

Lepton Fireworks

Lepton consists of a mixture of houses built in the 18th century and earlier. The village of Rowley is one of the hamlets built in earlier times, while its villages consisted of the usual mixture of Weavers, Coal-Miners, and Agricultural Labourers.

There had been large amounts of stone quarrying in the area, this being ideal for the manufacturing of fireworks, in the local dialect, the area was known as "Spuroil" or "Spurt-Hole" the place where fireworks are made. This is unique in the respect it was the origin of the Yorkshire Firework Industry.

In 1820 the first manufacturer of fireworks in Brittan was Charles Brock who started manufacturing fireworks in Southwest Scotland but he appears to have no roll in the Yorkshire industry.

1847 sees the start of the Lepton industry, Allen Jessop was the individual who started it all. He gained a knowledge of explosives during his work as a coal miner although the 1851 census indicates that he was a hand loom weaver. He began to make fireworks in his spare time to augment his income.

He and his wife took fireworks around in a basket, a few weeks before bonfire night, selling them door to door. In 1873 the introduction of the Explosives Act, this put a stop to fireworks being a cottage industry, all fireworks factories had to be licensed.

In 1865 Bob Shaw started to Manufacturing at Turners Quarry, behind Rowley Chapel and manufactured under the name of Globe Fireworks. The factory was No 32 and licensed on the 19th May 1876.

Allen Jessop started Manufacturing in 1871, at Rowley next to Bob Shaw's factory, under the name of Messrs Allen Jessop & Sons, the factory No 55 and Licensed on the 30th October 1876.

In 1881 according to the census, twenty one persons were described as manufacturers of Fireworks, and by the turn of the century there were three Shaw, Jessop and Jessop & Kilner.

In the Huddersfield Examiner dated 7th September 1881, George & Samuel Newsome were prosecuted under the explosives act and not for the first time, there were seven charges made under the act.

1. The building in which the making of fireworks was carried out within 50 yards of a footpath.

2. Not fixing copy's of the general rules and regulations of work in the factory.
3. That the building was not constructed as to prevent exposure to iron, and loose gunpowder plus explosive compositions were found about the building.
4. The building was not kept free from grit.
5. That no provisions had been made to provide clothing for the workers.
6. That no provisions had been made to prevent accidents occurring and to minimize the danger of attending work.
7. There were five employees in the building, when only licensed for four.

The bench proposed to inflict the penalty of the law, they were fined £11 and £23 and 6 shillings costs, and ordered that all materials be seized. Having all their materials seized, and the case being close to the 5th November there is no record of them after this date.

After the death of Allen Jessop in 1880 the business was carried on by his sons, Elliott, Ben, Humphrey and Ely, until 1897 when Ben decided to leave the family business. He set-up with his brother in law Harry Kilner and brothers Humphrey and Ely in a new factory which was built at the low side of Highgate Lane.

In 1906 there was a split between Ben Jessop and Harry Kilner, Kilner built a new factory by the side Allen Jessop's factory and traded in the name of the Yorkshire Fireworks Company; later to be Lion Fireworks.

Alex Parret came to Lepton in 1906 from London; he had been working as a salesman for Brock Fireworks and came to Lepton to manage the Allen Jessop factory until around 1910 when he acquired it. He traded until after the great war then, after getting into financial difficulties, he sold the business to Standard.

Ben Jessop traded under the name Ben & Able Jessop Pyrotechnics; the factory was sold to Standard in 1930.

Information from Frederick Rowcliffe, son in law of James Greenhalgh

Ruth's father James Greenhalgh came to see us in Cambridge once or twice. Her father was a man of about 60 with hair and beard turned grey but some black left in his moustache. He was the eldest son of William Greenhalgh who traded as a wholesale draper under his own name in Huddersfield. He sold fireworks, in season, to small drapers and general shops. It came about that James wanted to leave the family firm and to set up on his own which he did he did with a Mr Booth as a working partner but he seems to have been more interested in the fireworks aspect of the business. There were two small, old established firework makers in Lepton, from whom William and now James Greenhalgh got their supplies. James decided to go all out into fireworks manufacture trading as the Standard Fireworks Company, the proprietor being James Greenhalgh and

leaving the running of the drapery business to Mr Booth. He got the Lepton makers to provide his Fireworks with his company name "Standard" on them and acquired a firework store or magazine on Leeds Road. However a year or two before the 1914 war broke out, it appears that the Lepton factories, either could not or would not supply him so he decided that along with his son Edward, he would set about making their own. They leased a site at Crossland Moor, and proceeded to manufacture fireworks.

When war broke out in 1914 the Lepton factories obtained contracts for filling Mills grenades and from 1914 to 1918 they produced eleven million items, transporting them by rail from Fenay Bridge Station.

Reports of an accident were made on the 22nd October 1913 at the Shaw's Factory. Six employees were badly burned and one died. In 1944 the worst accident in the Yorkshire Firework industry occurred when seven women and one man lost their lives, at the Lion factory.

In the Huddersfield Examiner of the 29th October 1937 a photograph shows, the Kilner Family carrying Fireworks, Mrs Mary Ann Kilner complete with bonnet, was said to be the oldest woman firework maker in the country at this time. She was not only the mother of Harry Kilner but the daughter of Allen Jessop. Mrs Kilner told reporters with a chuckle that, as a girl of eight, she would stand on a stool filling fireworks while the grown-ups would sit on barrels of gunpowder to work. "I used to work from six in the morning until ten at night, but look at the young people today they are idle." Mary Ann Kilner died aged 91 in 1941.

Hours of Work:

Pre 1930 - 7am to 5.30pm - half hour for breakfast and one hour for dinner.

Post 1930 - 7.30am to 5.30pm - no breakfast and one hour for dinner.

Post 1945 - 8.00am to 4.30pm - tea break and half hour dinner.

The Globe Fireworks closed in 1962.

The Lion Fireworks closed in 1970.

The Lepton firework industry finally ended when Standard closed its factory in 1987.

Text supplied by Steven Hill