

## **INTERVIEW WITH JOHN PRATT**

**Former Managing Director of York National Glassworks in Fishergate**

**Courtesy of York Oral History Society**



**York Glassworks, Fishergate, seen from a hot air balloon. Photo Van Wilson**

John Pratt was born in York in Dringhouses in 1934 and moved out to Stamford Bridge in 1938.

“My father and grandfather had been involved in the glass industry in different guises, my grandfather having first started his business of glass importing back in 1907, at that time it was in London and he bought the old York Flint Glass Company in 1922.

My first acquaintance with the glass works which was in Fishergate in York was at the age of 10 or 11 when we were taken into the works by my father. And we used to play in the cartons and boxes into which the bottles were packed. We always went in at Christmas to see how things were on Christmas Day.

They produced bottles and jars and we produced millions of jam jars, but there were many other bottles of all sorts. There was a whole range of bottles for Reckitt's of Hull. We used to make a range of small tablet bottles, and for toiletries. There was a range of I should think 30 different types of standard bottles. Nurse Harvey's mixture, wonderful old product, was packed in bottles which were made in Fishergate, and all sorts of familiar products, Disprin at one time was packed in glass, Windolene and so forth. We were very familiar with that range of household products.

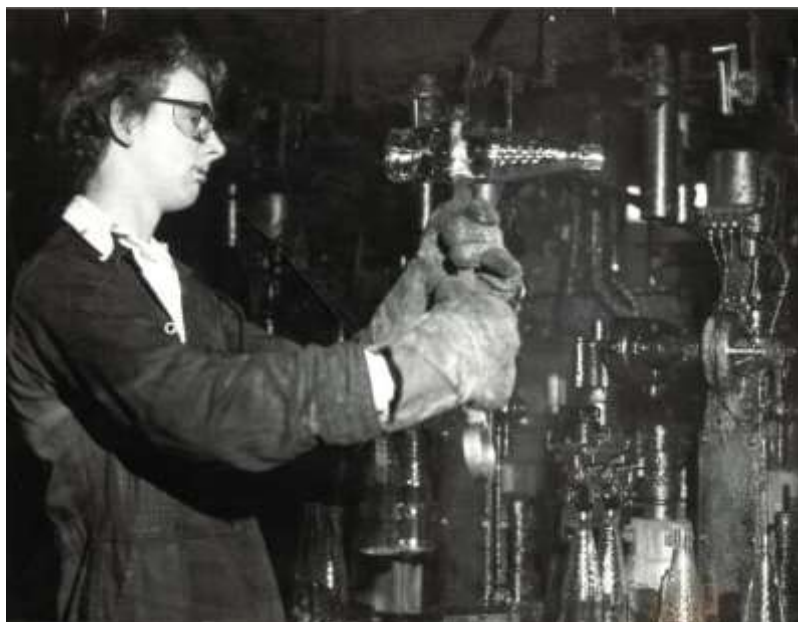
When my grandfather bought the company, it was called the York Flint Glass Company and then he changed the name to National Glass Works (York) Ltd because at that time he had a glass importing business in London, which was the National Glass Company. So he had two businesses at that time and in fact his business life started by importing glass from the United States from 1907. It was after the First World War in 1919 that the Ministry of Munitions approached him and asked him to consider manufacturing glass bottles in this country. And he did buy a glass works which was not a success and he subsequently sold it and in 1922 he bought the York Flint Glass Company which at that time was really bankrupt. It had large debts although it had been making glass of a different type on the site since 1793.

It involved some significant businessmen in York at that time, Prince, Smith and another name and the ownership passed through various hands and the success of the business fluctuated. It was all done by hand and one of the specialities were these rather beautiful chemist dispensing jars with glass stoppers and a highly coloured often gold leaf label and the speciality was that the label was protected itself by glass which was sandwiched in between the outer layer and the main part of the glass bottle. You can see them still in museums and private collections. They had a Latin name on and 50 years

after the war the chemists' shops had got lines of shelves with different products, made by York Flint Glass Company for the chemists in this area.

