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**Christopher Thomas & Brothers Ltd: the last Bristol soapmakers.
An aspect of Bristol's economic development in the nineteenth
century**

by S. J. Diaper
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By S. J. DIAPER

The usual view of Bristol's economic development in the 19th century is one of decline, stagnation and eventual recovery. The city's earlier prosperity is said to have crumbled by the 1840s as the old industries of sugar refining, glass-making and brass, iron and lead shot production on which it was based declined. This reversal of fortunes was followed by 20 years of stagnation, but then in the 1860s, the city rose again Phoenix-like, with the growth of the footwear, cocoa, tobacco, printing, paper and soap industries, combined with a more forward looking policy for the city's docks. Professor Alford has concluded that the evidence for this recovery is flimsy, however, and has argued for a more 'pessimistic account of Bristol's economic development' in this period.¹ A study of the performance of the city's leading soap manufacturer in the second half of the 19th century gives further grounds for pessimism, since it suggests that all was not well in one of the industries that formed the basis for the accepted recovery. The period saw great expansion and prosperity at Christopher Thomas & Brothers, but it also saw the beginning of the company's decline, so that the manufacture of soap did not form a secure basis for long-term growth in Bristol.

The manufacture of soap has a long history in the Bristol area. The city was well known for the production of soap for use in the local woollen industry in the middle ages, and by the 16th century the soapmakers of Bristol were sending their products to London for sale, as well as enjoying an extensive trade throughout the West Country. The local industry suffered a set-back in 1631 when Charles I granted a monopoly to a group of London producers, who limited the amount of soap that could be produced in Bristol to 600 tons per annum. Inevitably the number of local soapboilers fell sharply, although this did not signal the end of soap manufacture in the city. The industry enjoyed a revival in the 18th century and by 1722 there were 63 soap boilers operating in Bristol, although the numbers fell later in the century as the scale of production increased.²

One of these new 18th-century firms was Farell, Vaughan & Co., which claimed to have been in existence as early as 1745. The firm went through a series of partnership changes during the 18th century, and over the years it numbered several of Bristol's most prominent businessmen among its members. The most important change took place in 1771, when the Farell Vaughan partners (Joseph Farell, John Vaughan, Joseph Fry and William Jones) decided to merge their business with that of another local firm of soapmakers, Samuel Fripp & Co. The new firm traded as Fry, Fripp & Co. with an initial capital of £18,000, which was large by contemporary standards for a manufacturing business. The partners in Farell Vaughan contributed £10,000 to the new partnership, while the remaining £8,000 came from the partners in Samuel Fripp & Co., Samuel Fripp and Henry Davis.³

All six of the partners in Fry, Fripp & Co. were well-known in the local community. Joseph Farell was the President of Dolphin in 1753, while John Vaughan was the son of one of the city's

most prominent goldsmiths and bankers, and was a partner in the chocolate business run by Joseph Fry. Henry Davis was also connected with banking, although his firm, Henry Davis & Sons, did not last for long. It opened in 1784 and closed in 1793, in the difficult times associated with the beginning of the Napoleonic War. William Jones had an extensive civic career, and became master of the Merchant Venturers in 1770. He was also Governor of the Incorporation of the Poor between 1778 and 1780, Warden of St Stephen's Ringers in 1779, and President of Dolphin in 1780. Samuel Fripp and Joseph Fry were both apothecaries, and in addition to his involvement in the manufacture of soap and chocolate, Fry also set up a printing works and put money into Richard Champion's attempt to make porcelain in Bristol.⁴

The first change to the partnership came in 1774 when John Vaughan retired. The other partners must have contributed more capital to the business that year, because the firm's capital was unaffected by Vaughan's departure. The same was not true four years later when Joseph Farell died. The partners had to pay out his share in the firm's capital, and since this amounted to some £3600, the working capital of the business was reduced quite markedly. The firm was sufficiently prosperous in this period that the shortfall was soon made up, however, and by 1783 the firm's capital stood at £20,000. The firm's capital increased again the following year when Samuel Fripp's son William joined the partnership, bringing an additional £2500 into the business. William Fripp went on to make a name for himself in Bristol politics, serving as a city councillor between 1798 and 1812, as an alderman between 1812 and 1829, and as sheriff in 1799. He also made a considerable fortune from his business, and left £80,000 when he died in 1829. Joseph Fry died in 1787 and when the partnership was reconstructed Fripp brought a second son, also named Samuel, into the business. William Jones died in 1792, and the business became increasingly the preserve of the Fripp family, reverting to the name of Samuel Fripp & Co. The firm continued to prosper in their hands, and by 1810 the partners had a capital of £48,000 in the business and distributed a profit of £8600 after paying interest on their capital.⁵

