



SKEGNESS
SPRINGS
LIMITED

The history

A family history of spring manufacture





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Researched and Written by Peter Johnson

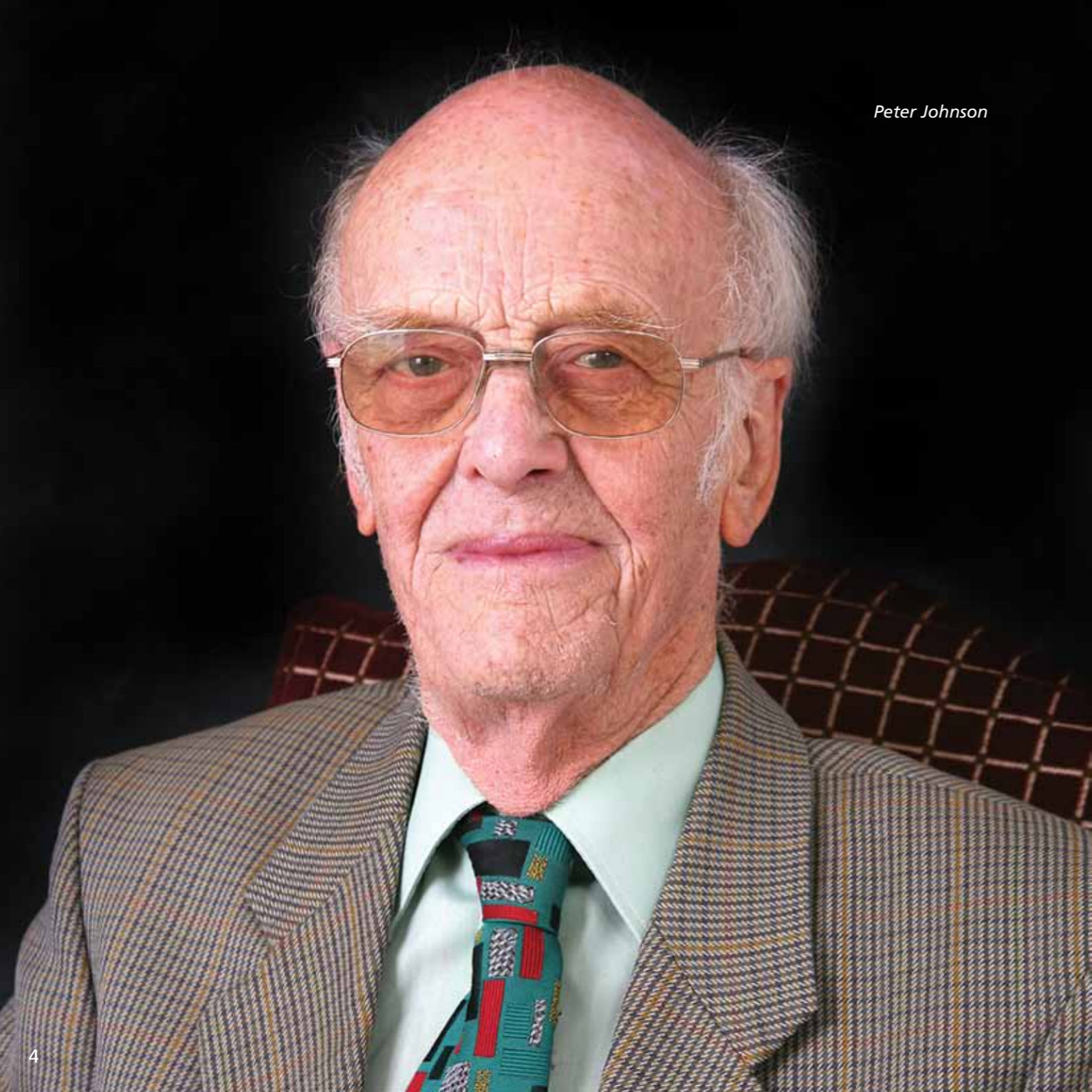
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Peter Johnson

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David Johnson

Foreword

What a delight it has been to read *The History*. I have watched the book evolve over the past year or so from a pamphlet of a few pages into this polished publication.

We are all indebted to my father Peter for his tireless work typing up his memories that go back to the early days of the business right through to the current day; without him none of this would have happened. We are also grateful to Rosemary for her work arranging Dad's various notes and jottings into a more readable format and to Darren for his help with the design and layout of the book. Thanks must also go to Russell for co-ordinating the whole project and pulling everything together into one cohesive book.

Even though I have been involved with the family business for many years I have found the book a fascinating read and I have discovered many gems of information and a few surprises within its covers. I do think it is important that books such as this are written, which chronicle the development of a business, so that the information is there for posterity. It is all too easy for memories to fade over time and this book is a marvellous permanent record of the family business through both the good and the not so good times.

I hope you enjoy reading this book and find it as captivating as I did.

David

David Johnson
April 2010

The early beginnings

The inception of the family firm of spring manufacturers happened almost by chance shortly after the First World War when my father and my mother's brother, Clem, fell upon the design of a variable carburettor jet for motor cycles.

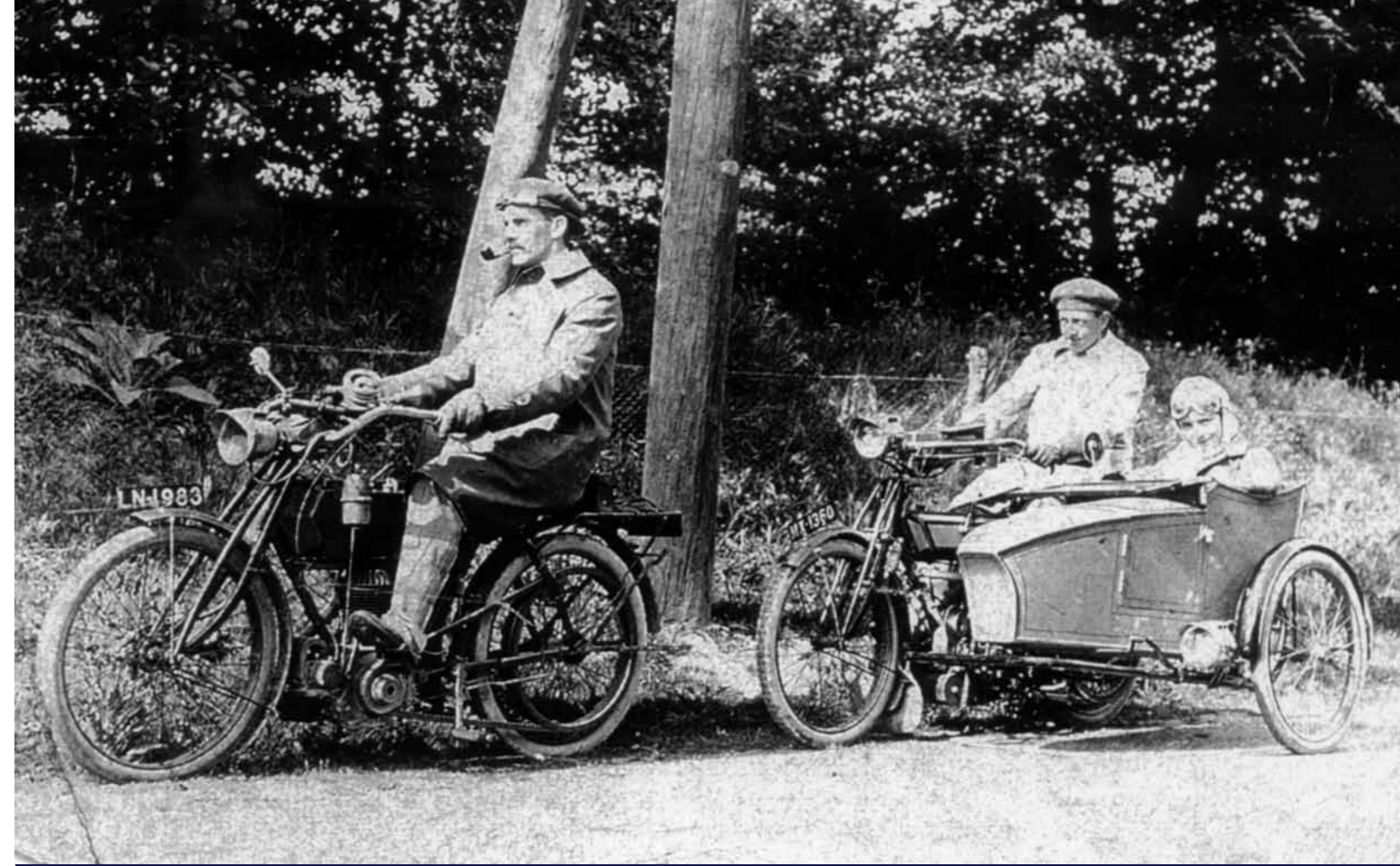
It all began before 1914 when the younger members of the Johnson family and my mother's family, the Pocklingtons, would ride out on their bicycles into the Hertfordshire countryside from Lancaster Road, near Finsbury Park. At the outbreak of war my father was enlisted into the Middlesex regiment which was due to serve in India. This brought forward the wedding plans of my parents, Luther Josiah Johnson and Florence Pocklington and they were married on 24 October 1914. My father then spent the next five years of his life serving in India.

After the war, the outings into the countryside resumed but the bicycles were replaced by a Scott two stroke and Humber motor cycle combination. This meant they were able to travel further afield and brought into reach Cosham, near Portsmouth where my mother's brother Stanley Pocklington ran a vegetable nursery. It was on one such jaunt that my father's motor cycle engine started to falter and he was helped by his brother-in-law, Clem Pocklington.

The problem was identified as a blocked carburettor jet. Fortunately Clem had a spare jet in his emergency kit which he carried with him. The replacement not only solved the problem, it considerably enhanced the performance of the motor cycle but unfortunately had an adverse effect on the fuel consumption. Petrol engines had a very limited performance in those days, therefore, any improvement was welcome and forced my father and Clem to evaluate the situation.



The Johnson and the Pocklington families enjoying the peaceful pre-war countryside. Shown are Dorothy Pocklington, Stanley Pocklington, Clem Pocklington, my father (with arm raised) and unknown others. My mother took the photograph.



Douglas motor cycles expressed an interest as their twin cylinder north-south mounted engines suffered from uneven cooling which adversely affected performance. The variable jet corrected this imbalance. Consequently Douglas motor cycles broke existing speed records using this modified carburettor.

Hence the following weekend was spent designing a carburettor modification to increase power but without too much detriment to the petrol consumption. After a few days of intensive work the mechanical ability of my father, along with the manufacturing skills of my uncle, resulted in a basic design.

Clem Pocklington on his Scott two stroke followed by my parents on their Humber motor cycle combination.

This used the principle of a sliding taper needle in a jet, which enabled a variation of mixture and improved carburation. They worked to improve the design until a marketable product was achieved.

At that time my father was a black and white trade artist. Whilst serving in India during the First World War, he had supplemented the meagre pay with the sale of his watercolours and in fact a handbook of his work still exists today. I know little of this phase of his life before he went into engineering but I understand he sketched catalogue insertions.

My mother may have had some influence on this as she worked for a Mr 'Dicky' Perry who was in advertising. The link with Dicky Perry continued for many years and in fact the company's calendars after the Second World War, which were based on Dickensian characters, were his suggestion.

Orders for the variable jet started to increase and with it the work load. My father was forced to consider his future career and fortunately for his offspring decided on engineering for which he appeared to have a natural gift. Consequently he joined the small bespoke partnership of Sutton and Pocklington (the Pocklington being Clem) in the basement of 111 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1.