The glass blowers were allowed to make items which they fancied, after their normal working shift and a number of them were very adept at making the most beautiful figures and shapes. They were allowed to keep them. My father made a collection of these, and for many years he used to advertise in the Evening Press for these items and he built up a small collection which is now in the York Castle Museum.

When I left school I started work at the glass works in September '52. My first job was sweeping up on the shop floor for a short period of time for about 3 or 4 weeks. Then in 1953 my National Service started. So I was out for two years and then when I came back again I went back on the shop floor but in a position of an assistant machine operator and I was put with one of these experienced chaps who were operating the machines and that was a marvellous experience. It was quite a place to work in at that time.



**A man working at a bottle making machine. Image York Press**

It was an extremely noisy place and you became used to this noise and after a while you could speak to your friends and colleagues on the shop floor in a normal tone. You didn't have to shout but for somebody coming in you had to shout to be heard. And there was the smell of hot oil and there were various compounds which we had to use on the moulds so they didn't stick to the hot glass. Everything was made in a mould and we used to use sulphur blocks to make sure that the glass released from the moulds and that strong smell of sulphur was hung about the place. And then there was the grease, we had to apply grease to the inside of the moulds often while the machine was running with a swab and that gave off a strong smell of hot grease. You got used to these things. The bottle making machines were 24 hours a day, 168 hours a week and we closed down at that time apart from for furnace rebuilds just at Christmas for 3 days. Otherwise the production was continuous.

It was a private company owned by my family until 1967. Things had moved on in the glass bottle industry, companies were merging and the costs of making glass and building furnaces to melt the glass in were becoming terribly high and it was quite obvious that we needed to be larger to afford to renew the reproduction process itself.

The bottle making machines were getting more and more expensive so we decided that we needed to become larger if we were going to be viable. We finally agreed a merger with Redfearn Brothers of Barnsley. Their glass works was extremely large, on an 80 acre site. There was an element of family ownership but they were a public company. A merger was arranged on a share exchange basis and the new chairman was Anthony Barber, the son-in-law of Milton Asquith, then chairman of Redfearn Brothers and we called the new company Redfearn National Glass. The head office was decided to be at York, it was a slightly more convenient place for a number of reasons.

Having gone up through the ranks, I was general manager. My father was chairman so then I was made Deputy Chairman to Anthony Barber and Stanley Race, the Managing Director of Redfearn, became the overall Company Managing Director and that continued until Anthony Barber, who was a politician, was appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1970.

Stanley Race was made Chairman and I was made Managing Director in 1970 and at that time the combined company was the third in size in this country. We had about 17 per cent market share. Our two large competitors had about a third market share each.

It was a very restrained site on 6 acres, it was very productive though and very profitable actually. For some of these national companies, the product range at Redfearn was entirely different. They made amber glass and were large suppliers to the beer industry and probably about a third market share in the UK for bottled beer, and by far the biggest supplier of soft drink bottles.

In 1968 it was all in glass and they had a 40% market share of the UK. So it was huge but that was in one sense an enormous strength but it was also an enormous weakness because it was in 1970 when the strength became a weakness when plastic bottles came in and we had to compete with this new material and that's the beginning of another story.

What we were making essentially was glass packaging. We were competing against cans, cartons and other packaging so we had to decide what were we going to do to compete. Up to 1970, Redfearn National Glass were large employers of people, we employed just over 3,000. We had a factory in Barnsley itself, it was over the Barnsley coal seam. They had a drift mine going into the coal seam and then they built this new factory in Monk Bretton just outside Barnsley. We had this factory in York on a very restricted site.

We had plans for an entirely new factory to be built on the Millfield site just north of York, between the Harrogate line and the mainline North and in fact we bought a 50 acre site there and I can remember doing the negotiations for it. We bought it for £100,000 and I forget how many millions it was sold for later on. Various companies went bust over it but we had a plan to replace the works at Fishergate on this new site. And we actually had an opening ceremony by the Lord Lieutenant. We carried out substantial ground works and we were well advanced with starting to build the factory itself at the time of the merger in 1967.