By the late 1830s the firm was in the hands of Samuel Fripp junior and his son Edward. Fripp obviously thought that the business would be too much for his son to manage alone though, and when he wanted to retire in 1841 he sold the business to Thomas Thomas, another local soapmaker, on the condition that Edward was taken on as a partner. Thomas had started his career as a grocer in South Wales, travelling through the region selling butter and cheese to the local colliers and iron workers. During his trips he saw a potential market for the sale of soap, and decided to try to exploit this opportunity. In 1824 Thomas bought a small soap and candle manufactory in Bristol with his brother-in-law and a third man, both of whom had experience as soap makers. The firm had a capital of £1200 contributed equally by the three partners, and it was thus much smaller than Samuel Fripp & Co. at the time. Like many partnerships in the early part of the 19th century, the firm was set up for a fixed period, in this case seven years. At the end of that time Thomas' partners both retired, and he carried on the business with the help of his eldest son Christopher. Together they built up the business selling soap in south Wales and to the growing population of the Bristol area.⁶

The new firm of Thomas, Fripp & Thomas operated from the Thomas' old premises in Broad Plain in St Phillips, and the acquisition of the Fripp business brought Thomas and his son an advantage beyond simply increasing the size of their firm. Fripps had specialised in the production of olive oil based soaps for personal use, while the Thomases had tended to concentrate on cheaper tallow based soaps for household cleaning.⁷ The purchase of the Fripp business thus allowed the Thomases to diversify and enter a new branch of soap manufacture. Thomas himself took the opportunity of the changes in 1841 to retire, and the business was continued by his sons, Christopher and Thomas, together with Samuel Fripp's son, Edward. Thomas, Fripp & Thomas traded successfully until 1855 when Fripp retired and the two

youngest Thomas brothers, Charles and Herbert, joined the partnership which was renamed Christopher Thomas & Brothers. All four brothers were public spirited men with interests beyond their firm. Thomas died young, but Christopher became a councillor, a magistrate and one of the few Liberal mayors of the city, and also served as chairman of the South Wales Railway and as a director of the Bristol Water Works Company. Herbert was known for his work for reformatories, schools and other philanthropic movements, while Charles became a director of the Midland Railway and of the Netham Chemical Works, as well as sharing his brother's interest in education. Even with all these other interests however, they did not neglect their business, which went from strength to strength under their control.⁸

By the mid 1850s Christopher Thomas & Brothers were well established as manufacturers of soap, producing a range of products, including hard soap for both personal and household use and soft soap for the textile industry. The main emphasis of their business was on the production of hard soap for household cleaning, and they made a variety of soaps of different qualities and prices. These ranged from the most expensive 'best white curd' which sold for 53s. per hundred weight and was produced by boiling alkali with tallow, via mottled soaps that were made by combining them with grease and oils, to the cheapest 'yellow' which sold for 15s. per hundred weight, and contained a considerable amount of cheaper raw materials, like vegetable oil and resin, as well as tallow.⁹ Like many other soap manufacturers, Christopher Thomas & Brothers also made candles, which used some of the same raw materials. The candle business was in a state of transition in the middle years of the 19th century, as paraffin wax began to replace tallow in candle making, and as producing candles in moulds began to oust the traditional method of making them by repeatedly dipping the wicks in fat. By the 1870s Christopher Thomas & Brothers had abandoned the manufacture of dip candles, but moulded candles remained an important element in their business until the widespread use of gas, and then electric, lighting drastically reduced the size of the market.¹⁰

