

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - September 2002

Huntley and Palmers

At the Wargrave Local History Society's September meeting Matthew Williams, the Social History Curator at Reading Museum, gave a presentation about *Huntley and Palmers*. The Museum has housed the 6000 items of the Huntley and Palmers collection since 1974 - initially on loan, and owned from 1989 - and with the aid of a Lottery Grant, a new gallery now enables this material to be displayed. A major new development will be an online website.

The company had been founded in 1822 by Joseph Huntley at 72 London Street. He managed the business, whilst his son Thomas did the baking. Their Quaker ideals of honesty, self discipline and hard work meant that they did not skimp on the ingredients and sold the biscuits for a fair price, and many Reading citizens bought their produce. The coaches from London to Bristol called opposite the shop, and so the reputation of Huntley's biscuits soon spread.

The company became Huntley and Palmer when George Palmer went into partnership with Thomas in 1841. George was also a Quaker - he knew the firm had goodwill, but had ambitions to make money - not just in Reading, but across the country, and eventually the world. George introduced the famous garter and buckle logo as a trademark. He also set about mechanising the biscuit production. An old silk factory on Kings Road was acquired, and steam engines introduced to power the mixers, cutters conveyors etc. Thomas died in 1857, and the Palmer family - George and his brothers William and Isaac - took over - the company becoming Huntley and Palmers. By 1898 5000 people were employed, and the factory covered 24 acres on both sides of the Kennet. It was the largest biscuit factory in the world, with its own fire brigade, railway and workshops - developing the biscuit making machines etc.

The Huntley and Palmers biscuit tins were a major innovation. The first air tight boxes had been made by Joseph Huntley junior for his brother in 1832 at his ironmongers business opposite the London Street shop, enabling the biscuits to be delivered fresh and on time. The firm became Huntley Boorne and Stevens, and was bought by Huntley and Palmers in 1918. There were two types of tin -- the large 10 lb ones - initially with a utilitarian paper label - were prized as useful objects, apart from their 'contents' - and had many uses, such as to store Bibles in Africa, or as ballot boxes in Switzerland. The other type of tin was printed with a design or picture - initially basic rectangular shapes, but by the 20th century many other shapes were made, such as one in the shape of the FA Cup -- in 1927, when it was thought Reading would 'win the cup'. Other tins depicted royal subjects -- popular in the many colonial countries to which the biscuits were exported, and a constant reminder of 'the brand'.

George Palmer began exporting Reading biscuits, and gained royal warrants in both Belgium and France by 1872, whilst the firm was the first British company to win a first prize at the Paris exhibition - in 1878 - all of which helped to boost their trade. In some cases, such as Tibet, H&P biscuits had reached the country before people from the west - and a trade card of 1878

proclaimed 'seldom a ship sails from Britain that does not carry a Reading biscuit'. In 1911 Scott's Antarctic Expedition was supplied with biscuits, and Stanley took them on his African expeditions, whilst in 1947 the company made wedding cake for the present queen.

For 100 years from 1870, Reading was known as the biscuit town - the smell of baking biscuits being familiar, and the local football team were known as 'the biscuit men'. There was a staff recreation club, with many sports available, and even had plans for a 2000 seat concert hall. George Palmer gave both Palmer Park and Kings Meadow to the town.

The staff were provided with a 'sick fund' (before the National Insurance scheme), although the pay was not particularly good - a £ sterling and a pound of broken biscuits - even the Chairman had the broken biscuits every week ! Several of the audience at this meeting had worked for H&P, and their memories added to the interest of the evening.