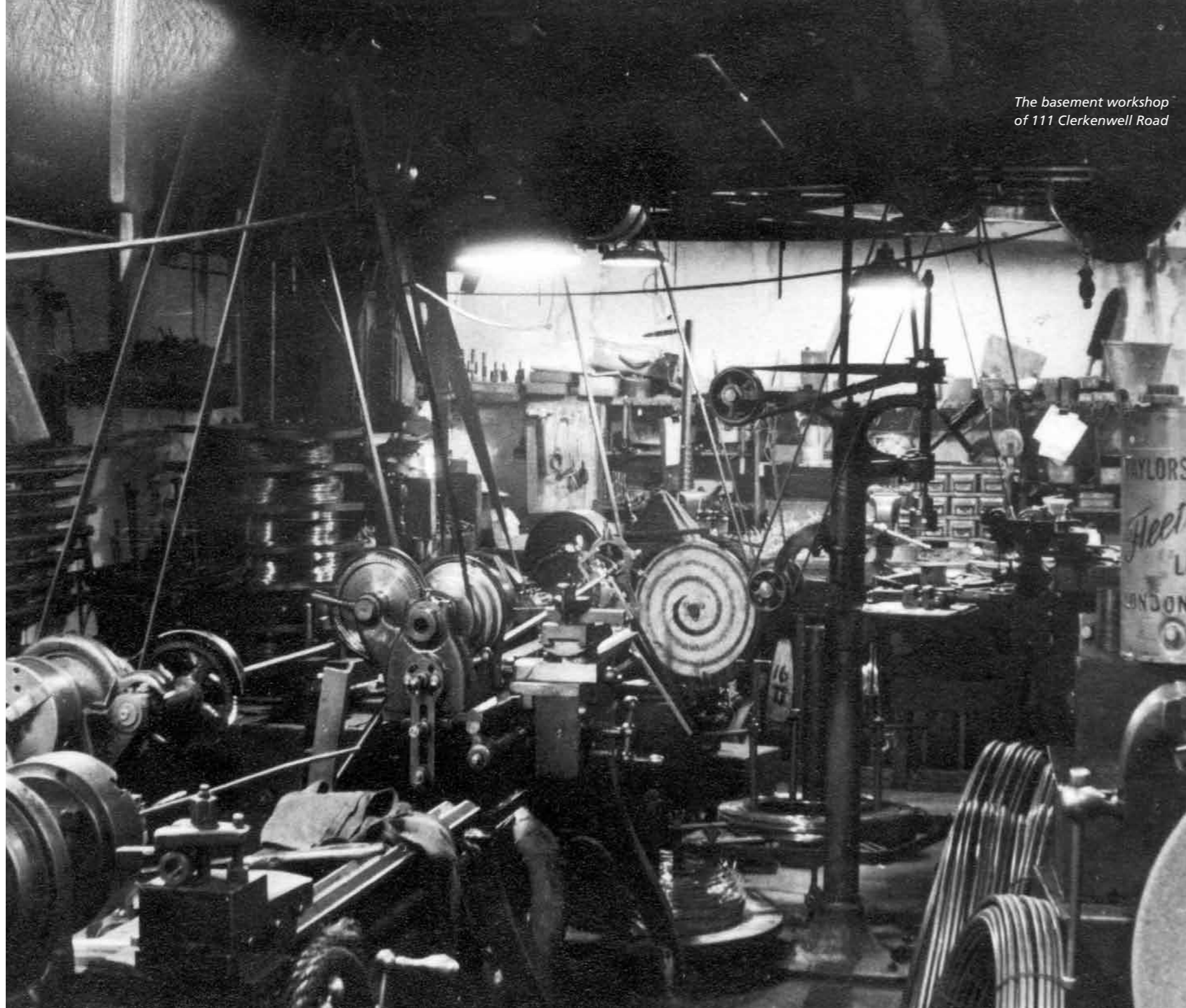
Clem Pocklington

111 Clerkenwell Road

The company's previous engineering work had included vehicle spares for the Duke of Bedford and armature winding, a technique at which Clem was very adept, so much so that his times were used to set piece-work rates in the area. However, when my father joined there was a down turn in the economy and the business was running on a shoe string. My mother was convinced that the development of the carburettor had saved the firm from collapse and urged my father to ask for a partnership. He was somewhat diffident about this but was eventually persuaded. His request was initially met with reluctance but this was overcome and the business became Sutton, Pocklington and Johnson.

After enlargement of the shop the windows were filled with various examples of past work





*The basement workshop
of 111 Clerkenwell Road*

In 1927, aware of the changing nature of the business and of his own advancing years, Mr Sutton decided to retire and the firm became known as Pocklington and Johnson. However, this brought about the need to find assistance with the book keeping and accounts, a problem which was resolved when my mother's sister, Dorothy Pocklington agreed to take on the responsibility.

Carburettor sales flourished for a while and customers included the naturalist, Sir Peter Scott who purchased parts for his Austin 7. Unfortunately though, sales declined as competitors' designs were constantly improving, reducing the performance advantage we previously held. In order to redress the situation it was decided to take on general light engineering and development work.

One of the first enquiries was from a Major Eden, who wanted to develop a mechanism which would be able to check whether the petrol put into the car's fuel tank was not subsequently siphoned out by its chauffeur. The concept was based on containers linked to a trip which operated a counter. Unfortunately the idea was not successful as the vehicle's movement whilst travelling affected the trip and gave a false reading. However, the Major was convinced that the principle of the idea was practical and suggested the use of extension springs to dampen the reaction. Fortunately a range of extension springs was available from Terry Springs who were situated across the road but the use of these springs did not resolve the problem and the project was shelved.

The depression of the thirties continued to hit many businesses and one such casualty was the owner of the ground floor shop above the basement of 111 Clerkenwell Road. His business suffered to such an extent that he committed suicide by placing a twelve bore cartridge in the chuck of a lathe with the percussion head outwards, fitting a centre in the tailstock and placing his head at the lathe end bringing the centre to fire the cartridge. A sad and messy affair. The empty shop caused the dilemma as to whether or not to expand to the ground floor which had



L.J.J. walks to work from Kings Cross

Before the factory in WGC opened my father used to travel daily to King's Cross and then walk to Clerkenwell Road. On one occasion, when he was looking exceptionally smart and with a new briefcase, a cheeky young lad asked "have you brought your sandwiches mate?". This caused amusement as in fact he had!

a reasonably sized front window. Fortunately the decision was made to enlarge and the shop window was soon filled with various examples of past work including a number of the springs used in the Major Eden project.

After a few days, a passing customer bought two of these extension springs. A further four were ordered, necessitating a clandestine visit across the road to Terry Springs. However, when a larger amount was ordered, it was decided to take a different approach and the customer was asked to call back. Great activity followed. A wire source was located and after trials a suitable size drill was found to give approximately the correct diameter. The springs were then 'strawed off' in a gas jet to enhance the colour. The benefit of this tempering process was not realized at the time.

Clem Pocklington had been suffering with illness for a while. Eventually he was diagnosed as being diabetic. For some unknown reason he didn't take the new insulin treatment which, although in the early stages of development, was available. Sadly, nature took its course and tragically in 1928 the small family business lost a key partner and joint founder.

Clerkenwell Road was well known as a source for a wide range of products and may have been the reason for the steady increase in sales. The time had come to improve the manufacturing tools especially with regard to winding on a mandrel. My father had a unique gift of being able to make quite complex tooling out of an assortment of odds and ends. With this talent he set about the problem, resulting in a hand tool that was not only able to control the wire accurately but could space one coil from another as with a compression spring or close wound as with an extension spring. The chuck of a lathe held the winding rod and compression springs were wound 'sausage' fashion before being cut up into individual springs. This development made a definite improvement in both accuracy and speed and improved our competitive edge.

Shortly after this advancement the business received a tremendous boost when a Mr Crack from Kodak of Harrow Wealdstone visited the shop. The purpose of his visit was to find a potential supplier for a camera shutter spring.



Staff sitting on steps at the rear of Clerkenwell Road.

It should be noted that Mr Crack himself had a certain aptitude for business. He started work at Kodak cleaning clinkers from coal fired boilers but towards the end of his career was one of the team sent to South Africa to set up a film processing plant.

He must have been impressed with the Clerkenwell Road works as an enquiry was placed for the enormous quantity of one thousand gross (144,000). A huge challenge! The development of automatic torsion spring making machines was in its infancy at this time and probably explains why a quotation based entirely on hand work was successful. However, this was a huge step forward towards the future development of the company. Orders from Kodak, covering an ever widening range, expanded over the years until the mid-fifties when they formed their own spring making department.

A quantity order of this magnitude was a first and such a massive boost to the business that the production requires a brief description.

The winding tool comprised of a coiling mandrel which was rotated by a small gear, the other end of which meshed with a typewriter rack. The wire was fed through a guide which also acted as a cutter after coiling. The second stage of the manufacture involved the wire U shapes at the end of the legs, followed by clipping. The shutter springs were very prone to tangling as the open ended loops on the leg ends had a tendency to lock together and once engaged were almost impossible to free without distorting the spring. The problem was minimized by layering the finished springs between paper in flat wooden trays approximately 10" x 18" (250mm x 450mm). When filled the boxes were sealed, transported to Kodak and then returned empty for refilling.

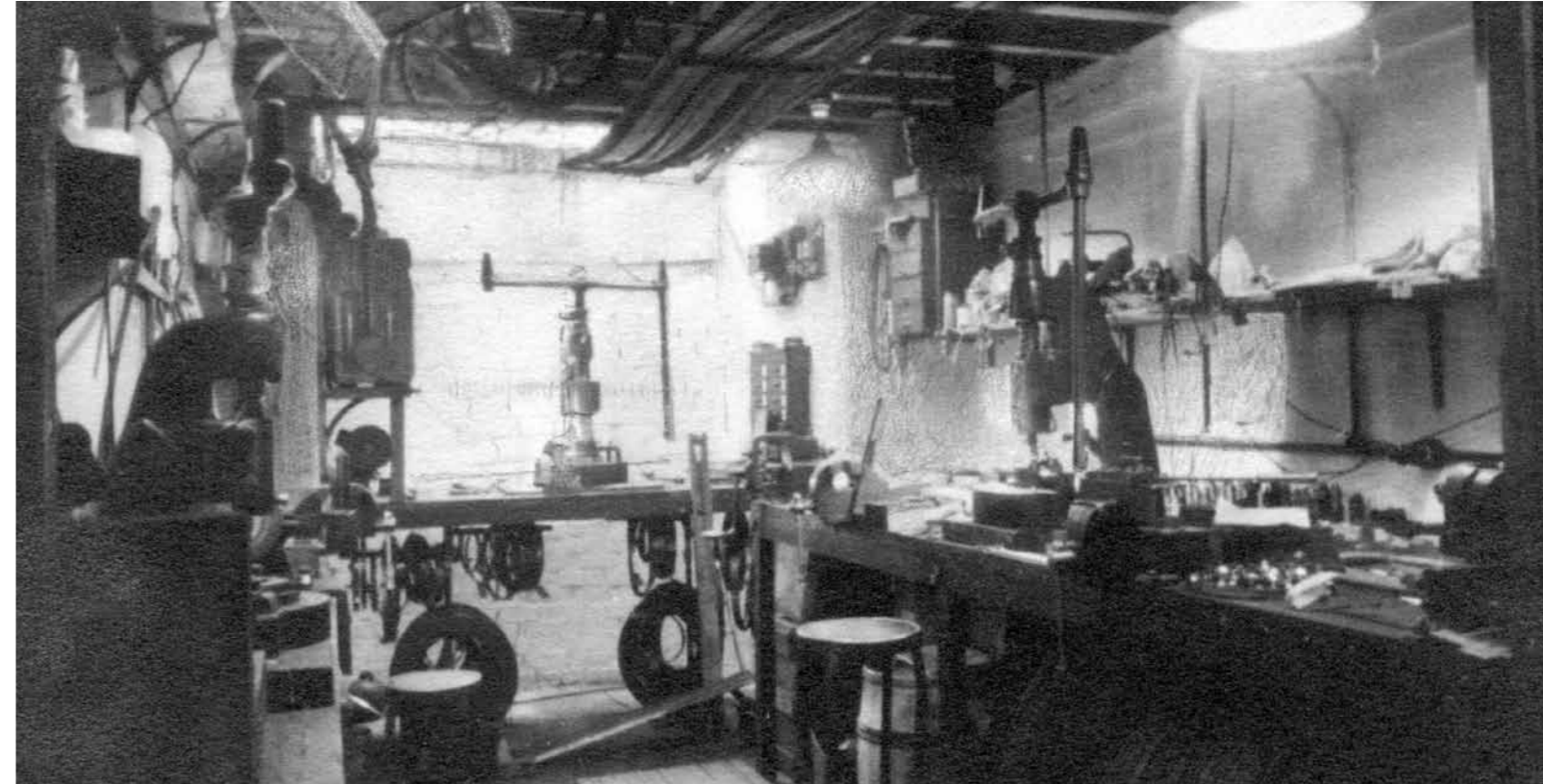
On one occasion we were contacted by a very stressed employee from Kodak, who asked for someone to visit the company as a severe production problem existed. Upon arrival we were led to the stores department. There must have been a change of store man, who instead of stacking the boxes had emptied them into one of their stock bins. There were thousands of springs and it would have been quite impossible to untangle them and they had to be scrapped. We were delighted to replace them!