The basic raw materials of soap production are fat or oil and some sort of alkali. Down to the middle 1880s, while olive oil was used for expensive toilet soaps, the most important source of fat for soapmaking was tallow, and like most of the larger soap manufacturers in the country Christopher Thomas & Brothers needed far more tallow than they could buy locally. In the 1840s and 50s they imported tallow from South America and Russia, and by the 1880s and 90s they were importing mutton tallow from Australia.¹¹ The soapmakers' traditional sources of alkali were wood ashes, barilla and kelp causticised with lime, but by the 1840s these sources had been replaced by soda made using the Leblanc process. Many of the leading soap manufacturers adopted the new technology and began to produce their own soda using the Leblanc process, rather than buying it from specialist chemical companies. No evidence is available to date the beginning of Christopher Thomas & Brothers involvement in soda production, but by the 1860s they were not only using Leblanc soda but were making their own. Despite problems involved in setting up production on a commercial scale, the ammonia-soda method of producing soda began to replace the Leblanc process in the 1880s and 1890s, and in the face of the need for more sophisticated plant, Christopher Thomas & Brothers gave up the manufacture of soda in 1889. Thereafter they bought the soda they needed from Brunner Mond, although they continued to causticise it themselves.¹²

The second half of the 19th century was, on the whole, a prosperous period for soap manufacturers. The population was growing and with rising real incomes people had more money to spend on items like soap. The industry received a boost in 1853 when Gladstone abolished the 3*d.* per pound duty on soap, and Wilson has calculated that consumption per head doubled between 1861 and 1891, from 8 to 15.4 lbs a year.¹³ Christopher Thomas & Brothers seem to have been well placed to take advantage of this buoyant demand for soap. In 1866 they

told the Children's Employment Commission that theirs was one of the largest soap manufacturing factories in the country, and although we have no figures for their output at the time, a decade later they were producing an average of 250 tons of soap a week,¹⁴ or roughly 8% of the national total,¹⁵ at a time when the very largest firms in the country were turning out a maximum of 500 tons a week. Christopher Thomas & Brothers were certainly the largest soap producers in the West Country in the second half of the 19th century, with a solid reputation based on the quality of their household soaps. Their profits of around £14,000 a year in the early 1860s were on a par with those of other soap firms of a similar size,¹⁶ and were large enough to allow the firm to expand over the next few years in the classic manner of British industry by ploughing back profits.

The market for soap was still very largely a local one in the 1860s and 70s, and although firms sometimes invaded one another's home territory, it 'was never considered quite gentlemanly' to do so.¹⁷ This understanding was often quite formal. For example, the Christopher Thomas & Brothers partners were friendly with the partners in Gossage's in Widnes, and obtained a written undertaking from them that they would not sell their soap south of a line drawn from the Wash through Birmingham to the Severn.¹⁸ Christopher Thomas & Brothers had seven or eight travellers operating in the West Country and South Midlands in this period, but their main markets continued to be in Bristol and South Wales. They sold around 1000 tons of soap in Bristol itself in 1878, roughly one-third of their total production that year, and their most important traveller's ground was the South Wales journey which Herbert Thomas took over when his father retired.¹⁹

Unusually among British industrialists of the time, Christopher Thomas & Brothers took a keen interest in scientific research to improve their soap and their methods of production. From the early 1870s they maintained a research laboratory and employed a trained chemist, whose theoretical knowledge was added to the practical chemistry of the partners. One of the early fruits of this research brought the firm valuable rewards. It was common knowledge among soapmakers that the waste liquid left after soap making contained glycerine, and many manufacturers and chemists were working on trying to find a way of recovering the glycerine on a commercial scale. Charles Thomas and the firm's research chemist, W.J. Fuller, were among the first to do so. They patented a process to recover glycerine in 1878, and the Thomas partners were quick to try to exploit their discovery. They tried to interest other soap manufacturers in setting up a company to recover glycerine using their process, but although they won support from some of the London manufacturers, the scheme foundered because of the opposition of the Northern firms.²⁰ Several of these companies had already contracted to supply a Frenchman, Victor Clolus, with their waste to use in his plant at Runcorn, built to exploit his own patented process for recovering glycerine.²¹

Despite this set-back, Christopher Thomas & Brothers still made use of their new process. They recovered the glycerine from their own waste, distilled it, and as well as using it in the manufacture of some of their soaps, sold large amounts to the explosives trade for the manufacture of nitro-glycerine and dynamite.²² Thomas' main customer was Nobel's, and they refused to disturb their close relationship with the firm by joining the association of glycerine producers which was formed in 1888 to combat the price policy of the explosives combine.²³ Glycerine sales were an important factor in Thomas' prosperity in the 1880s,²⁴ but unfortunately no figures have survived to show the proportion of their profit which came from glycerine recovery compared with soap manufacture.

