

York Glass Works

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YORK GLASS WORKS.

The honour of the discovery of the art of glass making has been contested by several nations. Its invention dates from the earliest antiquity, being one of the oldest industries in the world. As, however, the oldest known specimens are Egyptian its discovery may, with almost certainty, be attributed to that people.

The Egyptians were skilled glass makers a thousand years before Rome was founded, and six hundred years before the fall of Troy or King Pharaoh welcomed Joseph and his brethren to Egypt. It is mentioned as early as the 5th or 6th dynasty, and glassmakers at their avocations are depicted upon the walls of temples and tombs at Thebes and at Beni Hassan, accompanied with inscriptions indicative of their early knowledge of the art of glassmaking. These sculptures and inscriptions are of the 12th dynasty, which would be about 1800 B.C. The glass of Egypt at this early period was generally opaque, rarely transparent and always coloured. Under the native Pharaohs, Egyptian glass seems to have been extensively exported to Greece and Italy.

In leaving Egypt, it is certain the Israelites carried away with them a practical knowledge of many of the Egyptian industries, when released from their bondage, and that they established glass works along the Syrian coast, and thus introduced the art to the Phoenicians.

There is a splendid collection of Roman glass in the Hospitium, Yorkshire Philosophical Society's Gardens, York.

The first real introduction of glass making into England on a practical scale was about the year 1500, but works laid down in London did not succeed. About 50 years later, the second Duke of Buckingham started a glass factory in London for plate glass. This was the Duke who lived at Bishopscote in this city, and who married the daughter of the great Lord Fairfax.

The manufacture of bottles, and other vessels of glass, was introduced into this country in 1557, but did not make much progress till about 1690, in the reign of William III.

THE MARYGATE GLASS HOUSE.

The first glasshouse erected in York is mentioned by Drake in his "Eboracum" (1735). After stating that at the bottom of Marygate on the west side is a lane leading to the Almerly Garth, he says:

"On the other side of the lane, some few years ago, was erected a glasshouse which wrought glass for some time, but the gentleman whose publick spirit engaged himself to this undertaking being thoroughly employed in a business of a much nobler nature, he could not attend to these salamanders as he ought, who are known to be egregious cheats without good looking after; for which reason the matter was let drop, the house pulled down, and the project left open for some person of more leisure to pursue it".

A house near the Glasshouse referred to was for a time used as a Charity School for Girls, who were lodged, fed, taught, and clothed, and this school led to the formation of the York Grey-Coat Girls' Charity School. Mr. Malcolm Spence points out that this is the house at the corner of Marygate-lane, of which his sister, Mrs. Priestman, is the proprietor, and which is now occupied by Councillor Kenneth E.T. Wilkinson. Naturally Mr. Malcolm Spence, whose family has been connected with the Glass industry for several generations, was anxious to discover the spot on which the first Glasshouse stood, and after much trouble and great research he had the satisfaction of finding the site, which singular to say is opposite his own front door in Marygate.

The first introduction of Glass Making into York, occurred in the year 1730, at a time when Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington, was preparing his plans for the erection of the York Assembly Rooms, which were originally called "the Burlington Rooms." The same talented amateur architect, Lord Burlington, had a few years earlier erected the York Mansion House.

THE FISHERGATE GLASS WORKS.

In 1794, undeterred by, or perhaps ignorant of the fate which befell the previous attempts to establish

a Glass Making Industry in York, Mr. John Prince, a jeweller of this city, decided in 1794 to become a Glass Manufacturer, and to carry out his determination he purchased about three acres of pasture land in Fishergate called "Scutt's Close," in the suburbs of York, and on this land he built his Glass Manufactory. He then took Mr. John Hampston, who also was a jeweller, into partnership, and this was the origin of the present Glass Works, which stand on the same site though now very much greater in extent.

AN HISTORIC SITE.