Remarkably orders for this design continued until about 1945. In fact one of my first jobs on joining the company was remaking worn parts for the hand tools. My uncle Perce (Percy Faraday Johnson) had been apprenticed in sail (square riggers) which included the duty of setting the sails on the yard arms, quite a hazardous task. During the First World War he served in the Dardanelles, for which he received special commendation. He was particularly adept at semaphore, a skill he never forgot, and when seeing a relative while out walking would often greet them in semaphore. After the war he was in merchant shipping where he obtained his indentures. He joined Court Line Shipping on the Cedrington and later he moved up to become the Chief Officer of the cable laying ship named the Faraday.

Unfortunately the general depression of the late 1920s and 1930s resulted in his being laid off. However, after only a short period out of work he joined Pocklington and Johnson. He was a firm but fair disciplinarian, possibly due to his service at sea. It's interesting to note how characteristics are often carried forward – my younger son, Ian might be a current version of uncle Perce.

Our first enquiry for a large quantity of wire forming was for Dunlop dartboards. They required wire in the shape of a wide U about six inches across with short legs which were pushed into the board and ran from the bull's eye outward to form the number divisions. The wire was triangular to minimise the problem of 'bounce off' sometimes experienced with round wire. Unfortunately, little is known of the date or train of events of this manufacture. However, a new Heenan and Froude four slide machine was purchased so finances must have been reasonable as it would not have been cheap. The machine was sited in the basement of 109. Frank Vacani,

Percy Faraday Johnson c. 1950



*The flat strip shop basement
of 109 Clerkenwell Road*

one of the three Vacani brothers, who had had tooling experience with a watch manufacturer was given the responsibility of tooling and running the machine. One of my earliest memories of the London premises is of a visit with my father to see the machine running. I remember well the finished product falling on to a wide driven belt made of deckchair canvas and deposited into an area where it was collected and packed. All common place now but very advanced then. Orders continued for a long period of time until a change of fashion or competition brought orders to a close. This machine had the capability of producing a wide range of products which was extended further with the purchase of more sophisticated strip and wire forming machines from Bihler.

Welwyn Garden City

The move to Welwyn Garden City and my schooldays

My earliest recollections of this life are of looking out of a window, awaiting the arrival of an ambulance to take me from our home to Stroud Green hospital. I had been suffering from a chronic ear infection which turned into double mastoids. I was two and a half at the time but still have vivid memories of the occasion and to this day detest the smell of chloroform.

The illness led to thoughts of moving to a healthier environment than 56 Lancaster Road. Bertie Stevens, who was in shop sales at 111 Clerkenwell Road, happened to remark that the new town of Welwyn Garden City, about twenty miles north of London was under development. He offered a ride in his Jowett to visit the area – an ideal location where town meets country. AJ Howard the local estate agent had a wide range of new houses available and after careful review my parents chose a semi-detached property in Holwell Road. It was the last but one house before open fields and was of concrete slab construction, bricks being in short supply at that time.

The benefits of the new environment were soon realized. However, a short while later, when waiting for a bus at the tender age of five, I enquired "where's the bloody bus?". This incident led to my parents considering a move to the west side of town where a detached house at 31 Elmwood was purchased.

Living in Welwyn Garden City was a great improvement for our home life although my father still had the daily journey into London. Orders continued to grow at 111 Clerkenwell Road and although by this time the works had expanded into the basements of 107 and 109, more space was needed. The new town rightfully claimed to be a merger of town and country. Residential and industrial development was creating much interest during the mid 1930s. My father realized that the benefits resulting from a carefully planned residential layout would also apply to the industrial scene and decided to take advantage of the situation. One such



One of my recollections of living at 31 Elmwood was when the airship R101 flew overhead. My father made the remark that he wished he was onboard. Fortunately for him he wasn't as it crashed in France the following day, 5 October 1930, on its maiden voyage to India, killing forty eight of the fifty four passengers and crew.

industrial area under development was Bridge Road East. This was seen as an opportunity not to be missed and in 1936, after due thought and consideration a twenty one year lease was negotiated for premises at number 74.

The contrasts of living and working in London and Hertfordshire were huge and therefore it took little persuasion for personnel to make the transfer. The production team at Bridge Road East comprised of Fred Butcher, Jimmy Carman, Eric McKercher, Steve Myers and the Vacani brothers Frank, Reg and Ted. Jessie Ovel was responsible for the clerical duties and my aunt, Dorothy Pocklington, for administration and accounts. Uncle Perce still lived in Southend which necessitated a daily journey of epic proportions to Welwyn Garden City. However, he persevered for several years before moving to 108 Attimore Road, Welwyn Garden City.



My father in the lounge of our home at 29 Elmwood, Welwyn Garden City



Sarah Johnson (left; my father's mother), my father, I'm sat on my mother's knee, and Dorothy Pocklington (right) c. 1932

The works and shop at Clerkenwell Road continued with production under Fred Trussen, Dora Colvin in the office and Bertie Stevens in sales in the top shop until his retirement when Fred Butcher took his place. After only a year of living at 31 Elmwood we had moved next door to 29 and my aunts, Dorothy and Cissie, had moved into 31.

Business flourished with these new beginnings and it soon became evident that more expansion was necessary. Fortunately the property next door at Bridge Road East became vacant and the opportunity to lease number 72 was taken. My father's love of art had continued and he became involved with theatre groups, who prevailed upon him for stage scenery. Heating at 72/74 Bridge Road East was by hot water running through large bore pipes about four metres above floor level. These proved to be an ideal hanging location for a range of theatre scenery much to the surprise of some customers.

My mother went to the Royal Orphanage of Wolverhampton where, in addition to normal studies, she learnt to play the piano. Her playing must have been quite good because when their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of York (later to become King George and Queen Mary) visited the school she was selected to play in front of them. I gather it was quite a daunting experience! As a child, when of course there was no such thing as television, I have recollections of our own in-house entertainment – my mother playing the piano, father playing the violin and me trying to sing.

Meanwhile I had started school at The Grange, a small private school in Old Welwyn. My parents must have thought that a little independence away from home was required and so began my first experience as a boarder. The headmaster was fair although quite strict and held the view that sparing the rod spoiled the child and if concentration lapsed during lessons a chalk was hurled at bullet speed towards the offender.

The headmaster's wife, Mrs Miller had been matron at the sanatorium of Lancing College near Brighton, which probably explains the choice of my next school. The contrast was extreme and twofold – the Grange was a small preparatory school of about thirty pupils in the village of Old Welwyn whereas Lancing College was a successful public school of about two hundred pupils. I left the Grange top dog but joined Lancing as the lowest mortal!

As the risk associated with the war became more pronounced Lancing College was evacuated to the rural area of Shropshire and housed in stately homes near Ludlow. I was in the school house of Seconds which was located at Caynham Court. Lessons were at Moor Park about five miles away, necessitating a daily cycle of around ten miles. This was sometimes doubled if there was an afternoon session at Moor Park and a total of about 400 miles was covered on this journey throughout a term. This in itself was quite special as at the College we had only been allowed outside the boundaries on Saints Days! The weather was no excuse for absence, however, the luxury of a Saturday afternoon visit to Ludlow and tea at 'de Grays' was a bonus. My time at Lancing College must have made me fit as at the end of my last term I cycled home to 29 Elmwood setting off at 5 a.m. and arriving in Welwyn Garden City at 9 p.m. I covered the 140 miles in one stint on my 5 guinea Raleigh bicycle with a suitcase strapped on the back. This was all spoiled when my calling up papers arrived during my first weekend home.

Wartime

Gathering war clouds had brought about a dramatic escalation of orders and with the ever increasing need for space, my father entered negotiation with the authorities and helped by the wartime priority of essential war time manufacture this led to sharing half the production area of Wilkinson Paints in nearby Tewin Road. My father saw the potential fire risk of the adjoining paint factory and had a dividing wall built between the two premises.

At about this time Mr Lustig joined the company in order to keep pace with the ever increasing demands of administration. Unfortunately, for reasons not apparent, this was a short lived appointment and he left for the USA after about a year.

The increase in orders brought about the need for a different line of approach to meet the manpower shortage caused by the war. Our production was classified as essential war work and employees were protected from call up into the services but still there was a general lack of labour and skills. In order to overcome this limiting situation, it was decided to investigate the possibility of starting an outworking factory in a nearby rural area for hand finishing.

Below left: The Bugden's home. Our production was in the left-hand room.

Below right: The outworking team in the garden of our premises at Bucknalls Drive. Remembered names: back row left Mrs Rose, P.J., Mrs Tilley. Extreme right Mrs L. Honeywood (manager).



After talks with the Ministry, the use of the Church Hall in the village of Kimpton, about eight miles away was arranged and a staff of ten local ladies employed. Initially this caused an adverse reaction from a section of the community who found that some of their domestic helps were no longer available.

The unit was managed by Bob Ansell who had previously worked at Welwyn Garden City and lived in the nearby village of Gustard Wood. My mother visited twice a week for delivery and collection. Our own vehicles were used at the time and came under stringent scrutiny to ensure their use was limited to essential travelling, which had to be proved. It was therefore necessary to plead the case to the area Government Issuing Officer for fuel coupons. The company's allowance was very reasonable. This could have been due to a quick response from my father when asked by the official examining the application if he was aware of a petrol shortage, to which he replied no, not when he could buy what he wanted on the black market. The official responded that he would like to know the source and my father reacted by saying 'I expect you would!' Subsequently the application was fully approved. After the war and the end of rationing, it was learnt that the person behind the racket was the official himself. A tricycle was also purchased, carrying the firm's name. It was used to transport items between Bridge Road East and Tewin Road. However, after a while to be seen riding this mode of transport was not quite the thing and its use was discontinued.

The Kimpton venture proved very worthwhile and prompted a second similar extension at Bricket Wood near Watford, about fifteen miles from Welwyn Garden City. This was on a smaller scale in a private house owned by the Bugdens. Their sitting-room was soon fitted out with benches, vices and basic production items. In this residential area, manufacturing and supervisory experience did not exist, however, it was soon realized that one of our employees, Mrs L Honeywood, appeared well suited to take on the responsibility to which she agreed. From these early beginnings she continued working for the company

for twenty-five years, although production moved to more suitable premises in Lye Lane and eventually to a larger wooden building in Bucknalls Drive. (I last saw these premises in 2004 and they still looked very much the same.)

Outworking production, the deprivations brought about through the war and perhaps some 'British Spirit' meant that special celebrations were highlighted. Christmas at Bricket Wood was such an example. Shortly before the holiday, the benches were stripped of vices and all items connected with production. Tables were draped with cloths and decorations adorned the interior. Arrangements were usually made for Mrs Stockley's oven to be transported to the premises for cooking either a large chicken or turkey and sometimes Lawrence's the local family baker helped. Everyone was involved with preparations of some kind. Of course there were no drink driving laws then and I still remember the taste of Mrs Honeywood's brandy butter and the very special atmosphere which existed.

The Church Hall Kimpton premises; my mother left, Manager Bob Ansell center.



Throughout the war goggle springs were in high demand. We filled 5 gallon drums (22.75 litres) at a time with them. Production was by American Sleeper and Hartley coiling machines driven from a main shaft, powered by a large electric motor. The B type end loops were a purely hand operation, which was acquired with practice. As quantities increased some of the looping was put out to homework. Government quality inspectors paid regular visits to check production. They were usually well looked after with a meal at the Clock Restaurant in Old Welwyn. Upon returning it was not uncommon for the inspector to run his hand through a batch with the comment 'they feel alright to me.' Our inspection had ensured that this was the case but of no credit to officialdom. Another Ministry order was for use in torpedoes, ensuring a straight course after launch. The spring was a slightly open wound extension with end loops. These were checked on a torsion balance



Staff gather for a photo outside 74 Bridge Road East, early 1940

supplied by our customer and Jimmy Carmen was responsible for manufacturing and checking. I wonder what devastation and suffering was caused by this instrument of war.