Christopher Thomas & Brothers' research and development activity extended beyond glycerine recovery. They began to experiment with the production of margarine in the early 1870s, first of all using butcher's fat and then using coconut oil. Like many soap manufacturers,

they regarded this as a natural extension of their business since it involved many of the same raw materials, and making butter substitutes also gave rise to a useful by-product, as the 'foots' from refining the coconut-oil for human consumption could be used to make soap. The partners expanded their interest in edible products, and about 1875 they started refining edible cotton oil, obtained from the local seed crushing mills. Most of the edible oil they produced was exported and Christopher Thomas & Brothers built up a large trade in the Mediterranean and American ports and in the Middle East. Once again, the refining process created a useful by-product, and the 'foots' from refining the cotton oil were put to use in making soap.²⁵

The market for soap was growing rapidly in the second half of the 19th century, and as manufacturers expanded production to meet this demand, they also began to experiment with new, and cheaper, raw materials. Olive oil had been used to produce an expensive soap for personal use for hundreds of years, but now soapmakers began to use cheaper vegetable oils to make household soap. High prices for tallow during the Crimean War, which cut off Russian supplies, led William Gossage to make soap with palm oil,²⁶ for example, but vegetable oil soaps of this kind had a drawback. They tended to be soft and because of this, it dissolved quickly, and uneconomically, in use. As a result they failed to replace tallow based bar soaps for household purposes, but manufacturers continued to experiment with the possibility of producing vegetable oil soap successfully. With their tradition of research and development, Christopher Thomas & Brothers were in the forefront of this development. In 1882 they began to produce soap made from cotton oil and resin on a large scale, three years before William Lever began to manufacture his 'Sunlight' soap from palm kernel oil, cotton seed oil, tallow and resin.²⁷ Their achievement was in developing a way of drying the soap during manufacture and thus making it harder, so that it could be produced in blocks and used as economically as tallow soap. Indeed it lathered better than tallow soap in cold water and because of this was known as 'cold water soap'. The Thomas partners put up a new building to house production of their cold water soap, and at the insistence of Charles Thomas, who was a great traveller, it was built to resemble the Uffizi Palace. It contained 24 cast iron pans, fitted with slow moving scrapers and revolving arms, which could produce 240 tons of dried soap a week.²⁸

Cold water soap proved very popular with the public, partly because it lathered well in cold water, and partly because it was a better quality product than the cheaper tallow soaps and yet cost less. Christopher Thomas & Brothers sold a large amount of this soap in their own name, and also sold large quantities to two northern traders who resold it to the public under their own names. Some 60 to 70 tons of better quality soap (made from cotton seed oil) were sold each week by a Mr Sinclair as 'Sinclair's Cold Water Soap', while some 30 tons of darker, poorer quality soap (made from the 'foots' left after refining edible cotton seed oil) were sold by a Mr Harrison in the markets of Yorkshire and Lancashire, under the name of 'Magic Arizonic Laundry Soap'.²⁹

During this period, with their cold water soaps selling well, demand for their tallow bar soaps still high, brisk trade in edible cotton oil and a ready market for their glycerine, Christopher Thomas & Brothers made profits of some £28,000 a year. They were a large firm producing over 14,000 tons of soap each year,³⁰ at a time when a manufacturer of average size was making only 2,600 tons, and this was the heyday of the firm. Their products were good of their kind, with over a hundred years goodwill behind them and as long as there were no dramatic developments in the soap trade the partners could feel secure.³¹

Soap manufacturers generally were prosperous in the mid 1880s. Prices of raw materials were low and demand for soap was increasing, but changes in the soap trade were at hand which were to cause problems for many established manufacturers, including Christopher Thomas & Brothers. Outsiders saw the profits that could be made from manufacturing soap, and began to move into the industry. Chief among these newcomers was William Lever, who had been selling

soap made for him by others for several years, but who, in 1885, began to manufacture soap himself, first at a plant in Warrington and then after 1889 at his purpose built works at Port Sunlight.³² The Soap Makers' Association reduced prices in 1887 to try to drive the newcomers out of business, but by 1889 it was quite clear that this price fixing policy had failed, at least as far as Lever was concerned. In fact, the Association recognised him as a power to be reckoned with that year when they invited him to become a member.³³

