

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Roger Kennell, Pretty Corsets In Suffolk: William Pretty & Son: a Suffolk family and corset manufacturer

Suffolk in the 1800s may not seem the area for an innovative factory to be built, but this was where the first corset factory in the country was opened.

The speaker at the Rickinghall Area Heritage Circle meeting was Roger Kennell, the history recorder for Hadleigh, who became interested in his subject when he discovered there had been a corset factory in what is now the Old Town Hall there. He told members the history of the Pretty family, the founders of William Pretty & Son, Corset Manufacturers.

William Coleman Pretty had connections with this area having been educated in Botesdale and later, on his marriage in 1782, settling in Bacton where he opened a drapery shop. Later, in the 1830s he joined with a John Footman in acquiring a drapers shop in Stowmarket and eventually set up the first corset factory and warehouse in the country there. This soon prospered due to the fashion for nipped in waists and laced corsets, and William Pretty was able to move to Ipswich where he built another factory in the name of William Pretty & Son making the components for the corsets, which were sent by train to Stowmarket for assembling then returned to Ipswich for packing and despatch.

His son, William Jnr, had by this time served his apprenticeship in the trade and as the business grew he took over the management of the factory, freeing up his father to be able to devote more time to the good and charitable causes he sponsored in the town. He was an astute businessman but also a sportman, being the first man in Ipswich to have a lawn tennis court.

He travelled a great deal keeping an eye on the latest fashion trends and manufacturers in other countries. He made forty trips to USA and soon realised he had to expand as he was turning down orders from there as his garments were superior to all others but he could not produce enough. Despite his father's objections he acquired the lease on another building which he was later able to expand and open the largest corset factory in the country. However he found he could not find enough young female workers to fill it. However – ever the business man – he gradually opened about 12 small outpost factories, all in towns with railway connection to Ipswich, including two in Diss. William Senior died in 1889 leaving the business and £67,500 to William Junior who soon expanded again opening workshops to make his own boxes and labels for packaging, also stainless steel for the boning and later an alternative “coraline”, becoming the sole manufacturer for Europe, the Colonies and USA of “Coralite Corsets”.

He had five sons, one of whom died young; the other four became directors of the firm, at the same time having careers as officers in the Suffolk Regiment of the Territorial Army and they all fought in the first World War. One son, Frank married Edith Dempster from a wealthy Cheshire family. They set up home at Sutton Hoo – another connection to Rickinghall – as in 1938 Edith, by then a widow, employed Basil Brown the Rickinghall archaeologist, to excavate the mounds there.

William Jnr died in 1916 and his sons carried on running the business. However in the 1920s modern women began to abandon corsets so the business had to diversify, this time into the manufacture of silk lingerie, but this was not successful and in 1930 William Pretty & Son went into liquidation.

After being bought out first by a Market Harborough company then later Courtolds, both still used the Pretty trade name to carry on producing lingerie for Harrods and Liberty. However by 1968, with the coming of mini skirts, hot pants, etc the trade began to collapse and in 1983 the William Pretty & Son was closed for the last time. It was demolished in 1983 and became the car park behind Debenhams.

The next speakers for the Heritage Circle will be Tim Holt-Wilson with a nostalgic look at Redgrave Park in August and Roy Tricker in September with a talk called “100 Not Out”, a humorous talk about the 100 years of St. Edmundsbury Diocese. Visitors are most welcome.

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