After the war the Kimpton premises closed and the Church Hall returned to its original purpose. This small unit had fulfilled a vital function and provided purposeful employment in a rural area. It would have been interesting to know how many returned to domestic service after the war had brought about such major social change.

Sales continued to grow and consequently a tendency for larger quantities. To meet this change, homework was introduced at Welwyn Garden City, which allowed selected types of hand work



to be done in the home. Payment was based on piece work at agreed rates and allowed the individual the convenience of flexible hours and for the company the flexibility to vary output dependent upon demand.

Unfortunately, Dorothy Pocklington had suffered from the crippling disease, rheumatoid arthritis, for some time and this resulted in her active role in the company diminishing. The balance was partly redressed when Dora Colvin and Jessie Hovel, both of whom worked at the Clerkenwell Road office, agreed to take on the task of book-keeping and transferred to Welwyn Garden City. It should be stated here that Dorothy Pocklington had a passion for horse-racing and from the general impression was reasonable successful. Hopefully the excitement gave a welcome diversion as her painful condition progressed.

In 1941 my father's fears were realized when a production disaster occurred in the rear half of the Tewin Road premises. An employee of the paint factory was mixing paint in a barrel whilst smoking. His cigarette accidentally dropped into the paint mix which immediately caught fire, growing in intensity and finally causing an explosion which blew off the roof. My father heard the explosion at Bridge Road about half a mile away and from there was able to see a sheet of flame consuming the front half of the factory.

His wisdom of a dividing wall was now proved as only limited damage was caused to our half of the premises compared with the total destruction of the paint area. The fire confirmed the real risk involved with sharing space, especially with regard to the highly productive area. Had the fire extended beyond the wall it would have resulted in total disaster. The extent of the damage meant that the premises were no longer useable and necessitated a search

for alternative premises. Fortunately in 1947, ideal premises became available about three hundred yards away at 32 Tewin Road and negotiations were brought about to lease them as soon as possible.

As soon as the formalities had been completed my father decided to move the flat strip department into the larger area now available at Tewin Road. Under the management of Eric McKercher, this section had developed considerably and now required more space. Although only about half a mile away some of the machinery such as the Heenan and Froude four slides were heavy and required being moved by specialists. Careful forward planning ensured that the move by Henry Butcher was implemented without delay and so reduced production down time to a minimum.

My own wartime experiences started in the RAF with 'square bashing' at Cardington, followed by an engineering course at Cosford, before being posted to Montrose in Fife. After about a year I was transferred to the Fleet Air Arm and stationed at Donibristol on the north side of the Forth prior to transfer to the war in the Far East. However, the end of the conflict nullified any envisaged plans and I was demobilized without ever leaving the UK shores although life in the Services certainly broadened my mind.

Mac surveys the Wilkinson half of the Tewin Road premises, our half on the far side of the wall was only slightly damaged.



Dorothy Pocklington



The rheumatoid arthritis of Dorothy Pocklington continued to increase in severity to the extent that she needed help in everything she did and was even unable to wash unaided. My aunt 'Cissie' (Edith Johnson), had been a devoted housekeeper to a Mr Henderson of 5 Elmwood for several years, therefore, it was almost assumed that she would take over the caring role for her sister-in-law, Dorothy, along the road at 31 Elmwood.

During a routine bed bath it was noticed that Dorothy was ill at ease to the extent of her admitting that she had been a 'naughty girl' (her actual words). Unfortunately the door bell rang at that precise moment and the subject was not continued. Sadly she passed away a few months later on 22 March 1948. One wonders what chain of events would have occurred had the caller not interrupted the conversation.

After her death it became apparent that inconsistencies existed with the company's accounts of which she'd been in charge during her working life. Unfortunately there was no longer anyone in the company with sufficient financial understanding to advise on the problem and a very difficult situation existed. An intensive search followed to find a suitable candidate to take over this role. We were not overwhelmed with applicants but one response from a Mr Charles Salmon looked promising. He came along for an interview, which went well and he was subsequently engaged.

Shortly after he was taken on, my father invited him to our home at 59 West Common, Harpenden for a special meeting where the true nature of the problem was revealed. The choice was simple yet onerous: inform the tax authorities of the situation or attempt to cover up the problem.

As a newcomer to the firm it must have been very daunting for Mr Salmon to enter into such a discussion so soon after joining the company and further complicated by the fact that my father felt quite

strongly against handing over even more money to the tax authorities whom he considered had availed themselves quite sufficiently over the past years. However, after what must have been much stressful heart searching it was decided to take the second option. It's interesting to ponder the outcome if the former option had been taken. It might appear rather strange that my father was prepared to even suggest disguising the financial inconsistencies but although he was particularly gifted in the practical side of engineering and design, his talents did not extend to an understanding of accountancy. As far as he was concerned as long as the company was doing well that was 'just fine'.

Details of my aunt's estate had been forwarded to the authorities earlier, however, routine checking brought to light an inconsistency regarding some horse race betting slips. The further the problem was investigated the more murky the situation became as it was evident that the 'winnings' were false and had been obtained by defrauding the inland revenue for several years. The situation was serious enough to lead to court proceedings.

It was rather ironic that the person in charge of the case on behalf of the Inland Revenue was a Mr J Chear who had been a near neighbour in Elmwood for many years. His hobby of wild life photography was well known but his professional role was not. In the absence of Dorothy Pocklington, legal responsibility for the financial irregularities now fell on the shoulders of my father. Fortunately a family friend and solicitor Mr RF Lambert of Russell Jones Solicitors kindly agreed to represent my father in the court proceedings which followed. The situation was ominous with the possibility of both a substantial fine and imprisonment.

Meetings took place over the coming days. A particular difficulty in the minds of the court was that the person before them had only a basic understanding of accountancy and yet had built up a company of significance. At meetings there was often the need to refer to the

accounts. When this happened his lack of understanding was very evident and accepted by the court as genuine, which resulted in a rather more relaxed attitude although of course the offence still stood.

Notification to attend the concluding meeting was duly advised when the final assessment and penalty would be made known. The meeting was also attended by Mr (Reg) Lambert whose expertise and legal knowledge were invaluable. My father's lack of financial understanding must have been recognised as fortunately there was no custodial sentence, however, the financial penalty was assessed taking into account the traceable duration of the fraud which was believed to have been over a period of six years and used as a multiple to arrive at the final sum of £150,000. A considerable amount in 1950!

A condition was enforced for monthly visits by Barton Mayhew, whose financial reliability was accepted by the Inland Revenue, with the proviso of regular payment to clear the outstanding balance involved. In spite of realizing all our family investments, including properties at Rooks Hill in Welwyn Garden City, this still left an appreciable sum owing.

We soon adapted to the regular appearances of Mr DF Good from Barton Mayhew. Fortunately respective attitudes between him and the company were good and he later became known as DFG. His guidance helped the company through this extremely difficult period, for which full appreciation is due.

Towards the end of 1950 my father received a telephone call from a Mr Eric Fennimore, the head buyer for Martin-Baker Aircraft, specialists in the manufacture of ejector seats for service aircraft. They required a wide range of springs, including many 'R' type clips. We were able to satisfy the new customer and so began a good working relationship, particularly between my father and Eric Fennimore, to the extent that after about a year we were virtually their sole spring supplier.

The 1950s

The second part of this period saw growth in the number of new customers which reflected favourably in sales. Financial reserves were sufficient to provide the opportunity of investing in specialized automatic machinery purchased in Germany, Italy and UK, which enabled a wider range of work to meet the competitive edge.

Once again increased productivity meant shortage of space, especially as the new machinery enabled the company to cater for larger quantities. The first phase of expansion from 74 Bridge Road East took on number 72 and then we were fortunate enough to lease the recently vacated premises at number 76. Thus the block ran from 72 to 76, covering an area of about 10,000 ft² (930m²).

This was departmentalized as follows:

Number 72:

Hardening and tempering heavy coil springs and heavy Sleeper Hartley automatic coiling (up to 8.0 mm wire) and Almarco slitter.

Number 74:

Heavy hand coiling, automatic coiling and heat treatment.

Number 76:

Automatic forming, automatic coiling and hand work.

32 Tewin Road:

Flat strip production.

Home work continued to flourish and at times there were fifty home workers involved in the business.

Before the use of hot air, tempering was achieved by immersing the springs in a salt bath heated to between 200 and 400 degrees centigrade. This left a salt deposit on the springs as they cooled so the salt was dissolved in a hot water tank, however, some water residue remained which was removed by drying off in a gas oven and then oiled. The entire process was messy and time consuming apart from the corrosive risk.



Jimmy Carman cutting through a "sausage type" length of compression springs which would then become individual springs with ends virtually ground square.

During this period and using this process we were making a complex spring for Osram GEC street lighting. The fragile nature of this spring necessitated them being mounted on a steel tube before the heat treatment, after which they were transferred to a cardboard tube for dispatch. Whilst passing through the heat treatment I smelt burning paper and noticed a very puzzled employee who wondered where his one hundred and fifty springs had gone. He had tempered the cardboard mounted springs and subsequently learnt that cardboard does not take kindly to immersion in hot liquid salt. This oven still exists today at Hassall Road but as a storage cupboard.

Amongst my toys as a child I had a model artillery gun which was operated by a 'safe' spring. I thought the range could be improved by fitting a stronger spring but omitted to tell anyone. I returned to our Tewin Road premises one day to find my uncle showing the gun to a customer. He pulled the trigger, which fired the gun with such effect that the bullet ricocheted around the office! Fortunately, no one was hurt. Another experience was with a nail gun which we had purchased shortly after the war. This was to fasten fittings to brickwork and with a suitable charge even to steel girders. On one occasion when fitting a bracket to the wall at 70 Bridge Road East which adjoined the labour exchange, too powerful a charge was used which sent the heavy nail straight through the brickwork! Fortunately again no one was hurt but the gun wasn't used anymore.

Morphy Richards was a major customer and their toaster was a very successful model, well filled with springs. The ejector spring was made of stainless steel. At that time the best coating for automatic coiling was a film of lead which was subsequently removed by immersing in hydrochloric acid. It was a dirty operation and great care was required to prevent the heat generated by the chemical reaction in rising too high (chemical reaction doubles every 10 degrees centigrade that the solution is raised). On one particular occasion a proper check was not kept on the temperature as dense acrid smoke was seen pouring from the out building. The fire brigade was called and dealt with the problem, however, the mixture of water and acid in the yard was sufficiently strong to eat into the leather soles of the firemen's boots! A lesson was learnt and a new process was adopted.

In the early 1950s Sperry Gyroscope developed a ball bearing race for aircraft artificial horizons, with the particular requirement of working with minimum inertia. To resolve the problem Sperry based their reasoning on the theory that no two bearings were of exactly the same size, thus in operation one would always be catching or loosing on its neighbour, with the consequence of pressure on the ball race cage and resultant inertia. The theory extended to the thought that if small springs were fitted between the balls instead of a cage, the smaller balls would be eased by spring pressure to take up even spacing within the ball race and so



My father (far left) watches me at work at 74 Bridge Road East, early 1950s.

reduce binding and inertia. This may all seem hypothetical nonsense but strangely it worked.

Christmas celebrations had usually been of a limited scale, held in the respective premises at Bridge Road and Tewin Road. During the early 1950s this was expanded by the addition of a children's party held at the Community Centre and was usually organized by Mac. The programme included entertainment by Punch and Judy or a conjurer and there was a tea party. Funding was covered by the sale of left over production

material, most of the value of which came from non-ferrous flat strip. The party was usually held on a Saturday and involved quite a number of staff from the firm assisting. After about six years the party had grown to such an extent that it was out of balance with the original concept and therefore, it was decided to discontinue this rather special activity. A sad but necessary decision, however, everything changes with time.

We used to use an appreciable weight of copper strip for a spring for a switch gear company which was subsequently plated. On one occasion

thieves took the roof off our secure storage area and stole the stock waiting for plating! Our customer thought this a lame excuse and undertook to have the plating done by themselves, however, they were somewhat embarrassed when their platers experienced the same thing.