Lever built up his business using very different methods from those of the established manufacturers. He sold his soap in bars, wrapped and bearing his brand name, backed up by heavy advertising and sold throughout the country.³⁴ Before this, household soap had been sold by type and quality, in large unwrapped slabs which grocers cut to order, just as they did butter, and manufacturers had tended to sell their soap locally. Within a year of starting production in Warrington, Lever's 'Sunlight' was being sold in Bristol, and Christopher Thomas & Brothers was quick to recognise it as a threat. By the spring of 1887 they were selling wrapped bars of soap under the name of 'Perfect Cleanser' as a 'method against the Sunlight',³⁵ but the partners were unconvinced of the value of a 'registered appellation',³⁶ and preferred to use this descriptive title rather than a name which could have been registered as a trademark, like 'Sunlight'. Nor did they advertise their soap, as they did not believe that advertising could create demand for one manufacturer's soap rather than another, since all makers' soaps of a particular sort were essentially the same.³⁷ The Bristol firm had to face competition in their home market from other companies as well as Lever in the late 1880s. Joseph Watson & Co. of Leeds started to make a soap called 'Matchless Cleanser' to compete with 'Sunlight' which they marketed in the West country,³⁸ and John Knight's in London also began to produce a vegetable oil soap which they too sold in Bristol.³⁹ This competition, particularly from 'Sunlight', had a serious effect on Christopher Thomas & Brothers, as one of the partners later recalled. 'Gradually, the introduction of the Sunlight 12 ounce tablet and of 'Matchless Cleanser' began to drive out the dark coloured [poorer quality] cold water soaps and the old fashioned [tallow] bar soaps',⁴⁰ both of which had played a significant part in the firm's prosperity.

In 1889 the partners in Christopher Thomas & Brothers converted their business from a partnership into a private limited company, with an authorised capital of £100,000 of which £48,000 was paid up.⁴¹ Ownership and control of the firm remained within the Thomas family, and the change made very little difference to the management of the business. Three of the six directors of the new company were members of the Thomas family (Herbert and Charles Thomas and Charles' son Herbert Russell), while the fourth was Charles Thomas' son-in-law, and the remaining two had worked in the firm for some years. There is no evidence to explain why the partners decided upon the step of incorporation in 1889, although Herbert Russell Thomas afterwards claimed that it was for purely private reasons, but without expanding on what these were.⁴² Possibly the move was intended to facilitate the retirement of elderly partners, but whatever the reasons the new company had to face the same increasingly difficult trading conditions that had confronted the partnership. The new company's first Annual Report referred to 'several adverse circumstances . . . arising from unusually severe competition on the part of various firms', but the company was still able to declare a dividend of 21%, which must have lulled a good many worries.⁴³

Fierce competition continued throughout the early 1890s, and with the supply of soap outpacing demand, conditions became difficult for the manufacturers. The situation was exacerbated by high raw material prices until 1895, and profits declined throughout the industry.⁴⁴ Christopher Thomas & Brothers' dividends fell by a third between 1889 and 1892,⁴⁵ and profits continued to fall until 1895 despite efforts to expand sales.⁴⁶ Their position improved in 1895, as did that of British soapmakers generally, when a severe drought in Australia led to the

widespread slaughter of sheep and a consequent fall in tallow prices.⁴⁷ The directors attempted to improve their position further that year by launching a free sample scheme to boost the sales of 'Perfect Cleanser'. The results of the pilot study in Exmouth and Newton Montgomery were not encouraging, however, and the idea was abandoned.⁴⁸ Another scheme launched in 1895 did produce benefits for the company. Like other leading soapmakers with an interest in refining edible oils,⁴⁹ Christopher Thomas & Brothers began to manufacture a cocoa butter substitute. This product had a ready sale in the confectionery industry among firms producing the cheaper types of chocolate, and when Lever was considering buying the company early this century, he regarded the production of cocoa butter substitute as an attractive feature of the business.⁵⁰

