

PILTON GLOVE FACTORY

Gay and Arthur Reavel purchased from John Sanders and Joseph Hancock in 1897. Mr. Arthur John Reavel purchased the glove factory, work shops and drying sheds, together with nos. 1, 2 & 3 Ladywell Lane from Richard Ellacott Gay. Mr Reavel was mayor of Barnstaple in 1908.

How times have changed

My mother learned her trade as a Dressmaker at Hoare and Symonds in Barnstaple. During the first world war she started at the factory in the glove cutting department, (because of the shortage of men who were joining the army). Her dressmaking colleagues told her that she must not expect them to speak to her if she saw them in town - never the twain shall meet! She designed hats whilst she was there - she had a flair for designing.

Various leather articles were made as well as gloves. Mr. Reavel was very particular who he employed - it was very much a family business.

When I was a child I can remember that Doeskin and Chamois skins were cured in a little workshop or shed halfway up Ladywell Lane, at the end of the factory proper, and the skins were trundled up the lane to the factory fields (which are now Nursery End) and laid out on wooden structures to dry.

In the nineteen thirties Dent and Allcroft purchased the factory and a new building was erected attached to the old factory. This was in glass and brick with a glass roof for the top floor in which the cutters worked. The curing and drying sheds were done away with.

I started work in the office in September 1939, the year war broke out, as a Junior Clerk. The senior girl was leaving to get married; her fiancé worked for the council, but when it was time for the wedding they had to change their plans for their honeymoon, because of the threat of war. They could only go within about a 5 mile radius of Barnstaple, so Braunton was their destination.

Being in the office I was able to go around the various departments and see how things were done, and it proved very interesting. As you will see from a recent advertisement for Dents Gloves it takes 32 operations to make a pair of Dents Leather Gloves. Starting at the top floor in the old part of the factory the skins came in bundles and were sorted in colour, quality and thickness. When an order came through, with an order ticket for a certain quantity, the foreman chose the skins and passed them through to the leather cutter. He then looked through the skins and put them in an oven. This proved to be a box of damp leather pieces (I think the skins were wrapped in Hessian, but not sure of this point, and left for a while. When the cutter decided the skins were in the right condition (this made the skins more flexible and workable) the cutter would hook one end to a rope and stretch the skin so that when the gloves were made the stretch would only be across the width of the glove and not in the length.

He would then place the skin on the cutting table and cut out trunks according to the size required (using a template for each size) and then match small pieces for thumbs and fourchettes. Skins are not overall same colour and this took quite some skill.

These trunks were then sent to do a different department to be stamped and numbered and then pressed with cutting knives the shape of the glove required. Then they were passed down to the next floor where the different parts of the gloves were assembled by machinists, the fourchettes were stitched to the main trunk and then passed to the thumbers. Before this the pointers made their contribution on the back of the gloves.

After the gloves were examined they were sent down to the finishing rooms to be ironed, bagged and boxed before sending off to the warehouse at Warminster by container through the railway network or later by van. During the war our warehouses in London, 97 Wood Street were bombed, so the various departments were distributed over the country. The fabric and glove department were moved to the bottom of Newport in an old carpenters warehouse which is now a garage and showroom for Vauxhall cars.

The export department was transferred to Pilton Factory and I worked in this department, taking over when the man in charge was called up for service. Gloves were sent all over the

world. Cases of fabric and leather gloves. If the leather gloves had to go to a hot climate the cases had to be tin lined, the gloves bagged in anti-fungicidal bags and wrapped in special tissue paper and flannel material to stop the leather from spotting. This trading with the world was to raise money for the war effort, and therefore when it was my time for registration my boss applied for me to be registered in a Reserved Occupation.

The factory made gloves for airman in pure white silk cut in three thicknesses and tan leather gloves which had electric elements sewn to the lining and press studded inside the gloves.

Anti flash gloves for gunners were also made; these were in heavy fabric.

The atmosphere in the factory was good; very much a family feeling. At Christmas, on Christmas Eve each room had a party. The rooms were decorated in the lunch breaks by the workers. We had a social club, and after the war we had many an outing before cars became the norm. We had a cycling club and during the war we made use of the double summertime and cycled to Saunton Sands of an evening. We had concerts and dances run by the members of the social club, (usually us office workers).

The factory also had many outworkers some of whom had learned the trade in the factory, married, and now worked from home. End tyers (tying the ends of the points on the back of gloves) was an outworkers job. Sewing on buttons and putting the linings in gloves was another out workers job for the unskilled.

Unfortunately when I was 45 in 1968/9 the factory with the exception of the glove cutting department closed down, and by this time I was in the wages and cashier department and I had the unenviable task of obtaining the redundancy payments from government departments. The atmosphere was very depressing. Finally the leather cutting department was closed down and the factory sold.

As a matter of interest (again how times changed) the equipment in the offices was very basic; no carpet on floor, old kitchen tables which we periodically covered with brown paper, old chairs and stools, old typewriters etc. and maybe one old desk. Then after the war the government made tax allowances for equipment in places of work so we had proper desks and chairs, and new offices on the first floor. Dent's also had a fabric glove factory at the bottom of Newport.

written by Jennie Hobbs