

**BANKS & SONS LTD
Elephant Works
Bridge Street
Derby**

**A Memory
by
George Oldknow**

My father, George Oldknow (1921-2003) went to work for Banks & Sons Ltd as Junior Office Boy in September 1935, after leaving school. He stayed with the firm for five years until he enlisted with the Royal Air Force, and left in August 1940.

During his five years with Banks, George received a sound commercial training, and also attended night school. He was latterly employed as Assistant Cashier and Shorthand-Typist. There was a promise of a job when he returned from the War, and six years later he returned to Banks for £4 per week - but only for a short while before leaving to further his career elsewhere.

The following is his account of those five years with Banks & Sons Ltd, which he wrote following his retirement in the 1980s.

*Kathryn Oldknow
June 2010*

BANKS & SONS LTD

Banks & Sons Ltd, Elephant Works, Bridge Street, Derby were manufacturers of made-up textiles and retailers of tents, blind, leather goods, coal bags, tarpaulins, and twines of every description. They also had an extensive tent hire business.

I presented myself for interview one day towards the end of August and began my five years' service with the firm on Monday 5 September 1935. I well remember that morning. It was a typical, misty, late summer morning and I can still remember being struck by the whine of the machines coming from somewhere on the first floor as I made my way to the door marked 'Office.'

Mr Brown, the Secretary was already waiting for me and took me to his office for a chat before introducing me to the other members of the office staff. The one thing that stands out about that initial talk was the instruction that I was to get out of the habit of using the expression 'Right Ho.' I was told that Mr Tom (Mr J T Banks) considered it 'street talk' and I must develop the habit of saying 'Yes' 'All right' or even just 'Right.' But 'Right Ho' was out. I can also remember turning round to him at the door on my way out and saying 'Right Ho' and hearing him give a big sigh and say 'There you go again.' It took weeks to cure it, but to this day 'Right Ho' is an expression I never use.

I was introduced to Mrs Amy Oakley and Miss Lorna Jackson, cashier book-keeper and shorthand typist respectively, and between them they initiated me into the office boy's job of keeping the stamp book and the two main order books for the coal bags which were made and which were at the time the firm's main industry.

There was tea to make and (surreptitiously) cakes to fetch from the shop across the road (and don't let anyone see you!) It is difficult now to realise that I used to fetch a ha'porth of milk morning and afternoon, from a little two-gill measure that was kept in a cupboard in the shop where the large milk can stood. There were no fridges then. We only had tea in the afternoons; Mr Tom had his in the morning.

The Management (Directors) of the firm were Messrs H Banks, E Banks and J T Banks. E Banks was Mrs H Banks and she only appeared for Directors' meetings which took place annually when the auditors' report was received. On that day it was a case of having to be on one's best behaviour.

There was another Mr Banks, the quite unforgettable Mr Harry - 'Jumbo' as he was known to his many friends. When I arrived he was 'on the road' and travelled east to the Nottingham area and north as far as Doncaster. He did not bring in anything like the number of orders that Mr W H Short did, and it was not until Jock McGregor joined the RAF that Mr Harry came back into the Bridge Street office on a permanent basis as manager on the coal bag side of the business. A new office was built for him in a corner of the bag room and he took over and managed from there.

He was great fun, a great practical joker and a very 'easy' boss for those days. You could talk to him on any problem and he would always be prepared to listen to you. He was a socialite, a member of the Derby Shakespeare Society and belonged to other musical societies.

The only other member of staff was the outside representative, Mr W H Short. Mr Short was a character in his own right. He must have been about sixty years old when I joined the firm. He was a stooping, grey-haired figure and very arthritic, although his most constant complaint was of chilblains. Fortunately he only appeared on Saturday mornings to put everybody in a flap. I had to buy and make his Oxo for him - one-penny cubes in sixpenny boxes. He was always in a hurry and thought he should have absolute priority. He held the Patent Rights for the Short's Patent, which was a special method of seaming a coal bag, and it was what he accrued from those Rights that was the main source of his considerable income.

