

THE COURTAULDS STORY.

By 1750, a member of Courtauld family, Samuel I, came from France to England to become involved in the silk industry, another, George, in 1790 from America. There was as Courtauld factory from that date. By 1820 Courtaulds were making crepe, which was then a natural product made from silk and cotton.

There were two types, crepe de chine or Chinese crepe and crepe anglaise, or English Crepe. Crepe-de-chine was a fine woven gauze-like silk, whilst crepe anglais was a cotton and crepe mixture, and often used in clothes for mourning. Hat bands for gent's top hats, etc. Official mourning was requested and instructed by government, when, etc. Princess Caroline, (D'd. 1759), George II (1760), etc., and much later, Prince Albert, (1861). In order to cover the brighter parts of uniforms at the death of the Duke of Cumberland, 105 yards of crepe were bought from Italy for £34. 2s. 6d. for 30 officers.

Courtaulds were also making silk garments, and were secretly also trying to make an artificial silk-type fabric, without success. The silk mills were very much to the front in producing fashionable material for garments.

In 1833 Derby Silk Mill paid 7/ 7d. for a working week by a female, more if she worked overtime or at weekends.

East Anglia 5/-

Lancashire cotton workers 8/7d.

In Derby 63% were females, of which 8% were under 11 and 35% under 16.

Lancashire 50% females, 4% under 11 and 33% under 16

East Anglia 96% women, 14% under 11 and 53% under 16.

By 1850 some form of artificial silk was produced in Switzerland.

1890 Chardonnett silk was made in France.

1900 Courtaulds were experimenting with an artificial silk made from nitro cellulose, but stopped because it was highly explosive. At the same time they experimented with viscose wood pulp soaked in caustic soda, not very reliable. By 1909 they had succeeded in making something reliable and they bought up the whole rights of all firms experimenting.

But in 1907 a firm in Basle, Switzerland, started making cellulose acetate, run by two chemical experts, the brothers Camille and Henry Dreyfus. They used the raw waste cotton (linters) after the cotton had been picked from the cotton bolls, instead of wood pulp.

In 1914 the Great War commenced, and cellulose acetate dope was found to be a perfect waterproofing for aircraft wings and bodies, which were made of canvas on a light metal and wood frame. There was a problem – there were insufficient supplies in this country. In 1915 the British Government invited tenders for dope to be made in Britain. They turned down Courtaulds tender and decided to build their own factory, but decided to obtain some external finance besides paying out of war office funds.

Now we come to the start of the Spondon factory. They invited the Dreyfus Brothers to come over from Switzerland and offered three sites, one at the Branston Ordnance Factory near Burton, one near Ednaston where the road crosses Brailsford Brook, and one at Spondon. Ednaston was turned down because there was insufficient water supply (and probably space), Burton because it was too far away from the river, so the land at Spondon was chosen, mysteriously acquired by Derby Borough in 1901. It was financed by the Government, plus three men, Sir Thomas Dawson, M.D. of Vickers; Col. Morden, staff officer to Sir Sam Hughes, the Canadian Minister of War, and Edward Robson, director of Pinchin Johnson Paints. Courtaulds were not pleased from the start.

Production commenced in 1916, already about two years behind the original demand. Men were brought in to manage from various areas in 1916, and by 1917 a row of 'cottages' were built in what was later Derby Road, 'The Celanese Cottages'. They were built to house these men, and were of the very latest design. It was said that they were designed by Edward Lutyens, but this has been disproved, only inspired by him. (See design, and structure). Built by Sir Robert MacAlpine's company and completed in 1917, they had indoor bathrooms and toilets, with H. & C., etc., when ten and more years later Councils, etc., were still building houses without indoor toilets or hot water. 41 were built, Derwent Road still has the original nos. 39, 40 and 41, all being built and by the early 1920's known as 'Celanese Cottages'. The others were re-numbered when 'Nottingham Road' ceased at the Chaddesden/Spondon boundary became 'Derby Road' from Station Rd. Some were demolished for the bypass in 1958. In 1978 they were offered to the tenants for £11,000 each, but most of them, (including me) offered £8000 to £9000. This was turned down and all the remaining houses, plus six more modern houses elsewhere, were sold as a job lot for £4,000 each! (I later purchased mine, then a year later, sold it at a fair profit).

The firm had been named The British Cellulose and Chemical Manufacturing Company, Ltd. At the end of the war, 1918, the demand for aircraft fabric proofing was almost ended and the brothers started to make yarn. Conditions were dreadful, there was no ventilation or fume extraction, men were kept outside until those inside could work no longer, when they were pulled out and another group went in. Obviously they had been preparing because by 1920 they were producing yarn.

