

London, Fakenham & Reading

The monogrammed brackets used in Millers Walk shopping precinct remind us of the factory which was once the largest employer in the town. The locals knew it as 'the printing works' and would avoid going into town at teatime to avoid the 'printing works coming out' when several hundred people would exit Whitehorse Street, buy their cigarettes from the two local shops nearby before going off in all directions.

It all began in 1846 when Thomas Miller moved into the town from Wells and opened a grocer's shop in Exchange Street (Now Lower Market). He was also a printer and must have had some wealth because he had a live-in servant as well as two live-in apprentices. In 1858 he bought some property in Norwich Street and traded in earthenware, glassware and stationery with printing.

In 1866 Miller sold the Sun Inn which he had bought earlier and built a dedicated printing office beside it which he then rented to his son Thomas Jr, who could not expand his business in Wells. Thomas Jr then set himself up in business as T J Miller, Steam Printer, he called his works the Wharfedale Works after the type of press he was using. He began to take work from London Book Publishers and needed to expand his works which he did by building on the far side of the accommodation road which ran behind the buildings in Norwich Road. The two halves of his works were joined by a first-floor walkway across the road from Composing dept to Composing dept, tradition dictated that the Composing dept should be on the first floor over the press room.

The Wharfedale works was now too big to be run by a sole trader and so, in 1890, Miller Jr formed Miller, Son & Company with his father and two of his brothers. The major shareholder was Gt Yarmouth brewer Sir Edmund Lacon although he did not have a seat on the board.

Thomas Miller Sr died in 1908 and in that year the company found itself in trouble and called in the Administrator. A further expansion called, for some reason, the Warwick works required a new share issue which was seriously under-subscribed leaving the company out of pocket. However, waiting in the wings was a company who had been interested in the Wharfedale works for sometime. Wyman and Sons were stationers with a printer in Reading supplying the Great Western Railway. They could see Fakenham helping out with this work as well as printing books (via publishers) for their station bookstalls. Wymans formed a new company with the same name but with no Millers involved. Thomas and his two sons eventually left town. His brother had inherited the earthenware shop and stayed in Fakenham. Wymans continued the expansion of the Warwick Works then, in November 1914 a fire destroyed 20 Wharfedales in the old part of the works. The walkway had to be taken down to prevent the already fire-damaged Norwich Street catching fire again (Jos Baker's shop had been

burned down two years earlier). After a while production resumed using the now empty British School in Norwich Road and Gresham Hall in Whitehorse Street, a former chapel which would soon be the home of the Lancaster Press. Wymans continued building the Warwick Works, introducing new machinery and eventually getting the contract to produce first editions of Penguin and William books.

In 1926 Miller, Son & Co Ltd were wound up and the imprint on books soon became Wyman & Sons, London, Fakenham & Reading. The second World War brought the problems of shortages of staff and paper but the winters post war were also problematic. During this time the factory installed electricity, making the dangerous and inconvenient belts redundant.

By 1957 the board became aware of a predator buying up shares for a hostile takeover. The Eagle Star Insurance Company bought this company out resulting in two Eagle Star directors joining the Wyman's board. This injected some money to build on the East side of Whitehorse Street. Originally this was to be a Composing Room but instead it became the Bindery, freeing up space in the old complex for future development. In 1959 J Menzies made a bid for the company with the proviso that they could buy back the printers, of which there were now three, which they did renaming them with the ancient name of Cox & Wyman. The first thing the new company had to deal with was a 10 week printers strike. Ten years later there was yet another bid for the company this time from Thomas Tilling.

Tillings had many interests in publishing and also a Lithographic printer in Crawley which they wished to incorporate with Fakenham. To do this they built what was then the largest Litho Hall in Europe complete with plate room, filmsetting room and offices. Before long it was joined by a more utilitarian-built Bindery. This left the Eagle Star building free for the remnants of the letterpress printing. The 1970s were not a good time for UK printers, facing competition from Europe and the Far East. Europe could produce books at a cost nearly equal to the cost that UK printers could buy their paper. Redundancies were made but they were not enough. Tillings had no influence on who publishers chose to print their books and so wanted out of Fakenham as soon as they could. They renamed Fakenham works 'The Fakenham Press' and sold it to rivals the Clay Group who owned a factory in Bungay, Suffolk.

There were problems because the customers, products and systems were different to Bungay which they wanted to integrate, and anyway the Group were wanting to open a plant in the Far East. A consortium of staff, Trade Unions and banks made an offer to buy Fakenham but minds were made up.

So the long process of winding up and piecemeal redundancies began until October 1982 when it closed. The Wharfedale Works was demolished to make way for car parks

and shops. The Litho Hall became a chocolate factory and the bindery became a furnishing store that could trace its origins back to the time of Miller, Son & Co. The bomb site where Wyman's Offices once stood continues to be a problem for the local council who would like to see something done with it.

One could speculate that if the works were still going today in the digital age it would probably produce as many books with 50 staff as it used to with hundreds!

For more details see 'A GOOD IMPRESSION' by Mark & Jim Baldwin and also a display in the Fakenham Museum of Gas and Local History.