It was never my business to know, in the early days, what the senior staff of the firm received in the way of remuneration, but I did learn later. It went something like this:

Company Secretary	£6.00	per week
Shop Manager	£5.00	per week
Shop Assistant	£2.10s	per week
Shop Boy	£0.10s	per week
Cashier Book-keeper	£1.16s	per week
Shorthand Typist	£1.05s	per week
Office Boy	£0.10s	per week
W H Short	£5.00	per week plus commission on orders and Patent Rights

On the few cheques I saw in 1940, paid quarterly, the figure was always between £250 and £300

Mr Short drove the biggest car, an Austin 20. It was left at Atkey's Garage in Becket Street every Saturday morning while he came to the office, to be serviced and made ready for his next week's trip to Birmingham (where he went every week), and other journeys as far away as South Wales.

Birmingham Co-op alone took 300 coal bags every week of the year, and they went by special delivery by A J Hallsworth. This was in addition to what else he sold, all Short's Patent of course. Mr Short lived in the large bungalow called 'Beech Lawn' at the top of Horwood Avenue, Littleover. He was also a great Rosehill Methodist. His daughter, Evelyn had a lovely contralto voice and was a pupil of the lady who was eventually to be my next-door neighbour. Evelyn was secretary to the County Surveyor and on retirement she went to live in Blackpool where she took another job, becoming secretary to Al Read, comedian of broadcasting fame, and she stayed with him for many years in that capacity.

The Elephant Works

The Tent Works

This was purely what the name implies. No staff were employed here. Every conceivable type of tentage was stored from the largest of marquees to small tents for the side shows at garden fetes, special linings for occasions such as weddings, bell tents and tent floors. The demand in summer

almost always exceeded the supply of both tentage stocks and labour.

In the busiest of summer time, J W Smith (in charge) was helped by whatever other lads were available - the permanent haulage contractor (A J Hallsworth), Sam Mottram from the Machine Room, Jock McGregor from the Bag Room, the other young lads from all departments, plus casual labour.

I remember Mr Hallsworth being pushed off the back of his lorry by one over-enthusiastic handler of a large marquee pole, and as he lay on the ground with his pupils rolled back I quite thought this was the first 'dead man' I had seen. But he made a spectacular recovery without a sign even of concussion.

The Machine Room

The foreman in the Machine Room was Sam Mottram. Under his watchful eye worked two machinists who, for unknown reasons, were Mrs Smith and Sylvia. Why one was Mrs and the other not I never knew. There was little enough difference in age, so perhaps it was a status symbol. This room was where the heavy tarpauline and blinds were made up (can you still get Birkmyre's Cloth I wonder?), deck chairs, new tents and tent repairs. It was the machines in this room that made the characteristic whine I heard during the first weeks of my employment. The whine came during the intermission when the operator's foot was off the pedal which set the machine in motion. When the machine foot was lowered onto the material you would hear a constant clatter, clatter, clatter when the pedal was pressed, followed by the whine when the machine was stopped for the line of the material to be re-adjusted. I don't know what happened to Mrs Smith, but Sylvia is still around, now well into her seventies and still living in the shadow of the mill where she spent so many years of her working life.

The only other feature of this room was that it had a long window from which it could be viewed from Mr Tom's office, and also a hatch through which the works tickets were passed by him to Sam. It was the only room so supervised 'from the top' as you might say.

The Bag Room (2nd Floor)

The second floor was known as the Bag Room. The firm's main industry from the 1920s to the 40s was the manufacture of coal bags. It was a 48-hour week in those days - even the office hours were 8.30am to 6.00pm (5.30pm on Fridays), and 8.30am to 1.00pm on Saturdays. There was just one hour for lunch and I had time to cycle home, gulp my dinner and get back in the hour.

