

J. REILLY'S PATENTS - A FOLLOW-UP STUDY

As a result of Luke Millar's article on J.Reilly's patents, in the Newsletter (Winter 1990) and in collaboration with him, some more details can be added to the biography of these Victorian Manchester entrepreneurs. James Reilly senior was born in Ireland c1801 and died in Manchester. There were at least two sons, James junior, born in Liverpool 1825, and Thomas, who was born in Liverpool in 1827. Although the date of their arrival in Manchester has not been discovered yet, it is certain that in 1851 they lived and worked at no.11 Edge Street, which is adjacent to the old Manchester Smithfield market. These premises were shared with an Irish potato dealer, who also lived there with his family. We can only conclude that the Reilly's chair making business was carried on from the cellars. After 1855 there are 5 changes of business address and 3 of residence, involving a move away from the centre of Manchester.

In 1861 the Trade Directories show a change of address, area and title: New Globe Mahogany Chair Works, Clarence St; Barrack St; and Tatton St; Hulme. It is here then, that the consolidation and implementation of the previous patents is most likely to have taken place. For instance it is reported in 1869 apropos of New Globe that 'a thin perpendicular saw is working up and down...and the workman with a dexterous hand...transforms into a hind leg of a chair'. This precursor of the modern band-saw, is detailed in Reilly's patent No. 2800, dated 1853. The illustration accompanying it shows that it is part of an extensive piece of machinery for mortising, tenoning, and sawing wood. This was a part of a mode of labour division that would have required cheaper floor space than was available in central Manchester.

In 1851 James senior is described as 'Master employing 5 men' and James junior as 'employing 4 men' but by 1869 according to a report in a local periodical 'upwards of 300 people are regularly employed' at the New Globe. We can see that the factory processes were well organised into a 'seasoning' or drying room for the component chair parts prior to assembly. There was a workshop which seemed to be mechanised, where a steam saw reduced a 'two foot square' mahogany log, to a workable size in three minutes. Boys make wooden dowels by machinery. There are separate rooms where preliminary carving is done by machines, a stuffing room, french polishing and packing room, where goods are shipped overseas to Australia and Canada. It is also claimed that Mr. Reilly not only makes his own- and other people's- chairs, but he also makes his own machinery, grinds his own

paint and does 'many other ingenious things'. One of which of these was to establish 'gigantic' swimming baths next door to the chair works. There was also a swimming school, which explains the patent in 1867 for a swimming aid.

This was not the only interest in the Leisure industry. James Reilly Jr. purchased the Pomona Pleasure Gardens, Hulme in 'approximately 1868; these gardens covered an area of over 21 acres. The proprietor of St. James's Theatre is also listed as Mr James Reilly, which he opened in 1884 and St. James's Hall, opened in 1881, both in Oxford Road, Manchester. In 1892 'James Reilly Ltd;' took over as a going concern, the business of chairmaking, which was being carried on by the trustees and executors of the late James junior, and the company was formed, by seven subscribers, including James' son William Wovenden Reilly. In 1913 it was considered advisable to voluntarily wind up 'James Reilly Ltd.' and the final winding up meeting followed in 1919. There are many questions still unanswered in this project. For instance, I would welcome information regarding the whereabouts of the 'favourite chest of tools' that James Reilly bequeathed to his son William, and was his wish for 'James Reilly Workshops' offering chairmaking training to 'poor and deserving' ever realised?

Mr. Richard Owen, an R.F.S. member has kindly provided a photograph of a J. Reilly's patent chair in his possession. As the Reilly chairs come in many forms, it would greatly assist this study if any member could record or contact me as to the whereabouts of other J.Reilly chairs. The use of exterior bolt heads is often an initial clue. Note the exposed bolt heads on the chairs in the Pomona Palace Tea Rooms (Fig 13). Photographic evidence was collected of damage to the Pomona Palace Tea Rooms and the Chairworks (both owned by James Reilly) following an explosion in 1887, at the neighbouring chemical works of Roberts Dale & Co.

Mrs. Barbara Ferguson,

Fig. 13 Pomona Palace Tea Rooms, 1887

An interesting example of the type of market for these chairs in the late 19th century.

Photograph courtesy of Manchester Public Libraries