In 1921 the firm's name was changed to British Celanese, Ltd. Demand was increasing and in the mid-1920's 'Celanese' was the 'in thing' for ladies garments, both outer and underwear. By the 1930 they were making 78% of the whole British output. Called artificial silk, the name 'Art Silk' was unofficially accepted and many thought it was some special form of real silk. Gracie Fields, in her song 'Little Bottom Drawer', sang of her undies of 'finest Celanese'. The term 'artificial silk' was very soon to become 'art silk' and many ladies thought of was some higher grade of silk. In a book published in 1950 called 'How The Church Came to Spondon', written by Canon T. Barber, (the father of the then vicar Rev. T.E.M. Barber), described the Union Flag which hung over the 1914/18 was memorial in the church as 'of pure Celanese silk'

Ever since 1920 there had been a demand for labour. By the mid-1920's the firm was advertising and bringing in labour, specially from Lancashire, where the cotton mills were laying off workers. They specially employed weavers, knitters, etc., plus fitters who were experienced in textile machines, and women garment makers, etc.

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The main worry by Celanese (and presumably Courtaulds,) were absolutely terrified by each obtaining the other's secrets. When they were advertising for labour in the 1920's and 30's, their opponents knew they were employing weavers, knitting machine operators, etc., but many other employees were told to use the phrase 'Celanese Worker' to hide their true job. St. Werburgh Church marriage, baptism and burial records during this period include several references to this title where a trade or profession is requested and a Dictionary of British Trade Names includes this title. By the 1930's Celanese was making 78% of the whole British output.

There were many disputes over patents. From 1932 to 1937 there were a number of law suites between Celanese and Courtaulds, every one of which Celanese lost. Celanese even built a separate department with a couple of spinning machines and auxiliary plant to check on various demands, explanations, etc., that Courtaulds made, and to see if any knowledge gained was of use. For many years afterwards, this section was called 'The Litigation Room'. Celanese spent a fortune making a secret 'acid proof' plant to try out ideas for Courtaulds fabrics, but it was never used. Also Celanese tried Celon instead of nylon.

Labour was not well treated, the company's idea being that during the period of high unemployment it was a case of 'take it or leave it'. By 1935 the company did agree to 1.1/2 times day rate for working on Sunday, but nothing extra for Saturday. The worker's views were completely ignored and even reasonable requests refused. The Communist 'Daily Worker' claimed to be the only newspaper giving the 'views of the workers' and said all other papers, even the 'Daily Herald', gave only management views.

The T. & G.W. called for workers at Spondon to join them, and to commence a joint group for 'artificial silk' workers throughout the company, but the company refused to accept it. Shift workers rates were eleven shillings per shift, working six shifts per week, i.e., £3. 6s. 0d. per week. These rates were for males, although few women worked shifts. The average wage in industry in 1937 was £3 per week for men, but only £1. 5s. 0d. for women.

In 1935 the unions asked for recognition of shop stewards, but after several requests, the company refused to accept this, then said as a point of agreement, they would accept shop stewards if the union would allow only the company management to appoint them. Technical apprentices were allowed to join a union, but non-technical apprentices were not the A.Engineering U. similarly asked for recognition of shop stewards, but were told they were only a sideline, and shop stewards must first be approved by the company.

Men were sent from various parts of the country by the Employment Exchanges, specially unmarried men. They worked 13 hours per day but no overtime, even on Sundays. One department, a Dyehouse, had men working permanent nights from 6.00pm to 8.00am five days per week, then were told to work Saturday and Sunday as well. When they objected, the firm made a concession. They were told they need not go to work on Saturday and Sunday until 8.00pm. Dyehouse workers generally (and they were not alone) had 20 minutes lunch breaks, and a woman's pay was £1. 2s. 6d. per week. If plant of any size was out of commission for any reason, the operatives were not paid.

Finally an agreement was made for engineering tradesmen. They were to get time plus half for any overtime work between 10.00pm on Saturday and 8.00am on Monday.

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In some departments, it was necessary to wear rubber boots. These were supplied by the company, but the cost was deducted from their wages. Seventeen-year-olds so called trainees were paid 6.1/2d per hour, but the cost of these boots was still deducted. A friend of mine was a trainee of this age and being paid 6.1/2 per hour. He had an accident on a machine which led to the amputation of one finger. When he returned to work he asked for a rise, saying the job was dangerous. He got it; 1/16th of a penny per hour or 3d. per week for a 48 hour week.

Most canteens were too small and thick with smoke, because they were until around 1950 the only places on site where smoking was allowed. Women complained that the canteens were so crowded and smoky that they were forced to eat outside, but nothing was done to help.

Not until 1975 were male and female rates equalled. (My recollections with my Secretary regarding her new rate, when she was told her new salary, she was astounded!).

WARTIME – 1939/45

Intense preparations were made during the war. One senior staff engineer was made 'A.R.P. Engineer' and among the jobs he had to arrange or design were:

Having parts of the factory painted like a row of houses.

Buying hundreds of conifers to lie in the roofs to make it appear like a woodland.

'Blacking out' all the factory.

Very careful arrangements were made regarding all stocks of poisonous materials were listed and 'SECRET' notes made as to what was to be done in case of invasion. All superintendents (I.e., Senior Managers') were informed about what to do if action to evacuate were received within (a) two hours (b) 24 hours. However, 'superintendents' were to be interviewed secretly and not told why they were being interviewed'. Lists were drawn up of dangerous chemicals and how they were to be disposed of. This list covered six and a half pages of close print foolscap sheets, a chemical on each line.

