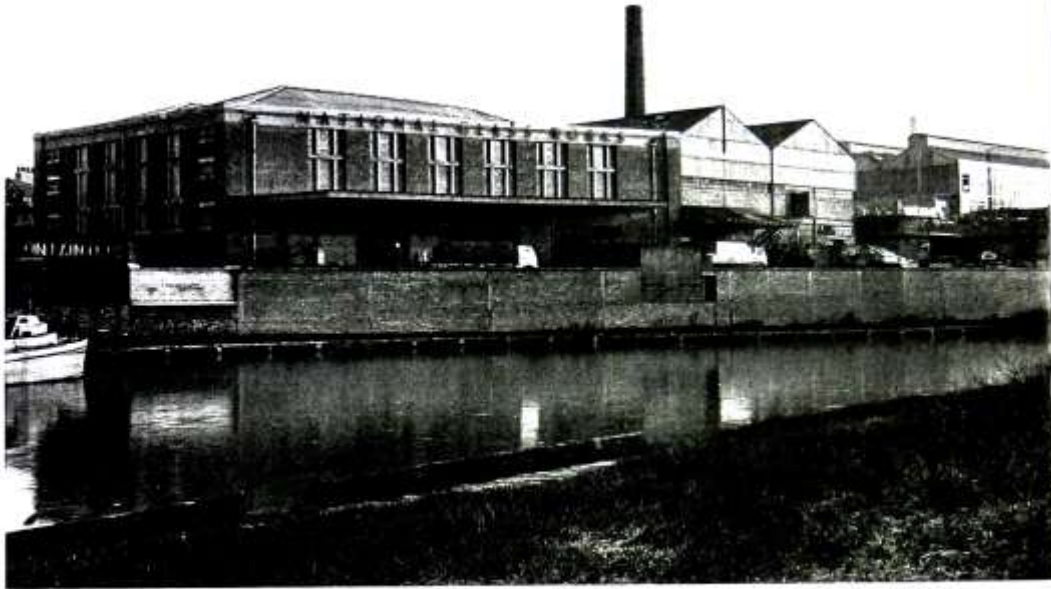


A Galaxy of Glass – Part XXI, Glass Making in Fishergate, York

By L. M. Angus-Butterworth

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A GALAXY OF GLASS

By L. M. ANGUS-BUTTERWORTH

Part XXI – Glass-making at the Fishergate, York

YORK is exceedingly rich in history and tradition. Part of the great modern factory of the National Glass Works in Fishergate is built on the site of St. Andrew's Priory, founded in A.D. 1202 by Hugh Murdac, who endowed it with adjacent lands and a rent of eleven marks, five shillings. The Priory survived until 1539.

When excavations were being made for the erection of an addition to the glasshouse buildings, near the conjectured site of the Priory Church, the workmen discovered a small cubical recess, about 18 in. square, formed of flags loosely put together, in which was a human skull and a gold finger ring or ear-ring. The skull was perfect with the sinister exception of having a deep hole on one side of the head.

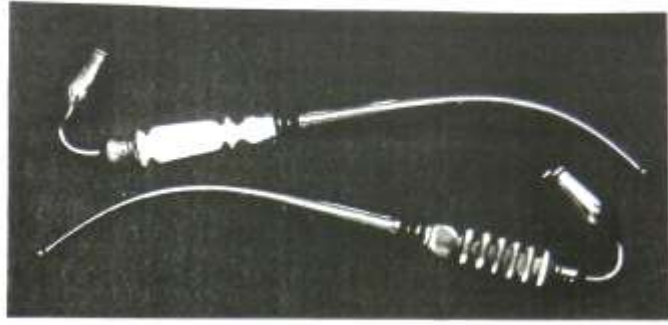
The Fishergate Glass Works, as it was first called, was established in 1794 by John Prince, who before becoming a glass manufacturer had been a jeweller in York. He bought about three acres of pasture land in Fishergate called Scutt's Close, and

on this built his glass factory. He then took into partnership John Hampston, who was also a jeweller. The present works, although now very much greater in extent, still incorporates the original site.