Christopher Thomas & Brothers' limited success in developing new products and new markets was not enough to counter competition from William Lever and 'Sunlight'. Neither the production of chemically pure glycerine in 1896, nor spending £500 advertising olive oil toilet soap in 1897 halted the decline in profits.⁵¹ They fell from around £17,000 in 1896–7 to some £15,000 in 1897–8 and in 1898–9 they fell lower still, to just under £11,000. In this period of worsening trade, the Thomas directors decided to reorganize the capital of their company. In 1897 the private company formed in 1889 was wound up and a new company, using the same name, was established with a capital of £200,000. H.R. Thomas argued that the change was made for purely family reasons, to assist the retirement of some of the directors,⁵² but it may also have been a way of raising additional capital, without the family losing control of the business. In a transaction that was typical of many at the time, £120,000 was raised from the public by the sale of preference shares, while the ordinary shares, and thus control of the firm, remained in the hands of the Thomas family and their close associates.⁵³ The directors of the company certainly had a use for this increased capital, since they believed 'that the wider the base of the company's operations can be made, the stronger will be its position'. In pursuit of this policy they extended their scented soap making plant that year and also began production of acetic acid, while making arrangements to begin manufacturing nightlights.⁵⁴ In addition, the directors were also planning their most significant response to competition from 'Sunlight'.

Christopher Thomas & Brothers had been producing a vegetable oil soap since the early 1880s, but had always sold it under descriptive names ('Perfect Cleanser' in the West Country generally and 'Thomas's Cleanser' in Bristol), which could not be registered as trademarks. Nor had they advertised their soap, relying on their reputation to sell it for them. This situation changed in 1897 when the directors decided to meet the competition from 'Sunlight' head on. They renamed their vegetable oil based household soap 'Puritan Soap', registered the name as a trademark, and began advertising it, initially at the rate of £175 per month.⁵⁵ Sales picked up for a year or two after 1897, particularly in 1900 when Christopher Thomas & Brothers managed to sell over 1000 tons of cheap soap in London,⁵⁶ but then fell back, despite the introduction of a gift wrapper scheme of the familiar Lever type in 1904,⁵⁷ during a period which Lever himself called an 'era of frenzied competition'.⁵⁸

In 1905, with their dividend varying between 2½–4%,⁵⁹ the Thomas directors issued new shares to raise £75,000, to enable them to broaden their manufacturing base by buying the small Bristol soapmakers, Lawson & Co.⁶⁰ They had very little time to assimilate this new asset, however, before they, like the rest of the country's soapmakers, were hit by a dramatic increase in raw material prices. Prices rose by between a third and a half during 1906, at a time when real wages were no longer rising, hitting demand for soap which was still a marginal item for many working class families. Increased production costs could thus not be passed on in higher prices without reducing demand still further. Lever responded to the situation by reducing the weight of a bar of 'Sunlight' from 16 to 15 ounces, and then he suggested that if manufacturers combined together, they could reduce costs by making economies in both manufacturing and selling, and

particularly in advertising. His plan received wide support within the industry and Christopher Thomas & Brothers were among the leading soap makers to follow Gossage's in joining Lever's combine. As a result they too were attacked when the press began to accuse the Soap Trust of trying to keep prices artificially high.⁶¹ Thomas' resolutely denied this charge, and followed Lever in suing the *Daily Mail* for libel over its accusation of price rigging. They were awarded £7,000 plus costs when they settled the case in 1908.⁶² The Soap Trust broke up in the face of the hostile press reaction, and the soap manufacturers returned to the severe competition of pre-Trust days, with an added competitor in the Co-operative Wholesale Society which had meanwhile stepped up production of its own soap, so as not to have to buy soap from members of the Trust for its retail stores.⁶³

The next few years were difficult ones for the soap manufacturers, and at the Soap Makers' Association dinner in 1909, they all agreed that they were suffering. The situation could be summed up very simply. There were too many soapmakers, too few customers and too many buyers on the raw material market, where prices were at their highest since the early 1880s.⁶⁴ Christopher Thomas & Brothers' position had worsened in 1908 when their market for cheap soap in London began to decline in the face of growing competition from the C.W.S. and the London manufacturers, although a 1000 ton increase in sales of 'Puritan' during 1909 helped to recover the situation a little.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, their position was still weak and when Lever approached them with an offer to buy the company, the directors were content to accept it.⁶⁶ Lever's acquisition of the company was one of a series of purchases designed to create the sort of concentration in the soap industry that the 1906 Soap Trust had been intended to achieve, and by 1914 he had succeeded to the extent of controlling some 61% of the British soap trade.⁶⁷ Lever acquired Christopher Thomas & Brothers in 1910, and the last of the old Thomas' directors, William Roscoe, William Edwards and H.R. Thomas, all resigned shortly afterwards.⁶⁸ From 1910 onwards the firm ceased to have an independent policy being run as part of the Lever group, and with the success of the group in mind.