On the road leading to the village of Fulford, in a place called Stone-wall-close, once stood the Priory of St. Andrew. It was founded in 1202 by Hugh Murdac, who granted and confirmed in perpetual alms to God, and to the twelve canons, serving God at St. Andrew's in Fishergate, Ebor, the Church of the same place, with lands adjacent; also the rent of eleven marks and five shillings. Likewise the lands at Thorp and Gudemadam.

The Priory had also several other lands, rents, etc. granted to it at various times, but was surrendered on the 29th of November, 1538, by the Prior and three monks. Leland says the Priory stood exactly opposite to the Nunnery of St. Clement. No remains of the Priory are now to be seen, but the site on which it stood has been well established. A portion of the Company's Works are erected on the site of St. Andrew's Priory.

It is interesting to note that when excavations were being made in preparation for the erection of an addition to the Glasshouse Buildings near the Foss, the workmen came across the lower portion of a substantial stone wall which ran parallel with the Foss, and which had evidently been the boundary wall of the Priory, and no doubt this has been the origin of the name which the field adjoining had acquired, namely "Stone-wall-close". In another portion of the ground, near the supposed site of the Church of St. Andrew, the workmen discovered a small cubicle about eighteen inches square, formed of flags loosely put together, in which imbedded in the soil, which had penetrated through the crevices of the flags was a human skull and a gold finger ring or ear-ring. The skull was perfect with the exception of a deep hole on one side of the head. Near to this was also found a curious leaden medallion, about two inches across, stamped with an Ecclesiastical device, and some fragments of the Priory Buildings.

THE YORK FLINT GLASS COMPANY.

John Hampston, soon after the establishment of the Glass Factory died, and was succeeded by his son, but the business does not appear to have prospered, and at a later period Mr. Henry Prest became a partner but died in 1824. The Title Deeds describe John Prince as "Glass Manufacturer, dealer and chapman", showing that he travelled about selling his wares, which in those days was the ordinary method by which they disposed of goods.

In 1822, Mr. Charles Priestly became one of the firm, but he did not make the progress which had been anticipated. In 1835, Mr. Joseph Spence, a practical chemist as well as a capable man of business, purchased the property, with the help of a few friends, of whom one was the grandfather of Mr. Malcolm Spence, and this was the turning point in the career of the concern, which was then made into a Company with the title of "The York Flint Glass Company", the members of which were Joseph Spence, James Meek (Grandfather of the present Recorder of York), Thomas Backhouse, great uncle of the present James Backhouse; Thomas Price, father of the late Recorder of York; and John William Brewis, an employee of the previous firm and who was appointed manager of the Glasshouse.

The first meeting of the partners was held on the 2nd of October, 1835, at which each partner was requested to pay into the York City and County Bank the arranged sum of money within one month, and the second moiety in two months from that date. At the next meeting the Board appointed a book-keeper and a general assistant.

It is interesting to note that Mr. Joseph Spence gave a few lectures in the York Institute at a time when York knew little or nothing of glass making. He had with him on the platform some little fireclay models of furnaces; also a little crucible, heated by gas and containing sufficient glass to make a few small articles, which were made in the presence of the audience by a glassworker Mr. Spence had brought with him.

Mr. J.W. Brewis did not live long after the formation of the new Company, but died in 1837, and Mr. Thomas Price and Mr. Thomas Backhouse withdrew from the firm, and the title then became Messrs. Meek, Spence & Co.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE BUSINESS:

Shortly after these events, Mr. George Wilson, a gentleman of keen business habits and scientific knowledge, who was Sheriff in 1852 and Lord Mayor of York in 1855, became a partner. Alderman James Beek, senior, who was Lord Mayor of York for the third time in 1851, died in 1862; and as neither Mr. Joseph Spence or Mr. George Wilson had a son to follow them in the Manufactory, a Limited Liability Company was formed in 1864, and Mr. Alfred Henry Spence (a cousin of the founder of the Company and father of Mr. Malcolm Spence) and Francis Hutchinson became joint managing directors. Joseph Spence died in 1872, and in 1880 Francis Hutchinson left the country and settled in New Zealand, whilst Mr. George Wilson retired in 1894 and died last year.