In 1954, orders for Vincent HRD increased to the extent that we were manufacturing most of their springs including the valve hair springs for their record breaking Black Shadow. It was therefore somewhat strange when Terry Springs subsequent advertisements referred to their springs in such a way as to imply that it was their own product which achieved this record. I cannot understand why this was not queried in any way and must remain shrouded in the mist of time.

The Suez Crisis, which resulted in the blockade of shipping through the Suez Canal, had an almost immediate effect on the country's oil supply. Power cuts were quite frequent and severely affected production as shafting for manufacture was driven by electric power. Steps were required to overcome the adverse reaction to the Sleeper Hartley automatic coiling machines, turning lathes and drills and in fact everything belt driven at Bridge Road East. Emergency action was needed and Reg Hurrell, the foreman of the maintenance department suggested using a car engine. An Amilcar engine was duly found which was fastened to a floor mounted frame and a pulley on the gearbox drove the shafting through a heavy leather belt. The engine ran, somewhat noisily in the confined space but it worked and we were back in business. Unfortunately, the engine cooling system was designed for a moving vehicle and inadequate for static use. The problem was solved by feeding cold water from the cold water tap into the radiator top and hot water from the base running into the gent's urinal. The improvisation worked and saved the day although it was rather 'Heath Robinson'. Fortunately the crisis did not last too long.

I was now playing a very active role in P & J and in 1954 when the firm became a limited company, I joined my father as a director. Doris Hammond was appointed company secretary in the following year and in 1959 we appointed two more directors, Reg Lambert as the company solicitor and Ted Vacani, who had been with the firm since its early beginnings.



Our wedding reception at Homestead Court, Welwyn Garden City, August 1955.

As my life evolved I met new friends and became involved in different social activities. Reg Lambert, kindly proposed me for membership into Round Table and I was fortunate enough to become a member. On a fundraising treasure hunt one or two of the competitors became hopelessly lost and it was left to me to find a particular Tabler and his niece. Eventually I found them miles off course, hacking away in the undergrowth. The following week at a Round Table social event the same Tabler, Bob Farnborough, was present again with his niece, Jill Horn. A happy chance which flourished and led to our marriage on 24 August 1955.

Moving On

My father was always favourably disposed towards new ideas. Therefore, when Mac (Eric McKercher) put forward the advantages of an improved hardening and tempering system, he was told to investigate the matter further. After due research this led to the installation of an advanced shaker hearth furnace, into which the flat strip components for hardening were fed through a curtain of flame into an inert atmosphere, passing through the heating area before falling into tempering oil. This enabled the hardened product to emerge as clean and bright as before the hardening process, and after tempering, resulted in the best potential performance and a first class finish.

Jimmy Carman left the company to form his own business in Hitchin some time during the 1960s. Jimmy enjoyed a beer and on one occasion when in a local pub he could not help but overhear a loud conversation from heavy drinkers at an adjoining table. They were talking of attacking someone, taking their keys and robbing some industrial premises. A date was also suggested. General interest changed to alarm when it was realized that the company was ours! Jim was a hard-working, genuine guy with a conscience and his next move was to phone us. The situation was serious enough to inform the police and an emergency meeting was called. It was decided to wait in the factory during the early hours of the morning of the suggested date in the hope of catching the offenders. When the night of the supposed robbery arrived we positioned ourselves out of sight in the factory and waited until dawn arrived. We left unrewarded but still felt very uneasy about the situation.

Sometime after this incident there was a shooting in Luton at which a man was killed. It was later learnt that one of the two men involved in our planned robbery had thought that his partner had grassed on him to the police and it was a revenge killing which fortunately for us eliminated any immediate risk of robbery.

The influence of the earlier income tax fraud continued. Regular Board meetings were attended by David Barton of Barton Mayhew Accountants,

who acted in an advisory capacity and were one of the few companies whose assessment was accepted as bona fide by the authorities. With an increase in orders it was necessary to bring someone into the company who had a wider business experience. George Porter was chosen from a batch of interviews due to his previous experience. It was not long before his suggested improvements were implemented with good effect although the time came when the comment 'if it works don't fix it' came to mind with increasing regularity and we parted company on good terms, with a little relief from Doris Hammond.

As well as customer visits to foster business relationships, enquiries were often better resolved by personal contact. It was on such an occasion that Jack Blight and I visited Morganite Resistors of the Bede Trading Estate in Jarrow. It was during an evening meal that I felt a compulsive desire to phone my father. The feeling was sufficiently strong enough for me to leave the table to phone home whereupon I learnt with shock and dismay that my father had just had a slight stroke. Fortunately it was only slight and a complete recovery followed. A year or two after this incident, when walking with my father from the office to the car, he suddenly collapsed. The doctor was called and he diagnosed a severe stroke and the chilling comment that he doubted he would pull through. However, determination and resilience won and a good breakfast was enjoyed the next morning.

About two years after his second stroke my father's involvement in the business began to diminish and the day to day running and responsibility fell on the capable shoulders of Doris Hammond (Company Secretary), Jack Blight (Wire Production Manager) who became a director in 1969, Ted Vacani (Company Director) and myself. I'm sure my father understood the situation but as founder of the family business it couldn't have been easy to accept.

On 17 October 1969, whilst I was painting the domestic fuel tank, I experienced another compulsive urge to phone my father, only to learn that he had just passed away.

It was becomingly increasingly difficult to recruit labour in the area. Space in our premises was limited and the lease on the Bridge Road East premises was due to expire during the 1970s. The situation caused sufficient concern that we decided to explore the possibilities of moving out of Hertfordshire. Considerable thought and effort were expended in locating areas which appeared promising and encouraged by my wife, Jill, we subsequently covered an area extending from Redruth in the south west, Whitehaven in the north west and Scarborough in the north east.

Scarborough had by far the most potential. The authorities went out of their way to help and we made a return visit to view a site on the new industrial estate to which there was also an added financial advantage of an Industrial Development Grant. The situation looked promising but was dependent upon the agreement of key personnel to move with the company. Meetings were held at which the advantages of moving to Scarborough were advocated – a vibrant, active town, new housing and future planning similar to that which had existed when we moved from London to Welwyn Garden City. Unfortunately the response was mostly negative and the lack of interest was a major upset to our envisaged plans so we had to look for an alternative.

In an attempt to find a compromise, locations were visited within a radius of about fifteen miles of Welwyn Garden City but nothing remotely suitable was found. However, a possible solution occurred when it was learnt that land was to become available for industrial development on the northern side of the town in an area called Watchmead. This seemed too good an opportunity to miss and a special meeting was called which included our advisors Reg Lambert and David Barton. Deliberations didn't take too long as the advantages were many and obvious and with sales at their existing level the future looked promising.

It is a sobering thought that since the founding of the firm at Clerkenwell Road in 1927 until the late 1960s all of our premises had been leasehold and after all of the payments we didn't own a brick.

Watchmead

We made an application to the Board of Trade for an Industrial Development Certificate, this was successful and after negotiations with the New Towns Commission we were offered a 2.6 acre leasehold site on Black Fan Road, Watchmead. The decision to apply for planning permission was agreed with enthusiasm. Building development was sensitive and strictly controlled but we were fortunate to have the experience of Jack Lee and George Wells of WH Lee Surveyors to help gain approval. The move from five individual production areas each averaging about 5,000 ft² (464m²) to one large open plan area of 40,000 ft² (3,716m²) needed very careful consideration. Thought was needed to avoid duplication in such areas as heat treatment and stores which had previously been at both Bridge Road East and Tewin Road. It did not take long to realize the overall advantage of having just one devoted area to serve the company as a whole.

Plans were discussed and agreed at a special board meeting and were then prepared for submission to the local authority. These were for a factory, two-storey office block, store room and car park. The factory was to have a portal frame and be covered by a three section roof with 70 ft spans and concrete framing with special service runs including overhead ducted heating.

In order that the office frontage looked more prominent, it would be of two tone brickwork with inset windows and decorative slate panelling. The entrance hall would be enhanced with a semi-circular staircase leading to the first floor and spiral lighting resembling a general spring form. With these innovative ideas it was quite a relief when planning was finally approved.

The next step was to obtain prices for the building operation. Tenders were sent out to three builders. This was all a new experience for us and we were very surprised at the huge

Ian, Jill and David peruse Watchmead, the proposed area for development.



differences in the quotations, ranging from £150,000 to £200,000. The most competitive quotation was from John Willmott Construction Ltd of Hitchin at £150,000 and this included the most detailed schedule of work. The attitude of the company and the personal involvement of Peter Willmott gave us sufficient confidence to place the order with them. They were as good as their word and in the autumn of 1970 work commenced on an open field. We were the first to build on the new industrial area named Watchmead.

Normal production was on-going and it was necessary to find someone who would liaise with departments both with regard to the individual planning and the task of moving from five individual premises into one main area. Advertisements were placed in selected broadsheets from which a number of interviews followed, resulting in the selection of Sidney Hayes of Harpenden.

David views the progress to date.



The building work was completed in the contract time of nine months and therefore, in the summer of 1971 the removal process began. A company named Vanguard were used to undertake the removals. The operation proceeded rather better than expected bearing in mind the five production areas involved. Everyone accepted the challenge and enabled completion in just under one week. Automatic machinery was in production again before the move was even completed, maximising the continuity of production and for this, particular credit was due to Jack Blight, who played a crucial part in the operation.

During the move I well remember the sense of purpose and optimism which prevailed – it was quite stimulating.

There were fears that the transition from a number of small units to one large operation might initially cause a psychological ripple in the workforce. However, in the event good sense and understanding prevailed and works meetings were introduced, which may have minimised any adverse effect.

The opening of the new premises presented the ideal opportunity to allow customers to see our new purpose built premises and manufacturing potential. A special Open Day was duly arranged for Friday 17 March 1972 and a buffet lunch was supplied by Mr Donnen of Heath Lodge, a local restaurant renowned for its excellence. Attendance was very good and it was generally considered that the day achieved the intention of confirming our position as a significant spring supplier with a wide manufacturing range and commitment to customer service and quality.

The new situation brought about the need for an improved sales approach. It happened that a personal friend, Harold Cox was looking for employment. He had previous sales experience, was a good communicator and seemed ideally suited for the job. He accepted the offer and joined the company. This led to a decision

to employ a sales representative to widen our customer base even further. A promising young man was taken on (his name escapes me) and a car was provided, solely for company use. Unfortunately it was soon realized that the anticipated benefits were not being achieved, we parted company with the young man and the project was shelved. However, Harold had an excellent rapport with customers and continued to build good relationships in sales.

The benefits of the investment in new machinery began to show their effect as large quantity orders were received for more complex shapes both in wire and flat strip material. However, good as this

might have seemed, there was always pressure to reduce prices to the extent that on more than one occasion we did not take on an order as it simply wasn't worth it. Business was evolving rapidly and this was one of the side effects we experienced. Another was our first exposure to sabotage. We had developed specialized tooling for the production of springs for cluster bombs. This had taken a great deal of time and cost. Unfortunately an employee of about two years, who had been involved with the work joined a competitor passing on the manufacturing procedure to them. Mr Chatterton Greenwood will long be remembered.

The development at Watchmead meant that Bricket Wood was no longer economically viable and it was decided to close the operation there. This was part-expected and staff there were very understanding but nevertheless it was not a pleasant task after its past contribution.

The new Watchmead premises, completed in 1971



For many years deliveries to customers had been part of our service and this was mostly undertaken by the helpful and co-operative Jimmy Lawrence. His daily schedule covered a radius of about thirty miles and more often than not meant journeys into London. It was on one such occasion whilst driving through Finchley in heavy traffic, a young girl ran out between parked vehicles into the side of the van. Fortunately no serious injury occurred, however, this had a deep effect on Jim and after a while he asked to be excused from driving and sadly he left the firm a short time later.

Our delivery service was considered an asset and a replacement was therefore needed. John Sharp from packaging volunteered for the job. He was a different personality to his predecessor and started to develop strong leanings towards trade unions and their introduction within the company.

Hardly a day went by without some grievance being aired! One such instance was the proposal for a reduction of the working week from 40 hours to 39 hours. Our reluctance to go along with this proposal led to a visitation from the district AEWU (Amalgamated Engineering Workers' Union) official which was quite an experience in itself! His attitude exuded arrogance and contempt and the meeting ended in greater disarray than when it started, which was most likely his objective. The situation was tense, work had stopped and some of the workforce led by John Sharp himself were hovering outside awaiting the outcome. A stressful emergency meeting was held with the real risk of stopping production; it was critical, a move in either direction would have a significant and lasting effect. It was therefore reluctantly agreed to accept the demand.