By 1818 the works had developed considerably, and a leading local historian describes the products and processes at that time in these words*: 'The chief manufacture is now FLINT GLASS VESSELS, and common PHIALS; and the particular process is extremely interesting; the glass being chiefly composed of fine Lym sand, mixed with pearl ashes and red lead. These are deposited in large clay vessels, or pots, which are placed in an immense furnace, and there exposed to an extreme heat until the materials become like a liquid fire, of the consistency of paste, that can be moulded into any shape. When in this state, hollow tubes are dipped into the pots, and the glass vessels are expanded by

*History of York, by Wm. Hargrove, Vol. 2, 1818

Pipe-smoking was a fetish to the Victorian father, but these pipes are merely ornamental. In white flint, blue and pink glass, they are 24 in. long. Below: This ornament is a fascinating version of the seraphook; the opaque glass ball is decorated with 'scraps' to form a pattern as well as a record.



blowing through those tubes, and shaped by the external application of tools.'

The moving spirit in this early enterprise was John Prince, who in the Title Deeds is described as 'Glass Manufacturer, Dealer and Chapman', showing that, besides being responsible for making the glass, he travelled about selling it. In those days this was the ordinary method used for the disposal of goods. After his death the undertaking suffered for a time a period of decline.

Chemist and business man

In 1835 a new company was formed by Joseph Spence with the support of a number of his friends. He had special advantages through being a practical chemist as well as a capable man of business. The title of 'The York Flint Glass Company' was chosen, and those associated with Spence in it were James Meek, whose grandson became Recorder of York; Thomas Backhouse; Thomas Price, whose

son was also a Recorder of York; and John William Brewis, an employee of the previous firm who was appointed manager of the Glasshouse.

The first meeting of the partners was held on October 2nd, 1835, and each of them then undertook to pay into the York City and County Bank within one month half the sum they had agreed to subscribe, and the second moiety in two months from that date. At the next meeting of the Board a book-keeper and a general assistant were appointed.

Joseph Spence was a man of abounding energy, and he caused prosperity to return to the concern. He delivered a remarkable series of lectures on glassmaking at the York Institute at a time when little or nothing was known about the subject in that city. He had with him on the platform, for demonstration purposes, some little fireclay models of furnaces. He also had erected a crucible, gas-heated and containing sufficient molten glass to produce a few small articles. The glass objects were in fact made in the presence of the audience by a glassworker the lecturer had brought with him. Proceedings of such a novel and exciting character naturally spread the fame of the Company.



The beautiful blown and engraved goblet (far right) was made in 1901 and presented to Lady Rymer, wife of the chairman of the company, when the new steam plant at the works was first put into use. The baluster stem is hollow and contains a sixpence. The goblet is now in the works museum. Right below: A pair of blue glass bells with crystal handles. The white flint flycatcher, in the centre, was the answer to the insect problem before the days of D.D.T.

Evocative of the Victorian era are these fireplace ornaments of dark green glass cast in the shape of fruit bowls

Three of the chemists' jars for which York was famous. In opal glass with gilded tops, they are enamelled with coats of arms and decorative labels



Shortly after these events George Wilson, a gentleman of keen business habits and considerable scientific knowledge, who was Sheriff in 1852 and Lord Mayor of York in 1855, became a partner. Alderman James Meek, senior, who was Lord Mayor of York for the third time in 1831, died in 1862. This death made it necessary to consider the future management of the Company, for neither Joseph Spence nor George Wilson had a son to follow them at the works. A limited liability company was accordingly formed in 1864, being one of the earliest in the glass industry.