Mr. Malcolm Spence has also recently retired from the position of General Manager, and Mr. Wilson Clarke, a near relative of Mr. Wilson now holds the appointment of secretary and commercial joint manager, Mr. W.W. Langwell being the joint works manager. Mr. Clarke had by considerable experience in the business, specially qualified himself for that important position, and Mr. Langwell has also had great experience both in England and on the Continent in glass making, including bottles, table ware, sheet glass, and all varieties of coloured glasses.

Mr. Spence had held the position of manager and secretary of the Company for many years with marked ability. He brought to bear on the management of the factory a wealth of knowledge not only of the processes, but of the history of the rise and growth of what was one of England's greatest industries. He had made extensive original researches into the early history of glass making in Egypt, Syria, Rome and in Europe, has lectured several times on the same interesting subject, and in the course of the lecture has depicted on the screen a view of such a furnace as would be in use at the time when glass making was first introduced into England in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. This was the oldest illustration of a glass furnace obtainable. It represented men working barefoot; women helping to blow, etc. etc. Illustrations were also shown of the York Glass Works at different periods showing the chimney built in 1794, and which was standing until 1875; also

the second furnace built in 1838. Now the chimneys have disappeared, gas being employed for firing the furnaces instead of coal. He has also shown slides of glassmaking operations as actually carried on at the Glass Works, photographed from life.

The class of goods manufactured in the early days was white glass, chiefly table ware, and at that time goods were sold by the hogshead to merchants and hawkers, who came round and took them away with them. As the trade in chemists' goods developed, the firm commenced to bring their manufactures before the notice of chemists by means of travellers, thereby very largely increasing the amount of business. The introduction of "green flint" glass also gave a stimulus to trade.

Long before there were any Government Regulations for the stamping of graduated glass measures, the York Glass Co. realised the importance of having a high standard of accuracy in these articles, and accordingly had all their measures specially tested, and a private mark placed on each one to show this had been done. As a consequence the term "York Measures" came to be recognised as denoting a measure of the highest quality and accuracy. The company were the original patentees of the "Phototype" Recess Label, which marked an important advance in the labelling of chemists' bottles, etc. and which may now be seen on the shelves of most leading chemists.

The contrast between the character and extent of the works sixty or seventy years ago and the present time is very great. In 1840 the whole of the glassware made by the firm was produced by one small furnace, containing four melting pots. Three powerful furnaces of the latest type are now always at work. The works are served by a system of overhead rails, which convey coal, as it is unloaded from barges, direct to the various furnaces and boilers, where it is required, sand and other materials also being conveyed to the places where they are respectively stored.

The property extends over seven acres, of which the works cover half. The present manufactures chiefly consist of the glassware required by chemists, medical men, hospitals, museums, laboratories, etc., including bottles in all the varieties used by these businesses and professions, anatomical jars for the

preservation of specimens, retorts, labelled bottles for chemists' shelves, ornamental jars for showing confectionery and other articles, graduated glass measures (English and metric), standard glass measures for the use of inspectors of weights and measures, and a certain amount of tableware, such as tumblers, cruets, and decanters; railway lenses in all colours also form an important branch of the business.

The firm manufacture their own fireclay pots, in which the glass is founded. A well equipped mould making department turns out all the moulds required in the manufacture of bottles.

In early days the imposition of a duty on glass seriously interfered with the trade of that commodity, but happily the tax has long since been repealed.

Although Mr. Malcolm Spence has retired from the active management of the Glass Works, he still acts as consulting engineer, and is a member of the Board of Directors. The family of which he is the last male representative will always be held in grateful remembrance in York for its successful prosecution of an important industry as well as for its assistance in social, educational, and philanthropic work, and for its fine example of zealous and loyal citizenship.

The present composition of the Board is as follows:- Sir J. Sykes Rymer (Chairman), Malcolm Spence, John Tatham Ware, Charles A. Ridgway (Dewsbury), and G. Wilson Clarke.

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