*The automatic machine
coiling section at Watchmead*



Left: Standing in the boardroom with Jack Blight (right) and Nancy Osbourne.



Middle: Ivy Garrod discussing production



Right: Doris Hammond (Company Secretary) and Audrey Jubb.

In the present day this would possibly be seen as easy submission, however at the time the unions wielded considerable power and the mood of the newly recruited union members was very hostile. The situation was not helped when a security lapse was discovered. It was realized that parts of discarded typewriter ribbons could be read. Some of these included minutes of confidential meetings, the interpretation of which was angled to suit the occasion. However, throughout this the all important production continued although the working week was now thirty nine hours and sadly the confrontation had effected the attitude of some union inclined members of the workforce which was then maximized by John Sharp.

It was at about this time that a severe down turn in the economy of the country hit engineering in general including the spring trade. Some time before this decline our company had subcontracted an increasing number of orders to Precision Rowland Products of Portadown, Northern Ireland. Through normal business liaisons it was learnt that the company was experiencing a number of problems due to the unrest in Northern Ireland which at that time

was severe to the extent that they were exploring the possibility of moving away to a more stable environment. This observation triggered the thought of the overall advantages which could be gained if Denis Waldron and his company could be incorporated into our company at Watchmead. The proposition was thought worth taking further and an exploratory meeting in Portadown was arranged.

Torsion coiling machines at Watchmead





Left: Ronny Scales (left) and foreman Vic Milson in the torsion coiling section at Watchmead

Below: Tom Jenkins, Bill Robinson and Phil Emms

The visit to Portadown was quite a sobering experience and introduced us to the potential violence and in some areas an unfriendly public attitude. I remember quite clearly that in the middle of a meeting with solicitors, two distinct bomb explosions were heard. They were clearly accustomed to this as the meeting carried on without interruption.

After lengthy discussions it was agreed that the staffing situation would be best served by initially housing the skilled staff in temporary accommodation in Welwyn Garden City until permanent housing was found. The manufacturing equipment should be transferred to Watchmead. We flew back to England feeling encouraged with the way things had progressed.



The big day for the transfer arrived and we journeyed to Stranraer to meet the ferry from Belfast. The off-loading of equipment progressed smoothly and the small convoy was soon on its way south.

The overall situation regarding Precision Rowland Products had previously been explained to everyone at a special meeting. Everything worked well and the works manager, Jack Blight, kept an efficient finger on the pulse to ensure that daily business procedure was effectively maintained.

However, after a period of time the novelty of the change began to wear off as home ties started to make themselves felt amongst the newly acquired staff, far more than had been anticipated. One of the newly transferred chose to return to Northern Ireland and this encouraged others in doubt to follow suit.

Whilst the numbers who returned were small it nevertheless caused a detrimental feeling within the company. The situation was compounded as the effect of a recession began to be felt and the purchase of Precision Rowland Products had been a drain on finances which further complicated matters.

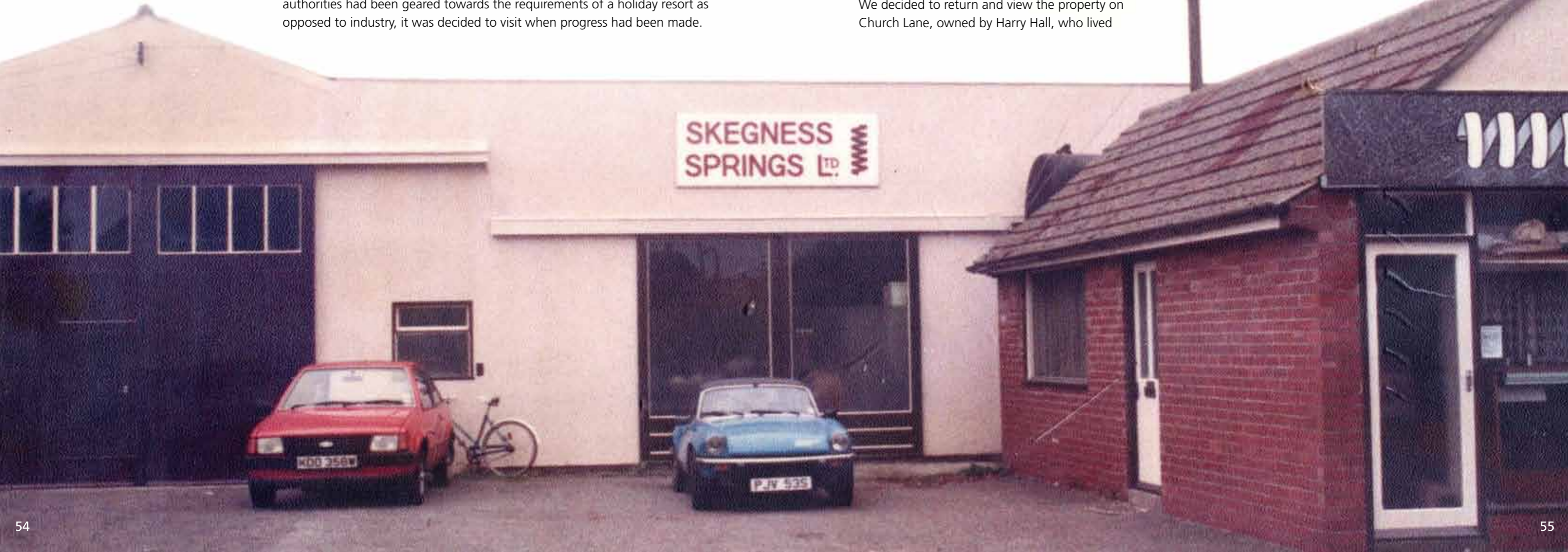
A meeting with our financial and legal advisers was held at which Doris Hammond, Jack Blight, Ted Vacani and myself were present. The outcome was to explore the possibility of moving the company away from the area and to start a small company which would deal exclusively with small volume orders. Due to the considerable scale down in size which was envisaged, it was thought that a holiday location which had limited seasonal employment would give an opportunity to those seeking more stable work. A number of locations were visited of which Skegness offered the best potential.

Skegness

Arrangements were made through Skegness Council for Reg Lambert and myself to visit the area and be shown the industrial estate which was in the early stages of development. The prospect of moving there looked promising to the extent that a second visit was arranged when Jill accompanied me. Our findings were discouraging as very little of the development of the site had been implemented. However, as the authorities had been geared towards the requirements of a holiday resort as opposed to industry, it was decided to visit when progress had been made.

We returned to Skegness about a year later only to be disappointed again as the site was virtually unaltered from the previous viewing and the council representative had a very disinterested attitude. We left feeling very despondent.

On our return to the town centre, Jill noticed in an estate agent's window, details of some small premises for sale, just to the north of Skegness. We decided to return and view the property on Church Lane, owned by Harry Hall, who lived



in the adjacent bungalow. We were well received and after explaining the situation were given a thorough tour of the 3,300 ft² (307m²) premises, which together with the bungalow looked ideal for our purpose. After further discussion over a cup of tea, a verbal commitment was given to purchase subject to board approval.

The trip back to Welwyn Garden City was in a happier mood although the difficulties which faced us were considerable especially that of finance as the sum required to implement the project was beyond our available resources. Faced with this problem, Jill most generously offered to arrange a loan from a long term investment fund set up over the years by her father for her benefit; this enabled our hopes to materialize.

The first priority was staffing for which interviews for a manager were held, resulting in a short list of two. David Hirst, who had valuable experience in engineering was the final choice and it wasn't long before a small but effective labour force was selected. Jack was very sympathetic towards our situation and was instrumental in channelling jobs to Skegness which required hand work or hand finishing. One or two journeys were made each week between Skegness and Welwyn Garden City where we still lived.

However, the general decline in work continued to the extent that a major viability crisis arose and after consultation with our legal and financial advisors the stark situation was clear - the only way out was to sell our company Pocklington and Johnson Ltd., a bitter pill indeed.

Over the previous years there had been increasing contact with Con Goss of Spring Steel Productions at Walthamstow and it was thought they might be interested in the company. An approach was made and Mr Goss visited Watchmead to see the potential for himself. The impression he gained was favourable enough for him to make us an offer and although it was considerably less than the sum requested we were forced to seize the opportunity. The deal also enabled us to carry on the Skegness project as a self-contained entity. Clerkenwell Road was to be kept on by Skegness Springs Ltd after the sale.

An aerial view of our Church Lane factory



A general meeting was called to explain what was happening. Con Goss strode into the canteen full of confidence, immediately taking charge. It must have indicated to those present the way of things to come!

The change also affected our routine as Jill and I spent the weekdays at Skegness, returning to Welwyn Garden City at weekends. Both David and Ian were at Bishop's Stortford College about three-quarters of an hour from our home at 4 Barleycroft Road. Living between two houses was not an easy situation.

Left to right: Graham Ogglesby, Colin Frith, Graham Abott, Marlene Porter, Jill Johnson, Andy Thompson and Martin Pick at our Church Lane premises



Jack Blight continued to feed us with work and the Precision Rowland Products car trailer was invaluable for the collection and return of work as well as collecting wire from William Hughes's storage depot at Deane House, London NW5. Although sub-contract work was vital it was necessary to improve our trading position. A two line approach was adopted, that of confirming the position with existing customers by improved personal contact and attention to service and a concerted drive to increase sales from new sources. This was not easy as at the time the economy was depressed and Skegness Springs was virtually unknown. The best way of achieving the latter was by the introduction of cold calls. After contact with possible customers a weekly routine commenced which after a period of time covered an area from Hull in the north to Crawley in the south and Southend in the east. I covered approximately 40,000 miles a year delivering springs and making cold calls.

It became evident that a better financial understanding was essential and in this respect we were very fortunate in finding Michael May of Black and Severn Accountants, whose subsequent guidance was invaluable and led to the improvement of the company's finances. Meanwhile the promise of good management skills shown by David Hirst at his interview had not materialized and he left the company after a short time.

Both of our sons, David and Ian had always expressed an interest in joining the company and this possibly explains our perseverance when the odds were stacked against us. David left Bishop's Stortford College at the end of the summer term of 1974. It was obvious that financial awareness was very necessary and as he had a natural leaning in this direction, it was arranged that he join the accountants Forester Boyd in Louth to gain knowledge and experience. He also spent time working at Duncan and Toplis our current accountants. When David eventually joined the company, his financial understanding together with his ability for order and

exactness highlighted the need for a review of our pricing as well as an improved administrative system.

In 1976 Ian left Bishop's Stortford College and moved to Skegness to join the company. Whilst at school he had spent the holidays working at Clerkenwell Road, commuting from Welwyn Garden City. He showed a flair for the practical side which developed to cover a wide range of production skills including tooling and automatic machine production. For economic reasons David recommended that production at Clerkenwell Road should cease. A bank report confirmed this and sadly on 30 June 1981 the premises were closed and all machinery was transferred to Skegness.

Cold calls and customer liaison continued to achieve varying degrees of success. One particular positive example was Aldo Manta of Dover, who required a supply of high initial extension springs which were required to move the false floor of a large postal basket as it emptied and so avoid the body strain of reaching down or of falling into it. Thanks to my father I knew the procedure needed to obtain the high initial tension but hopes were dashed when a competitor undercut our price with the comment that production was 'a piece of cake.' However, after a few weeks David Turner of Aldo Manta phoned to say that our competitor was having trouble in achieving the loads required. In response a batch of proving samples were forwarded and approved, resulting in an order which necessitated collecting material from the aforementioned competitor. This gave quite a sense of achievement. Not only did Aldo Manta orders increase but use for the loading spring expanded into other applications with similar problems, even bank notes. It is interesting that in 2010 we are still receiving orders for the same spring.

David answers a query with Martin Pick.



*Ian checks a spring
at Church Lane*

In 1988 Jim Murphy of Cosworth Engineering contacted us unexpectedly. He placed his first order on 4 May that year and became a very important customer throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. Our relationship flourished, partly I think due to our ability to produce small quantities quickly and of high quality. There was also the unanticipated advantage of being remembered by former Cosworth employees when they moved on to other motorsport companies. A benefit which continues today.

