

Why East's went West to Gossoms End

Berkhamsted's Oldest Business

BEFORE THE YEAR IS OUT, the Berkhamsted joinery manufacturers, East & Son Ltd., will dine and wine employees and guests to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the addition of 'Limited' to the company's name.

Not that 50 years is a long period in the history of a firm which, under another name, began more than 200 years ago. A local newspaper of 1888 tells us that East & Son, owners of the oldest country saw-mills within a radius of 20 miles, had records extending over a century and a quarter. This means that the foundation year was 1763 or earlier, pre-dating any other continuing business by many years. Again to quote the newspaper, the business 'was originally carried on in the name of Austin, who was succeeded by Mr. Howard. At Mr. Howard's death it became the property of Mr. Job East.'

TURNER AND SHOVEL-MAKER

Pigot's directory of 1838 described Thomas Howard as a turner and shovel-maker with premises in the High Street. This was the business Mr. East took over and renamed about the year 1840, three years before William Cooper founded the chemical works.

In those days wood-turners, shovel- and spoon-makers, and other manufacturers of woodenware, still plied their trades in much the same way as their Elizabethan forebears. Men worked singly or in very small groups in dusty workshops and muddy yards. Some, of course, were more ambitious than others, and a hunch that trade would follow the railway caused Job East to give up a small business at Chesham and move to Berkhamsted.

Mr. Howard's workshop was just what he wanted. It was small but well sited on land now occupied by Callaghan's garage, with space for storing

timber on the opposite side of the street, where the Cooper Technical Bureau now stands.

For the first dozen years Job East's business was similar to those of several other local manufacturers of woodenware. To supplement manual labour there was nothing other than a saw-mill with horse-gearing attached. But Job East had ten men to help him, and that made him the largest local employer in the trade.

It was the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1853 which greatly extended Job East's range of products. The first of many Government contracts was

BY

'BEORCHAM'

received, and extra men were engaged to cope with orders for lance-poles, rammers for the artillery, tent pegs, etc. To quote once more from a newspaper report of 1888: 'It seems a curious decree of fate that the determination of the Czar Nicholas to subjugate Turkey... should have resulted in the establishment of a peaceful industry at Berkhamsted constantly employing nearly a hundred men.'

THE CHIMNEY

By a happy chance, the town's first skilled photographer, William Claridge, lived almost opposite East's original works. One of his photographs, almost certainly well over 100 years old, shows two workmen in a timber yard near the canal. Another shows a variety of sheds, some dilapidated and one with a thatched roof, on the south side of the street, with a 'pole' type of one-horse timber cart in the foreground. One of the sheds

sprouted a tall chimney, and thereby hangs a tale.

Mr. Constable Curtis, of Berkhamsted Hall, is said to have objected to the tall sight of smoke belching from the tall chimney and caused Mr. East to go west to Gossoms End. This story may or may not be true, but we know that Mr. Curtis bought the land on which Mr. East's sheds stood and thereby caused the removal. The site at Gossoms End had been a garden, and within a week Mr. East installed his machinery, started a steam engine, and answered the call for higher productivity.

THE GREAT FIRE

The ageing Job was helped by two sons, Josiah and Cornelius. In 1888, when Cornelius was in charge, it was described as the largest single-handed business of its character outside London.

The date 1888 has appeared several times in this article because a newspaper report of a fire at the works in that year included some historical information about the firm. The fire destroyed the saw-mill, machine shop and some other buildings, and badly damaged a huge beam engine. One hundred men feared a long spell of unemployment, but in a matter of hours some of them were clearing up the debris, and within a few days a powerful portable engine was installed. A spur to action was the knowledge that several Government contracts had to be finished under pain of heavy penalties.

FIFTY YEARS AGO

The East dynasty lasted until 1917, when Miss Catherine East, granddaughter of Job, sold the company to John Lenanton & Son Ltd., of Millwall. It was then that the late Mr. H. E. Hunn, for some years a member of Berkhamsted Urban Council, began a long association with the Berkhamsted Works, first as manager and finally as general manager and director until his retirement in 1956, when he was succeeded by Mr. R. Slatery.

The original garden site of one and a half acres was extended to its present size of six acres, and while the bulk of the manufacturing capacity was taken up on Government contracts, some unusual work was undertaken.

For example, in 1932 the firm secured a contract to manufacture 202 lock gates for a widening scheme on the Warwick to Birmingham section of the Grand Union Canal. If this was not the firm's largest contract it was certainly the heaviest! Each of the 102 tail gates, 15-ft. to 18-ft. high and nearly 10-ft. wide,

weighed 4½ tons; the head gates (i.e., at the head of the lock, and only 10-ft. high) each weighed 2½ tons. Altogether 26,000 cubic feet of sawn English oak was used, and the order took 18 months to complete.

The problem of cutting the unusually heavy tenons was conquered after many tests and the installation of a very special machine.

SHIPWRECK!

Another ticklish problem was the delivery of such massive gates to locks which were not easily accessible by road. Appropriately, the gates were sent by canal, four per boat, and loading was a worrying operation. Boats of narrow beam easily overturned if insufficiently ballasted, and as the gates took up so much room, it was impossible to load all the necessary ballast first. Each gate was therefore held in the crane while extra ballast was thrown in until the boat floated safely. At least one boat overturned and hundreds of people stood on the towpath or Billet Lane bridge to watch the salvage operations.

The journey from Berkhamsted to the various locks took three days, and often there was a clearance of only 4-in. under the bridges.

In this short article there is no space to recall modern changes and recent achievements. The firm's work may be seen in many famous buildings—at London Airport, the Shell Centre on South Bank, London, etc. What is so interesting to the local historian is the continuity of a business which is proud of its deep and long local roots, and may possibly employ the descendants of bowl-turners and shovel-makers who plied their trades in Berkhamsted when the Castle was in its prime.

KEEP



COOPER, McDOUG

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