

NOSTALGIA

The history of Nicholl and Janes

By Mike Dewey

THIS week we conclude our series of articles on the history of one of Wycombe's iconic furniture companies, Nicholl & Janes (N&J).

We finished the previous article on August 25th with a look at the firm's participation in the 1950 British Industries Fair, when the Duchess of Kent visited their stand and commented 'I did not know that things like this were still being made!'

Ralph Janes who had led the company for around 40 years, died on Monday August 2nd 1954 at his home 3 London Rd, High Wycombe at the age of 81. His wife had passed away earlier that year and Ralph had been in poor health since then. At that time he was still Chairman of the company, with his son Harry as Managing Director.

Ralph had led a very colourful life. In an unpublished memoir he had written "I used to do a little singing and went one Christmas 1903 with a local concert party to entertain the inmates of Saunderton Workhouse". He then goes into a story about an old man called Tommy Harcourt, nicknamed 'Treacle', who he was surprised to see in the front row of the audience as he had thought he was dead. Treacle had been a skilled maker of spiral-turning on chair legs in the style of Charles II and Jacobean chairs. This had become a near-obsolete skill and so Ralph got him back to work. However he commented in the memoir that the idea of reviving it had greatly distracted him during his performance in the workhouse, and that this was possibly the reason why he was the only performer not to get an encore! In fact Ralph did more than just "a little singing"! He seems to have never turned down an opportunity to use his vocal chords in a musical performance. This was at a time when many meetings of people in a social context would end with the group demanding a song from some of those present. Ralph would never fail to volunteer! Two of his favourites were reputed to be 'Old Tom Braddlum' and 'The Lincolnshire Poacher'.

Ralph was also one of the founder members of the Wycombe Guarantors. At the dinner provided by them at the Red Lion Hotel on January



Ralph Janes in The Gondoliers

3rd 1952, Ralph led an impromptu choir of the Guarantors to entertain the old folk. His musical skills also extended to opera, the picture shows him as the Duke of Plaza Toro in the Gilbert & Sullivan opera The Gondoliers!

Most of Ralph's obituary in the Bucks Free Press was concerned with his achievements as a sportsman. He was among the founders of Wycombe Wanderers Football Club in 1887 and although he was never a regular player he often substituted in the first eleven. He was a keen golfer, being a member of the Flackwell Heath club and captain for several years. But it was as a cricketer he achieved the greatest repute. He joined High Wycombe Cricket Club when he was 18 and was soon playing for the first eleven. From 1889 until he retired from the game in 1926 "he was consistent with both bat and ball. His performances with the club are legend wherever cricket is talked about". He captained the High Wycombe club for 12 consecutive seasons. He also played many seasons with the Bucks County side. His most memorable season was in 1919, when he was 48 years of age. His batting average was 58, his highest score being 206 not out, reaching a century before lunch. Four days later against Ealing he scored 121 and then took 6 wickets. His achievements that season culminated with the award of all five club prizes, including that for the best fielding performance. He was then made an honorary Life member of the club.

The obituary in the Bucks Free Press also reported that Ralph had been a founder member of the Voluntary Fire Brigade and in recognition of this he had been presented with the bell of the first motor fire-



The premises of Nicholl & Janes in St Mary Street, High Wycombe

engine to have been owned by the brigade.

By the time of Ralph's death the redevelopment of Wycombe town centre was starting to proceed apace and in 1957 N&J sold their St Mary Street premises to Bucks County Council. The firm moved to the former factory of chairmakers F.R. Ellis in Queen's Road, off Tottenham Road and changed its name to Nicholls & Janes (1958) Ltd. Modernisation of the Queen's Rd factory was overseen by Eric Janes, an architect, who was the brother of Harry Janes. It was planned that the ornate carved wooden gates at the entrance to the St Mary Street factory would be re-erected at the Queen's Rd premises, but this seems not to have taken place.

The closure and then demolition of the N&J premises on the western side of St Mary St, in the shadow of the Technical College building, now a part of Bucks New Uni, was a particularly poignant event. These premises were where one of the first chair-making workshops in the town was established by Thomas Widginton in 1810. He employed some 30 men who assembled Windsor and cane-seated chairs.

Although moderately successful

for the first few years at their new premises in Queen's Road the company were finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain skilled craftsmen. In 1967 N&J were sold to Warmcellite, a company who manufactured polystyrene ceiling tiles. After some 200 years an ignominious end for an iconic company.

Does any reader remember the carved wooden gates at the entrance to the St Mary Street premises of Nicholls & Janes and know what happened to them when the factory was closed in 1958? If so please contact Mike Dewey on 01494 75070 or email him at deweymiked@aol.com.

I am grateful to Rowland Janes who in March 2011 set up a website as a basis for ongoing research into the history of Nicholls & Janes, the furniture they made, and the people who made its reputation for quality products. Rowland has allowed me to quote extensively from the website, and in return I hope I have been able to contribute to the recorded history of the company. If any reader has information or photographs about N&J I would be grateful if they would contact me on 01494 755070, email deweymiked@aol.com; or contact Rowland by email info@NandJ.org.uk

Gt War timeline

TO remind ourselves of the progress of the World War I, we are detailing the main events affecting Great Britain which took place each week.

In the week up to September 7th:

Private Cecil (Ralph) Swanborough from High Wycombe died of disease in East Africa on September 1st

On Sept 2nd Private Horace Stevens from Marlow was killed in action at the Western Front

Lance Corporal Walter George Rackstraw from West Wycombe was killed in action at the Western Front on Sept 5th

On September 6th Lance Corporal John Staple from Chesham was killed in action at the Western Front

Rifleman Walter J Arnett from Farnham Royal was killed in action and Private George Cox from Gerrards Cross died of wounds, at the Western Front on Sept 7th.



Ralph Janes in his cricket whites