This room was supervised by Jock McGregor. He was a handsome lad in his early twenties, nothing Scottish about him, only his name. He was very much a Derby lad. He was assisted by young Albert Ingram who was then about sixteen, somewhat older than me, and his elder brother Alfred who joined the firm a little later. The management had great faith in young Mr McGregor, and Mr Brown, the company secretary took a great interest in him since he was an orphan - he had only one sister who we heard little of. He left in 1938 to join the RAF as a fitter, and after one or two calls back to visit the firm and his old friends I never heard of him again.

Coal bags being the main industry, large teams of girls stitched the seams of the jute sacking together after the jute ropes had been sewn onto it. There were usually two forms of seam that had to be worked - the double seam and the Short's No.1 patent seam which embodied the idea of stitching a piece of jute cord between the two edges of the sacking and sewing the ends together through and round this cord.

The seaming was all hand work with palm and needle. The needles were stainless steel, huge triangular things, and periodically girls would fly down the office spurring blood all over the place, looking for first-aid plasters or bandages, which I kept in the first-aid box. The injuries were the result of the needles slipping, as they were prone to do if the girls were hurrying to make up pay, or earn a bit more for a special week. The needles came from Redditch, as all good needles do. I think the firm who made them was named Woodward's.

The rope handles on the coal bags were sewn on by roping machines. These made an even bigger clatter than the ones in the Machine Room downstairs. These machines also sewed the double bottom onto the bag.

All the work was piece rate and this was calculated right down to so many sixteenths of a penny per bag, and this applied to hand seamers and machinists alike.

Hand seaming was still in operation when I left in 1940, but some time before that came the advent of the seaming machines. With these came an awful lot of teething troubles and a lot of arguments regarding rates of pay. There was no trades union in these works at that time. There was to be a possible reduction of work force and other new arrangements. Eventually these machines did settle down and in the name of progress they did, in fact, reduce the number of workers, but this was all dealt with by means of natural wastage.

The last job that had to be done in this room on the completed bags was to sew on the customer's initials and the special legal requirement of a '1 cwt' metal plate, the official stamp on each bag. A final check over by Jock with a pair of sharp scissors to clip off the loose ends, and they were packed off down the chute to be dressed with pure Stockholm tar before despatch.

The Tar Coppers

Although it means returning to the ground floor, the Bag Room has to be followed by the Tar Coppers. In the Bag Room there was a table built in at the top of a chute from which the checked bags were sent hurtling down to the ground floor. On reaching the ground floor they were stacked by the Tar Dresser, Darkie Richards. The Stockholm tar came in huge drums, direct from Hull. The dry bags were sent down the chute on the basis of an order at a time; the completed produce was tied up in bundles of ten and stacked independently in the yard, according to customer, to await road or rail transport. The bags were placed on big benches alongside the Tar Coppers and as the tar boiled with a gas jet under it, it thinned and was then workable to brush on as the final dressing to the jute canvas. The special brushes for this job were made by another old Derby firm, Goddards of Sadler Gate. This is yet another old company no longer in existence.

Darkie Richardson was quite a character. I don't know if he was called 'Darkie' because what little

hair he had left was white, or whether it was because more often than not he resembled the colour of the tar he brushed onto the coal bags, but the name stuck. He was fond of the bottle and there was usually one secreted away somewhere, or else he would arrive for work actually drunk! However, he stuck to his job - and who else wanted it? He had to retire eventually and rumour had it that he was around eighty years old then. He was one of the real old Westenders of the town, the area in which the works was situated being always known as The West End.

There were several successors to Darkie. The tarring job was an extremely dirty one and played havoc with the hands particularly, but it improved considerably around 1937 with the arrival of 'Rozalex' barrier creams which the firm happily provided. These did not really eliminate the stains completely, but did improve the conditions of the men employed on it.