David and Ian's involvement in the company led to a greater efficiency and confidence and hence a positive future. Once more increased business meant shortage of space. This was rectified temporarily by erecting an extensive balcony in one half of the two bay premises. It was evident that a more permanent arrangement was necessary and after a board meeting in the autumn of 1995 it was decided to explore the possibility of moving to larger more suitable premises.

In the late 1980s, Tony Horn, Jill's brother, had recommended to us a financial advisor, Gerald Pepper. The excellent and sound advice given to us by Gerald Pepper enabled the company to invest wisely. Consequently we were in a position to purchase a larger, more suitable property. The choice available in the Skegness area at that time was limited. The first property we looked at was on the industrial estate, now CFN in Heath Road but this was unsuitable due to low roofing.

We persevered and finally found premises on Hassall Road which had previously been used in the manufacture of caravans. The 10,000 ft² (930 m²) property was for sale by auction and we were fortunate enough to succeed in obtaining it. However, the new premises had been very badly maintained. Extensive work was required in re-cladding the outside walls, interior decoration and structural alteration for areas such as the grinding shop and canteen. In fact, nearly everything was replaced apart from the floor and the roof! The entire family was involved in helping.

*An aerial view of our
Hassall Road factory*



Below: Jill, David, Ian and Cathy outside the Hassall Road premises in 1996

Opposite: Various shots of the renovation work

Much of the redecoration was carried out whilst Church Lane was still in production. It was hard work but the premises received total rejuvenation thanks to the family and staff helpers. The builder carrying out the main work, John Epton, knew of a local company, Piper Windows, who were looking for larger premises. We were lucky that our Church Lane property suited their needs and they bought the site where they remain today.





Above: The weekend move from Church Lane to Hassall Road

So as to minimize down time the production lay out was prepared beforehand. Careful planning and preparatory wiring by Graham Taylor ensured that this was achieved. Work continued at Church Lane until Friday afternoon, when the move to Hassall Road started. It took place on Friday evening and all through the day on both Saturday and Sunday. Rundles of New Bolingbroke assisted with the removals. It was quite an experience to see how easily they handled awkward machinery. Their swift efficiency played an important role in the smooth and organized removal and installation which enabled production to start at Hassall Road on Monday morning of the 30th September 1996.

Increased space allowed for investment in new machinery and material stocks. The most significant of these being the bulk purchase of a complete range of Inconel material in the late 1990s and more recently with another specialist material, Elgiloy. Space is no longer so plentiful but sufficient area exists on site for any future expansion.

Tentative steps were made into the uncharted virtual reality of the world wide web when our first website was launched in 1997. However, our sales potential was widened when my grandson

Above: The new production area at Hassall Road

Below: Exhibiting at Professional Motorsport World in Germany, 2006



Russell Matthews joined us in 2003 in order to focus on our sales and marketing strategies. One of his first proposals was to move away from the established beige and brown company colour scheme to something more appropriate for the 21st century. Darren Bray of Bray Design, Skegness was chosen to design a new logo and re-branded stationary in readiness for our 30th anniversary in 2004. After much debate the current 'blue spring' logo was selected and the initial concerns about a change from the original beige and brown were overcome.

Armed with a new image, the company ventured into the world of exhibitions, starting with the 2004 Autosport Engineering Show at the NEC in Birmingham. Shortly afterwards, to confirm our commitment to the motor sport industry, we became the first spring manufacturer to join the Motorsport Industry Association (MIA). Further visits to exhibitions at the NEC Birmingham, Stoneleigh Park in Warwickshire, Cologne (Germany) and Orlando (Florida) have followed with a varying degree of success.

A new insulated roof over the production area, built in October 2008, will hopefully be taken as an expression of confidence in the future. In this current time of world-wide turmoil may this be proved true!



Above: Boarding the bus to Hull for our trip to Amsterdam

Skegness Springs Ltd and Pocklington and Johnson previously, have always made good staff relationships a priority and we pride ourselves in the fact that many of our employees have been with us for a very long time. Special acknowledgement must be paid to Marlene Porter, who joined Skegness Springs at the very beginning in May 1974 at Church Lane and retired in June 2000. A party was organized for her at our home in North Foreland Drive for all staff and families. Tribute should also be paid to Graham Ogglesby, who joined the company in January 1977 and died in 1998 whilst in employment with us and also Colin Frith, who joined in January 1990 and died in 2006, whilst still employed.

Perhaps our employees have remained so loyal because the company resembles an extended family. In 1999 on the 25th anniversary of Skegness Springs, we celebrated with a trip to Brugge for all staff and their families. We took the P&O ferry out of Hull overnight, spent the day in Brugge and returned on the ferry the following night. In 2004 for our 30th anniversary, we took a similar trip to Amsterdam, again for all staff and families.

Below: left to right:
Colin Frith toolmaking at Church Lane,
Graham Ogglesby, Marlene Porter's 20 years



The team in 2004 - 30th Anniversary Year.

Russell Matthews, Graham Abbott, Colin Frith, Gordon Dyson, Jim O'Connell, Brian Clews, Sheila Clark, Graham Clarke, Albert Hick, Pete Turner, Martin Pick, Andy Thompson, Peter Johnson, Ian Johnson, David Johnson, Jill Johnson, Cathy Johnson

There has always been a deep desire for the continuation of the company which is strengthened by my two sons, who have a similar frame of mind and the constant support of my wife Jill. This has ensured the maintenance of a close family attitude, essential in our small firm.

Below: Installation of the new insulated roof in 2008.

Bottom: The new mezzanine floor installed in 2009 has allowed an expansion of our wire stock.

Below Right: Andy and Stephen coiling torsion springs

Apart from the huge roles which David, Ian and Jill play, my daughter-in-law Cathy and grandchildren Sarah, Stephen and Russell are all actively involved. Spring manufacture is our business but the customer service which we endeavour to give plays an important factor and the family commitment goes a long way towards this.



The team in 2010: left to right: Sheila Clark, Sarah Abbott (with Josh), Cathy Johnson, David Johnson, Ian Johnson, Katie Johnson (with Grace), Jill Johnson, Brian Clews, Russell Matthews, Graham Clarke, Martin Pick, Albert Hick, Luke Bowes, Andy Thompson, Peter Johnson, Stephen Johnson, Aaron Castelow, Graham Abbott

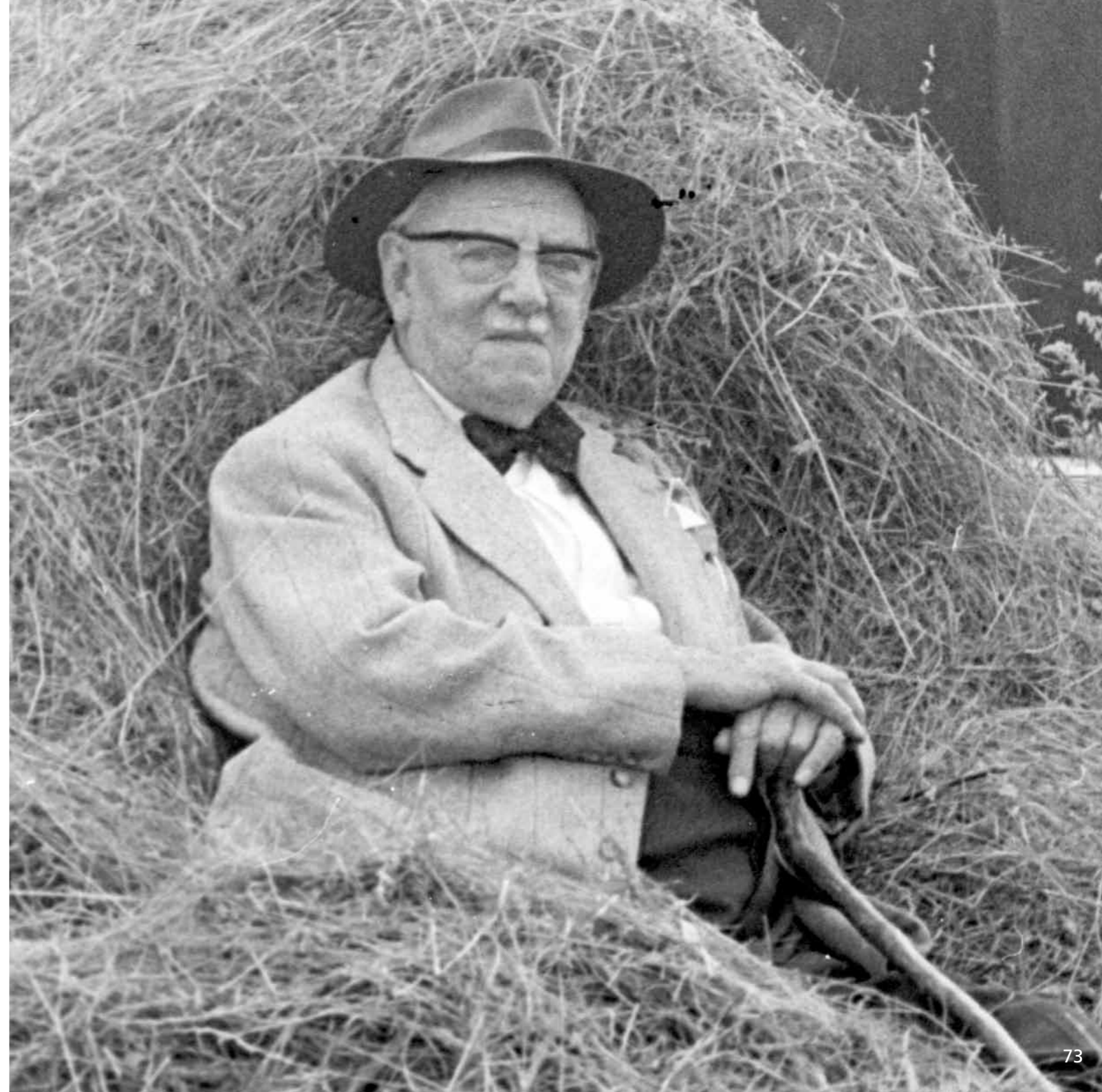
Business has not been without trauma especially during the situation leading to the sale of Pocklington and Johnson and also the initial years at Skegness, when the viability was in doubt. Fortunately the contribution made by David and Ian helped to turn things around and wise planning, perseverance and a supportive family have ensured continued progress to the present day. Long may this continue!

In retrospect, it is impossible not to reflect on the thoughts my father might have had if he knew of the train of events leading from his sad passing to the present day. His natural engineering talent coupled with the enthusiasm, judgement, perseverance and sense of humour carried the firm forward for many years. Without him nothing would have happened and the company, with its current eighty two years of history would not have existed, for this we owe him a great debt of gratitude.