Competition was increasing and we decided to look again at the company's strategy and we decided that building the new factory at that time and we had all the planning permissions and everything for it, and the work was reasonably well advanced, was going to be a high risk, and we ought not to at that time go ahead with it. So we put that on the back burner. We still had our two main plants operating but competition from overseas and in the UK was getting more and more intense. So we started a campaign of becoming more efficient and regrettably it involved redundancies and in the early 1970s we had redundancies one year after the other, an extremely painful process. And at the end of that we still had the two factories but were employing 1200 staff instead of just over 3,000. But it was necessary. Had we not done that we would not have had a business at all. A very painful exercise, one of the worst jobs anybody has to do.

Our main market, that of soft drinks, was changing radically. It was clearly being replaced by plastic, so we decided to go for plastic containers. So we went into plastic containers and we made what are now very familiar to us, 99.9 percent of all our soft drinks are in these plastic containers made out of PET, polyethylene terephthalate originally. And we started a factory at Leeds.

We did a turnover of about 12 million but the profitability was always extremely difficult but at least we were making packaging which we could sell. So we took the decision to move the entire production from Fishergate to this huge site which we've got at Barnsley on over 80 acres and we made that move and the York plant was finally closed down at the end of 1983 with the final redundancy of another 600 people. I left the company in 1988.

Originally the sand came by barge up the Ouse from King's Lynn and then it was moved on to road about 1950. And it came by road and then it came by rail. I said road but it was principally by rail to the railhead in Foss Islands Road, which I remember extremely well when the cattle market was there. And it was lorried round from Foss Islands Road to the glass works in Fishergate. That's right but the other main thing which came by river was fuel oil and that was a very efficient process – it came from Salt End on the Humber, up the Ouse and we pumped it out on the Foss Basin just by the glass works there between the glass works and St George's Fields.



**Fuel Oil Barge Discharging at the Glassworks. Photo Richard Pearson**

Glassmaking is a continuous process, you have the raw materials which are sand, about 73% limestone and a material called soda ash and the sand was refined sand. It wasn't the seaside sand, it's got too much iron round the grains so they were reliant on deposits of glass making quality sand and the biggest deposits latterly were in the King's Lynn sand quarries. They served most of the country from there then the limestone came from the Peak District. That was quality limestone, very low in iron and the soda ash which, in layman's terms is called a flux, makes the glass runny but it also makes it workable. Too much soda ash meant the glass could be weathered very easily and exposed to a damp atmosphere for extended periods of time so you'd get a weathering effect on the outside.

You've got three main raw materials and then decolourisers which we put in and because iron oxide which coats the grains of the silica has got a natural green colour, we had to eliminate that colour by adding some red. The way you obtained a clear transparent glass colour was to balance the green element by red and blue, that's right. That was for the clear glass, except in amber. And then you had carbon and there were various other oxides you used there to maintain that colour.