The Cutting Room (3rd Floor)

On the third floor was the Cutting Room. Here the great rolls of jute sacking were stored. Here too was a huge guillotine machine which slit through the sacking like a razor. I doubt whether it would be legal today as it was then, but nevertheless no-one to my knowledge ever got hurt with it. Albert Ingram used to do the cutting and was quite an expert with the machine. He also did a bit of stock control, but everything was always checked over by Mr Brown and later by myself as I made progress beyond the role of office boy.

Top (4th) Floor

This floor was empty. Even then it was not considered safe. There was not a bit of even floor in the whole building, not even Mr Tom's office, although he did have lino on his floor and you could see the pattern of the floorboards through it. I always went onto the top floor with a feeling of trepidation - it was a very eerie sensation. The motor for the hoist (I refuse to call it a lift) was housed there and this monstrosity did haul all the way up to the top floor. The machinery was a piece of antiquity itself. The motor was operated by two steel cables which were attached to two ball-like hand grips on each floor. In the middle of the hoist casing was a window. The procedure was that you pulled either the right or left hand ball according to whether you wished to call the hoist up or down, and then you stopped the thing by centering the cables again when a certain mark came in the window. Stepping into the hoist was a heart-stopping experience (it was the stuff of which nightmares are made), and I always imagined it hurtling from top to bottom out of control.

The foregoing completes a tour of the main building, but there was still one more building to visit across the yard. This, for unknown reasons, was always referred to as the Factory. I always thought factories were machine shops, but this one had no machinery of any kind within its walls.

The Factory

Attached to the main building at ground level were the Tar Copper sheds. Alongside, before reaching the sliding doors which led into the Factory, was the Boiler Shed. This boiler supplied, or did not, according to its whims, heat for the whole complex (including the office, unfortunately). Only Mr Tom had the luxury of an electric fire.

In charge of the Factory was Wallace (Mr J W Smith) who cycled in every morning from Findern to light up the boiler by 7.00am during the winter months. He it was, too, that looked after the tentage on the ground floor. The firm supplied tents and marquees for every outdoor function of note in and around Derby for many years. J W Smith attended to the processes of re-proofing the tentage when necessary and stocks of all manner of special dressings of whatever grade of canvas required his attention. There were green ones, black ones, clear ones, light and heavy ones. He also treated heavy tarpaulins in the same way. Covers often came in from haulage companies etc just for re-proofing. Wallace was also a great hand with a marline spike, splicing ropes, and he was one of the most professional 'whippers' I have seen at work. He taught me, too, and also how to use a punch and die to provide eyelet holes, but I never managed to whip the end of a piece the way he could.

Another job he did was the sewing of the blind canvasses that were made up in the machine room, onto the blind rollers. This was a skilful; hand-sewing job. They would then be fitted into the blind boxes which were manufactured for the firm by Walkerdines, the joiners and builders, next door.

Wallace and boy travelled the town throughout the summer on blind jobs. They had no van, everything went on a hand truck. The boy pushed the truck and it contained all they needed for the jobs, plus a short ladder usually. All this work had to be fitted into the tenting programme as well, but everyone knew their job and there were seldom any problems that were unable to be surmounted.

The Shop

The Shop (Retail Department in East Street, Town Centre) was a thriving business. It did business with nearly every other business house of note. Ropes and twines of every description were stocked. No-one had ever heard of Sellotape in those days and every parcel that was bought was wrapped up in paper and twine. Canvasses of every description were also stocked, leather goods, harnesses, dog leads, muzzles etc. Banks were what might be termed the Farmers' Chandler, if there ever was such a thing.

The Shop was managed by Charlie Wilkins, who had been with the Company all his life and he had a very able assistant in Bill Wheatley, and a boy with a truck. The boy and truck travelled at least once a day to Bridge Street Works, empty one way but always full on the return journey with finished products of one kind or another. The boys came and went - there were many of them.

Mr Tom was very interested in the work of the Shop. He came to the office every morning about 9.45am, went through the jobs he passed through the hatch to Sam Mottram in the Machine Room, had his tea and then left for East Street where he spent most of the rest of the day.