There was also a statement that secret locations in various directions away from the factory site were to be found where secret documents, money, laboratory equipment, drawings, etc., could be stored. Matlock caves, Via Gellia lead mine, etc., were suggested and three members of management were to search for suitable locations. Ultimately some thirty locations were inspected, which included the woods of Calke Abbey, a working hen-house on a farm near Ashby, a pigsty on another nearby farm, Anchor church, a wooded hollow near the Weaver Hills and a site near Stone, which was considered suitable in all respects, but of course, the final location was subject to where the enemy were located.

A special petrol allowance was made for the Senior Defence Engineer's car to enable the search to take place.

Wartime plant 'disruption' made need making plant unusable. Removing valves (*sic*) or Valve nadles, etc., may be necessary. Valuable laboratory equipment (even gold) to be taken home if necessary. Tanks of chemicals to be only half filled, to allow for dilution with water if the factory was invaded.

Tests were carried on driving cars and commercial vehicles with a mixture of petrol and water. 50% of each worked, but with starting difficulties. In the event of invasion, the wheels were to be taken off all road vehicles, and the connecting rods of railway engines. Key workers were told to find lodgings near the factory, or if this was difficult, they were to sleep on the factory site.

1947/57

My interview. Did I know Coventry! Did I have relatives living and/or working in Coventry, or friends working for Courtaulds in any part of the country.

Security staff on Derby Station.

A Senior Engineer living in Chaddesden took the train to Manchester every weekend and received a memo asking him why. He returned the memo with his one-word reply, 'Seduction'.

Clocking in for staff. Signing in on the Department, meaning we had to be in Department by nine o'clock introduced in the 1950's. Clocking in and out of Dr. Soller, Managing Director, was done by a Security Officer as his car was driven into or out of the factory.

'Bus in bad weather. When I lived up Dale Road, I normally used my bicycle, but if very wet or snowing, I took the company staff 'bus from Ilkeston. In one month it was late because of deep snow three times, and along with all the other passengers, wrote 'bus late' on my clock card. I was sent for and asked to explain why I was late and when I told the boss, he said 'Then you must take an earlier 'bus'. I explained that there was no earlier 'bus so he said 'Then you must walk it, starting out earlier'.

Turn off all road vehicles and connecting rods off the railway engines.

Key workers were instructed to obtain accommodation as near to the factory as possible, but if necessary, they were to sleep on site! Where?

Even after the last war the telephone was an item scarcely used. Departments had messengers who were used to carry information from one section to another. The department I worked on was located near the north end of the factory but we had one section of the plant at the south end. A messenger sat in the corner of the clerical office and at the call 'Alf', a man near retirement, would come along and take whatever message you had, even a walk a mile down to the south end site. To be seen walking within an area of the factory not where you were employed meant almost an arrest if a member of the Security staff saw you. You had to explain the reason why you were there. I remember once being taken into an office to have my credentials checked, then finally told I could proceed, although I had an arranged appointment with the plant 'superintendent'.

There was no 'phone directory until 1952, so if you did not know the other person's phone number, you either picked up the phone and asked for the person by name and department. If this was not on the list at the manual 'phone exchange, there was no alternative but to send a letter by the internal mail system or by your own messenger. Internal and external 'phone calls were often 'tapped' by the supervisor of the 'phone exchange or one of his two senior assistants.

Until after the Courtaulds take-over all out-going mail had to be collected by one person, taken to the head of the Department, (the 'superintendent') and passed by him on to central sorting by messenger if for another department, then re-issued to the other department, who had to send someone to pick up the mail. It was not until 1958 that a regular thrice daily pick-up, sort and delivery system was organised.. Nothing could be ordered from outside except by Purchasing Dept., and all incoming mail was checked before being passed on.

Until 1957 private cars were not allowed on site except for very special management. Later special 'bus services carried workers to the more distant departments. (Now no longer used.)

STAFF ARRANGEMENTS

There was a great divide between the 'on the clock' work force and the 'staff'. It was often discouraged for staff and workpeople to mix on social and sporting occasions. (Me and table tennis). The internal sports events – Soller Cup, Spilman Shield, Dreyfus Trophy, etc. In the 1930's and early 40's works teams were discouraged if they competed with other outside teams, but this finally came to an end in 1950 when the new sports ground was opened at what is now Asterdale.

Even the 'staff' were divided. Unofficially there were three grades, the clerical and non-skilled staff, (including most of the ladies), the lower skilled level (foremen, etc.) and the skilled staff. This was later altered when 'Group 1 and Group 2' staff was introduced.

In the 1950's there were two annual events, the 'Work's Dance' and the 'Staff Ball'. Anyone could go to the Works Dance, although in some Departments even then the staff members were frowned upon for attending and mixing with the common workers – they may pass on vital information. The Staff Ball on the other hand was very strictly staff only and although not essential, dinner jackets and ball gowns were expected.