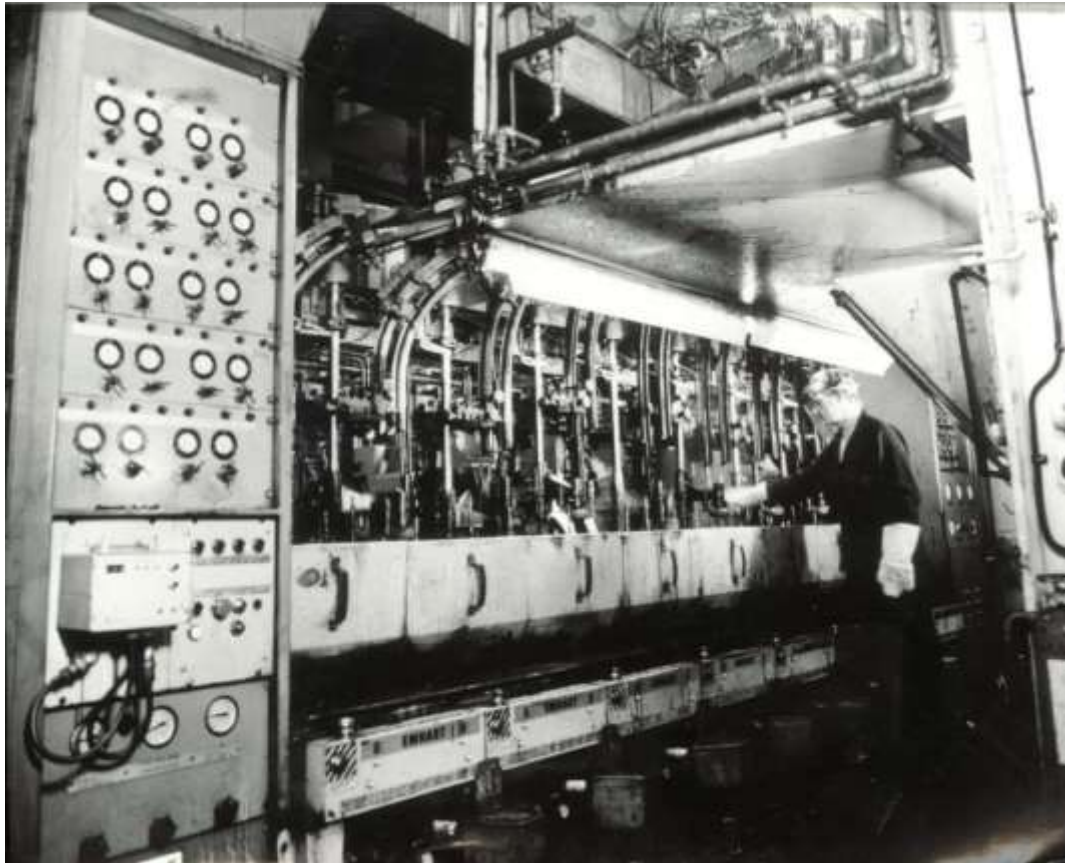
The colour is extremely important particularly for beer bottles and we had to monitor it very carefully. We also made green glass for wine bottles. We made Martini bottles, which were of course green. One of the most enjoyable customers were our scotch whisky customers and we had quite a business in scotch whisky. It's extremely interesting because not only have you got the projection process which was challenging enough but it is also the destination of the bottles, which we used to have a working knowledge of. I'd often go around supermarkets and see the new packaging trends, to be aware of what glass was being used for.



We made bottles which ranged from the very small tablet bottles which were of course replaced by a plastic bottle and the largest one we made was a 2 litre wine bottle which was made in Barnsley. They were very clever at making these internal screw bottles with cider for example. A lot of the beer bottles have the internal screws. At one time most of the soft drink bottles were in glass. We made one container in York which was unique at the time, it had not been done before. It had two separate cavities but made in one mould.

There was a lot of engineering expertise because we made our own moulds, so we had some very clever engineers and very clever designers, because converting making a bottle with a cavity in from a blob of metal was in the skill and the shape of the mould. A bottle is made in two halves. The first mould it is called a parison mould, it makes what we call a parison. The mould itself was called a blank mould for some reason and that did not look like a finished bottle, but a semi formed bottle and then that parison which is this odd looking object sort of halfway between solid glass, and bottle was then transferred mechanically to a blow mould. So there was a lot of movement taking place on these machines and the internal design of the moulds was absolutely crucial to get the right distribution of glass in the final bottle, and there was a lot of acquired skill in mould design. This was before computers of course.

For many years it's been entirely computerised but originally it was skill and knowledge as to what shape this parison had to be to make a reliable glass bottle with uniform glass in the walls. We had a very wide engineering department, we could do structural steel jobs, we had very skilled electricians, all the bottles had to be made by compressed air so we had a massive compressor house.



**Operator of a bottle making Machine. Photo York Press**

We were next door to what became the Mecca bingo hall. That was the cinema owned by the Prendergast family and I can remember old Jack Prendergast, the father of John Barry. He complained that the screen in the cinema was trembling because of the noise from the vibration from our compressors. We sorted that out and we had a little new compressor house.

The Shepherd family had their offices in Blue Bridge Lane. They became very good friends.

It was a happy company, the people who worked there were very resourceful. The machine operators had not got a traditional engineering skill but they were highly skilled at what they did and making adjustments to the machine while the machines were going, they were very adept at that.

My father was very insistent that there should be a very good pension scheme and there should also be awards for long service. And I can remember when we were giving gold pocket watches to the men with 25 years' service. I think it was a happy place to work despite the conditions.



**Photo: York Explore**