Christopher Thomas & Brothers' trade continued to decline after 1911, despite the new management, and in October 1914 the company's capital was reduced from £335,000 issued to £280,000 issued.⁶⁹ The works were almost entirely reconstructed and new plant and machinery installed between 1914 and 1920, and the 1920s were a more settled time for the company. It continued to produce a range of goods, including vegetable butter, glycerine, clothes dye and toilet soap, but it was 'Puritan' which dominated Christopher Thomas & Brothers' trade in this period.⁷⁰ The company's main advertising effort was devoted to promoting 'Puritan', including an extensive gift scheme introduced in 1924, when this soap was used to lead Lever Brothers' response to the introduction of 'New Pin' in the West of England by the British Soap Company.⁷¹ Christopher Thomas & Brothers continued to produce soap as a Lever Brothers Associated Company during the 1930s, despite the rationalisation of production within the group which took place during that period, but after the Second World War the introduction of continuous manufacturing processes and non-soapy detergents made the comparatively small scale of the Bristol site increasingly uneconomic, and in April 1954 the Broad Plain Soap Works were sold and production moved to other Unilever sites.⁷²

Christopher Thomas & Brothers were heirs to a long tradition of soap making in Bristol. They dominated the manufacture of soap in the city and in the West of England throughout the 19th century, and for much of the period they were in the forefront of developments in the industry. They were among the first soap manufacturers in this country to recover glycerine from the waste products of soapmaking, and they were among the first manufacturers to produce a vegetable oil household soap. However, like most of the other producers in the country, Thomas' lost ground in the face of William Lever's aggressive promotion of 'Sunlight' soap, and they were

slow to see the advantages of a branded and heavily advertised product. Competition from 'Sunlight' reduced their sales and ultimately the profitability of the firm, so that by 1910 they no longer had the reserves to compete with Lever, and selling out to him seemed the best course of action available. Christopher Thomas & Brothers were important employers in Bristol in the second half of the 19th century, and undoubtedly the company's prosperity was an asset to the city. The company's fortunes began to decline with the changes in the soap trade in the 1880s though, and however optimistic a view we take of Bristol's economic development at the end of the 19th century, the soap industry was clearly not a sure basis for future growth.

Notes

Anyone studying the history of the soap industry owes a great debt to Professor Charles Wilson and his history of Unilever, but in studying the development of Christopher Thomas & Brothers I am particularly indebted to Dr William Reader who worked as a research assistant on the project. Many of Christopher Thomas & Brothers' records have been lost or destroyed in recent years, but the notes which Dr Reader made on them are available in the Unilever Archive and go a long way towards retrieving the situation.

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10. UA, Home Companies File C.T.B. Notes on the history of the firm by F.E. Rogers, one time Assistant Works Manager who joined the firm in 1876 (subsequently cited as UA, FER), and HRT; C.T.B. price list for 1857.
11. UA, HRT and FER.
12. UA, HRT and FER; *Parliamentary Papers*, 1866, XXIV, Children's Employment Commission : Evidence, 66; W.J. Reader, *Imperial Chemical Industries 1* (1970), 52–3. Charles Thomas became a director of the Netham Chemical Co. in Bristol, which was taken over by the United Alkali Co. in 1890. The firm produced sulphuric acid and Leblanc soda. It is unclear whether Thomas became involved with the Netham Co. because of his interest in chemistry, or whether it was because Christopher Thomas & Brothers supplemented their own production of Leblanc soda by purchases from the company; see R. Holland, 'The Netham Chemical Co. Ltd', *Avon Past* (1983), passim.
13. C. Wilson, *The History of Unilever* (1954), 9.
14. *Parliamentary Papers*, 1866, XXIV, Children's Employment Commission : Evidence, 66; UA, HRT.
15. D.J. Webb, 'The Changing Industrial Geography of the Port and City of Bristol since 1861: A Study in Port Function' (unpublished M.A. thesis, Univ of London 1961), 182.
16. C. Wilson, op. cit., 14–16.
17. W.J. Reader, 'The United Kingdom Soapmakers Association and English Soap Trade, 1867–1896', *Business History* 1 (1958), 78.
18. C. Wilson, op. cit., 20.
19. T.O. Brien, 'Christopher Thomas & Brothers Ltd', *Progress* (summer 1949), 45; UA, HRT.
20. UA, HRT and FER. Bristol R.O., 7955 (11) c and d, CTB to William Gossage & Sons, 20 June 1881.
21. A.E. Musson, op. cit., 77.

