind is his younger brother
Fred Hale probably taken soon after the
1st world war



Young Fred Hale who registered the name
Hale and Co. with his father John in 1927,
he also had a shop at Dunk's Corner



Clara Hale (Brain), Fred's wife



Hale and Co Shop how it used to look



Hale and Co Yard 2006