Early views of the works show numerous chimneys with a great amount of smoke issuing from them. Some of the smoke shown may have existed only in the mind of the artist. Nevertheless, such pictures do reveal a great change that has taken place in the glass industry within the last generation. The introduction of more efficient systems of combustion has now largely eliminated smoke from glasshouse chimneys. Using fuel to better advantage has also had the effect of lowering the cost of the glass.

York Measures

The class of goods manufactured in the early days was white glass, chiefly tableware. At the time the glasses were sold by the hogshead to merchants and hawkers, who came to the works and took the goods away with them. As trade in chemists' goods developed, the firm began to employ travellers, thereby largely increasing the amount of business. Long before there were any Government regulations for the stamping of graduated glass measures the York Glass Co., realising the importance of having a high standard of accuracy in these articles, had all their measures specially tested, and a private mark placed on each to show that this had been done. In consequence the term 'York Measures' came to be recognized as denoting a measure of the highest quality and accuracy.

Decorated for use

A fascinating document in the possession of W. L. Pratt, the present managing director, is a catalogue and price list of about 1840. In this are illustrated highly decorative glass jars with enamelled designs in gilt and colour. These jars, for holding such things as magnesia, Peruvian bark, hartshorn, sarsaparilla, colocynth, arrowroot and tartaric acid, were made in heights of 23 to 31 in. including cover, and sold at prices of £1 16s. to £2 3s. each, with glass covers costing 10s. each extra. They bore representations of such things as the Royal Arms, the 'Scotch Arms', St. George and the Dragon, the Crown and Cushion, the Royal Plume of Feathers, the Physicians' Arms, the Surgeons' Arms, the

Apothecaries' Arms, and the Phoenix. Lettering or labelling of these or other glasses, in gold and enamel, was done 'by superior London artists'.

Catalogue or Encyclopaedia

The names of other products of this period had a romantic flavour about them. They included, as listed in the catalogue, alembics, aromatic vinegars, bee-hive glasses with hollow knobs, beetle traps, bird fountains, cake shades, caraffs, cayenne cruetts, cupping glasses, Daffy's Elixir glasses, drawer knobs, essence pennyroyals, guinea and feather glasses, Haarlems or Dutch drops, hyacinths in white, green, blue or amethyst glass, lavender, opodeldocs, perfumers, pomade divines, pungents, retorts, rolling pins, and wasp traps.

Helpful practical hints are given in connection with some of the products of that time. Thus under drawer knobs, supplied in crystal, sapphire, blue, jet, or canary yellow 109az, we read: 'Directions for fixing glass knobs into drawer fronts. First make holes through the drawer fronts' . . . there follows detailed instructions, concluding with the words: 'In fixing labels and knobs, it is well to acquire practice by operating once or twice on a waste piece of wood, before commencing with the drawers.'

The machines take over

The present head of the firm, W. L. Pratt, has formed in the last few years a valuable collection of glass associated with the works in earlier days. From the well-known Hirst collection at York he acquired a tumbler made at the old York Glass Works, the glass having on it the date 1797 and a small engraved picture of the glasshouses. Another piece is a beautifully made and engraved Presentation Goblet given in 1901 to Lady Rymer on the occasion of the starting of 'the new steam plant' at the works. Lady Rymer was the wife of Sir Joseph Sykes Rymer, who was then the chairman of the Company.

When the first world war ended it became imperative to install automatic plant. C. J. Pratt, then the governing director, made an unsuccessful attempt in 1919 to get the old hand-blowers to accept automatic methods of bottle production. In consequence of this failure activities were for a time transferred elsewhere.

Since 1930 the National Glass Works (York) Ltd., under W. L. Pratt, the son of C. J. Pratt, has greatly modernized and improved the old works. Glass containers and licensed victuallers' glassware are made by the most up-to-date methods. A speciality is 'National' quality machine-made thin tumblers in a large variety of patterns. Thus the tradition of glass-making which has existed on this site in York since the latter part of the 18th century is still alive and vigorous.