22. UA, HRT.
23. W.J. Reader, op. cit., 81.
24. UA, HRT.
25. UA, HRT and FER.
26. A.E. Musson, op. cit., 70.
27. C. Wilson, op. cit., 30–31.
28. UA, HRT and FER.
29. UA, HRT.
30. UA, HRT.
31. C. Wilson, op. cit., 14, 19.
32. C. Wilson, op. cit., 30–31.
33. W.J. Reader, op. cit., 81.
34. C. Wilson, op. cit., 29, 32–33.
35. UA, C.T.B. to Lawson & Co, 21 May 1887 (Reader's notes).
36. UA, C.T.B. to Crosfields, 10 June 1887 (Reader's notes).
37. UA, HRT; C. Wilson, op. cit., 41.
38. UA, C.T.B. to Crosfields, 27 Feb 1888 (Reader's notes).
39. C. Wilson, op. cit., 62.
40. UA, HRT.
41. P.R.O., BT 31/4455, Company Registration No. 29034 Christopher Thomas & Brothers Ltd.
42. UA, HRT.
43. UA, C.T.B. Annual Report, 1889.
44. C. Wilson, op. cit., 62–63; W.J. Reader, op. cit., 82.
45. UA, C.T.B. Annual Reports, 1889–1892 (quoted in Reader's notes).
46. UA, C.T.B. Minute Book, 5 Aug 1891, April 1892 and November 1894 (Reader's notes).
47. W.J. Reader, op. cit., 83.
48. UA, C.T.B. Minute Book, Nov 1895 and May 1896.
49. A.E. Musson, op. cit., 160.
50. UA, HRT.
51. UA, C.T.B. Annual Report, 1897 (Reader's notes).
52. UA, HRT.
53. Companies Registration Office, file on Unilever Computer Services Ltd, company number 53419. C.T.B. were not the only soapmakers to go to the investing public for capital in this period. Crosfields also decided to try to protect themselves from Lever's competition by developing their interests in chemical production, and in 1896 they formed a public company to raise money to do this.
54. UA, C.T.B. Annual Report, 1898 and Minute Book, 12 March 1898.
55. UA, Memo 'Thirty Years of C.T.B. Sales', 15 May 1929; UA, C.T.B. Minute Book, 4 June 1898.
56. UA, Memo 'Thirty Years of C.T.B. Sales', 15 May 1929.
57. UA, C.T.B. Annual Report, 1904.
58. C. Wilson, op. cit., 55.
59. UA, C.T.B. Minute Book, June 1905.
60. UA, File 92B, C.T.B. Circular to Shareholders, 4 Oct 1905 and Minute Book 1898–1944; Meeting of preference shareholders 21 Oct 1905 and Annual General Meeting 16 June 1906.
61. C. Wilson, op. cit., 70–80.
62. UA, File 92, C.T.B. Circular letters 31 Oct and 23 Nov 1906, and HRT.
63. C. Wilson, op. cit., 83, 118.
64. C. Wilson, op. cit., 117.
65. UA, Memo 'Thirty Years of C.T.B. Sales', 15 May 1929.
66. UA, HRT.
67. C. Wilson, op. cit., 120; H.R. Edwards, *Competition and Monopoly in the British Soap Industry* (1962), 159.
68. Companies Registration Office, file on Unilever Computer Services Ltd.
69. UA, Memo 'Thirty Years of C.T.B. Sales', 15 May 1929; UA, C.T.B. Minute Book 1898–1944, 30 Oct 1914. Companies Registration Office, file on Unilever Computer Services Ltd.
70. UA, Memo 'Thirty Years of C.T.B. Sales', 15 May 1929.
71. UA, Home Companies File C.T.B., Memo re campaign against 'New Pin' in 1924; C. Wilson, op. cit., 280.
72. C. Wilson, op. cit., 156; A. Buchannan and N. Cossons, op. cit., 145; UA, C.T.B. Minute Book (1931), 20 April 1954.