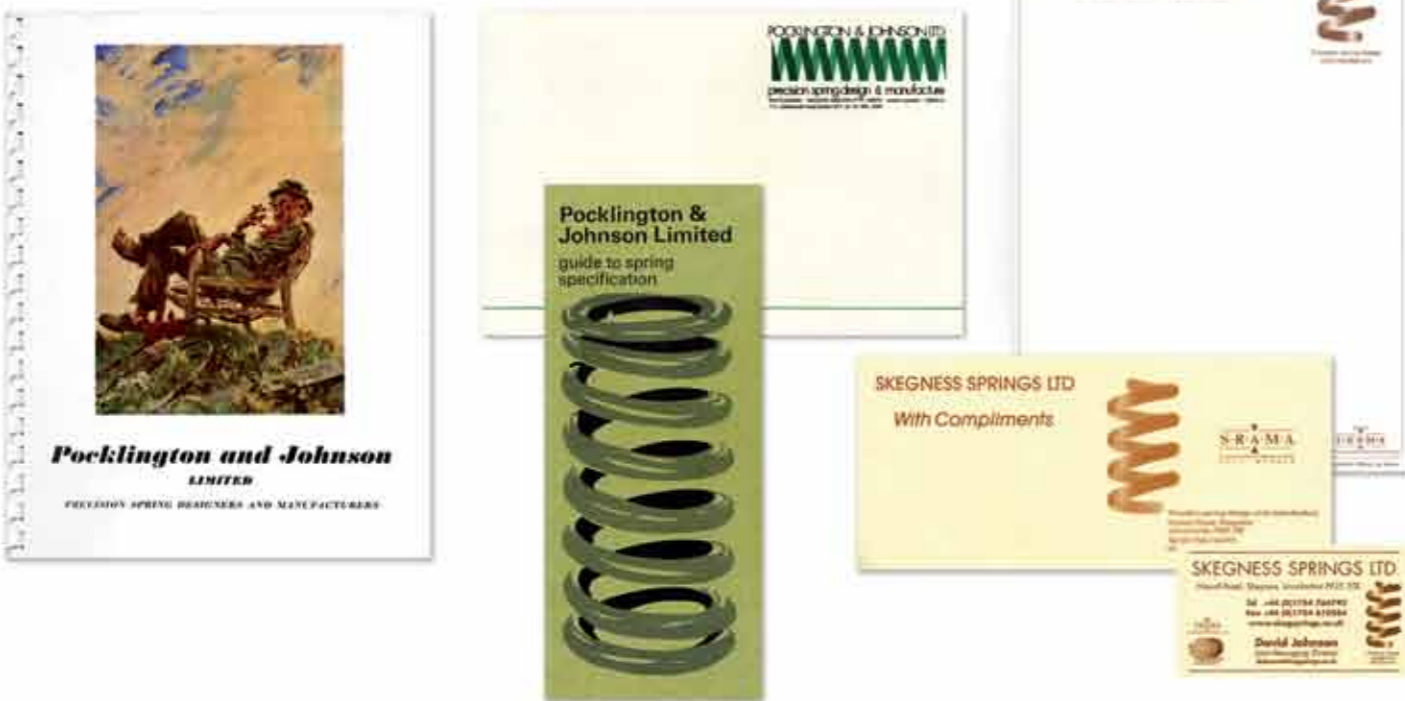
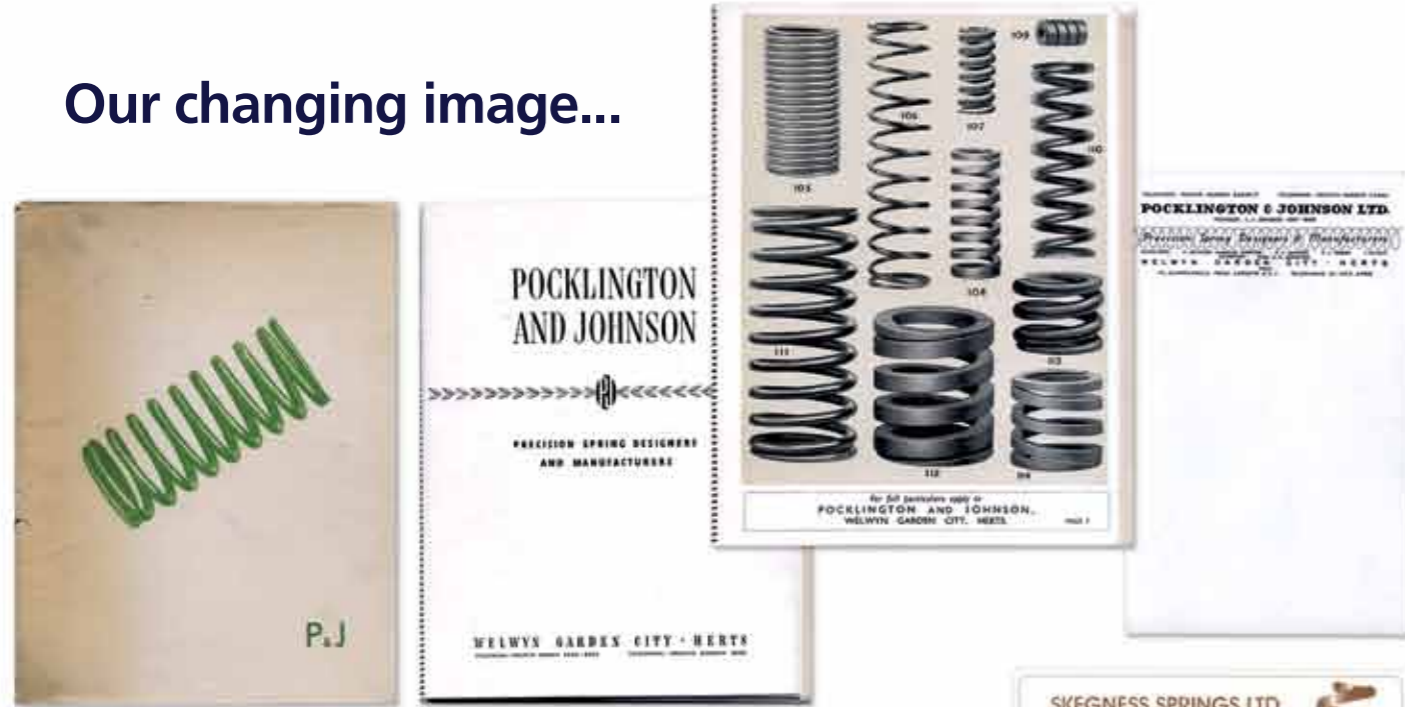


Above: Jill continues her important daily role preparing deliveries to take to the post office.

Opposite: My father relaxes watching the Panshanger Air Display, late 1950s



Our changing image...



Personalities and their thoughts

I have so many memories but it seemed a shame not to include some thoughts and comments from employees throughout the history of the company.

Letter to Doris Hammond from Jack Blight

(Past works manager at Pocklington and Johnson)

“Further to our telephone conversation on P & J in the old days, I have come up with a few names and things that went on about which Peter may not have known!

I don't suppose he knows that Bertie Stevens came down to Welwyn Garden City for a spell to run the hand finishing department and that he took over an old desk (a tall one which teachers used to have). It originally belonged to PFJ and used to stand inside the doorway at 72, which went through to 74. That's where the little Wafios grinder used to go before the grinding room was built. An apple was often placed on his desk before his arrival, which was often late especially if there had been a bad air raid.

The youngsters used to take it in turns to sit out on the front step of 72 to keep an eye open for the 'barrel to go up Norton's flag pole,' which gave a warning that enemy aircraft were almost here. The barrel was just made of plywood and was in place of a flag. In the days of PFJ he used to rule us like his 'boy sailors' in the sailing ships! But we all loved him! There was a young lad named Bangs from Wheathampstead (six miles away) who used to cycle in every day and was generally late. Uncle John or Uncle Perce as we called him, would be waiting at the door at 8.00 to greet everyone. Many a time poor Bangs was very late but came up with all sorts of excuses – mainly I've cycled all the way here from

Wheathampstead, or I've had a puncture etc. Uncle John would say “now turn around and cycle all the way back and try to be early tomorrow!”

In those days we had just two females in the factory, Edie Gould and Francis Dunne. Edie came from Wheathamstead and Francis who was a Mancurian, used to do the cleaning, make the tea and do production bench work.

All of the machines were belt driven from girder work through shafts and pulleys down to a big motor in the far right hand corner of 74. On a Saturday it was the job of us youngsters to climb up in the girders and oil the shaft bearings etc. Later on the machines were given individual electric motors fitted by Reg Hurrell in maintenance. Reg and I did night work on the Wafios Grinder for quite a spell. We did one week then Ted Vacani and I think Alfie Robinson (Bill's brother) the next. We used to grind springs for Sperry Gyroscopes – very important war work. Our early tea lady after Francis Dunne was Maude Daniels (ugh the tea was awful), her daughter worked for us in the office years later.

We got up to all sorts of pranks. Reg Hurrell had an old Austin Ruby with a canvas hood for rainy weather. I don't know whose idea it was at the time but the car was easily manhandled and one Friday about six to eight of us picked it up and put it diagonally across a corner of the yard. He was not amused! Another prank was by a chap who worked with Frank Vacani. He tied kippers onto the exhaust pipe of a workmate who was getting married – it was very smelly! Some names come to mind and I must write them down. George Goodley, Jack Fairbanks (his mother was landlady to the murderer Dr Crippin) and John Hudson were all in maintenance. Vince and Dennis Mowbray were automatic productions, Jim Lawrence, Stan Scales were drivers and were joined by John Sharp before he transferred to the grinding shop. Fred Walker, Joe Crump and Bob Douglas were in packing and dispatch. Travelling from London during the war was Harry Field, Les Butcher, Harry Flight (known as Uncle Harry), Fred Shelton, Len Bathie and Joe Gregory and later Albert Amor, Fred Butcher (brother to Les) and Arthur Taylor. The local females (as opposed to London) were Ivy Hamer (later Garod) Maude Hamer, Mrs Bye, Dorothy Greener and sister Nancy Osborn, Sadie Dorris, Eleanor Gorley, Mrs Hale, Chris Messer (later married Dennis Mowbray), Enid Barnett, Cilla Jenkins, Marion Woodward, and Mrs Syrett. The flat strip section was started with a bench against the wall of 74 consisted of Mac, Len Bathie, Fred Skelton, Ron Hill (known as Digger). Wire coiling comprised of Ted Vacani, Steve Myers, Jimmy Carman, Harry Field, Tom Taylor, Ron Owen, Digger Hill,

Bill Robinson, Les Rimmington, myself, Albert Pitts, Albert Mills, Den Bradbury (travelling daily from Ascot), Dennis Burton, Dennis Mowbray, Ron Scales and Bob Ansell. The torsion department was made up of Frank Vacani, Vic Milson, George Dyer (Snowball), and Mrs Syrett. Mrs Syrett's husband was a union official and she came to us about the time we changed over to wages by credit transfer and unknowingly to us gave out Union Membership forms! John Sharp, who was later a Union rep was in the grinding shop and in the office there was Cicely (married to Ron Scales), Joan Pudufot (married to Mott Salmon) and more whose names I forget.

Jimmy Carman used to finish work on a Friday night, then do a night shift at a bakery and come in to work on a Saturday morning. He would bring along cakes and biscuits etc. It got rather out of hand and had to be stopped! He used to look just as black on a Saturday as he did when he went home from the bakery on a Friday night! Poor Jim could not satisfy his wife with money!

Kodak shutter springs were another big job. Maude Hamer was the expert at coiling on a small hand operated machine made in the factory. 'The Man' (LJJ) said that if we whistled a piece of music she became engrossed and kept in time until we speeded up and she would literally scream!

Digger Hill who worked in Steve Myers heavy hand coiling section, was a keen boxer. His weight maintenance was important, necessitating regular checks using one of our scales. However, over time the scale was slightly loaded giving too high a weight and resulted in much sweat and tears trying to reduce!

One of the three Vacani brothers, Frank, was very conscious of status. When safety shoes were first introduced he asked if an executive pattern was available! At Welwyn Garden City he used to cycle to work. After leaving his cycle at the front entrance he usually asked a junior employee in his department to put it in the cycle rack in the back yard! He was often teased but we all took it as an instance of the colourful variations in life!

I hope some of this is of help."

Jack

P&J Reflections by Eric McKercher

"When I joined P & J in 1932 at the age of 16, the company consisted of the shop, offices and basement of 111 Clerkenwell Road and the basements only of 107 and 109, employing about twenty people in total. Miss Pocklington ran the office and Bertie Stevens the shop. Mr Johnson liked to be hands on in the basement of 111, Steve Myers was producing heavy gauge springs wound on a lathe with Jimmy Carman as assistant.

Frank Vacani (former instrument maker) was involved making jigs and machine setting, Ted Vacani oversaw the basement of 109 with the production of lighter gauge and automatic work.

Albert Amor, John Badger, Phil Emms and Harry Flight were involved with the production of wire springs assisted by several young lads whose names I don't remember.

Reg Hurrell ran the smaller flat strip section in the basement of 107 assisted by Percy Johnson. I joined this section and I believe that I was taken on as Percy was suffering from a duodenal ulcer and awaiting an operation. Our section was making film tensioning springs for Kodak. This was a running order as were the shutter springs being made by Phil Emms in the basement of 109. Jigs for both items were made in house.

This situation continued until a very significant event came along with the purchase of 74 Bridge Road East by Mr LJJ Johnson."

Eric

Special thanks and gratitude

Skegness Springs Ltd people
past, present and future

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Vic Miller
Winn Miller
Maurice Moyes
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The history

A family history of spring manufacture

Researched and written by Peter Johnson



SKEGNESS
SPRINGS
LIMITED

Skegness Springs Ltd, Hassall Road, Skegness, Lincolnshire, PE25 3TB