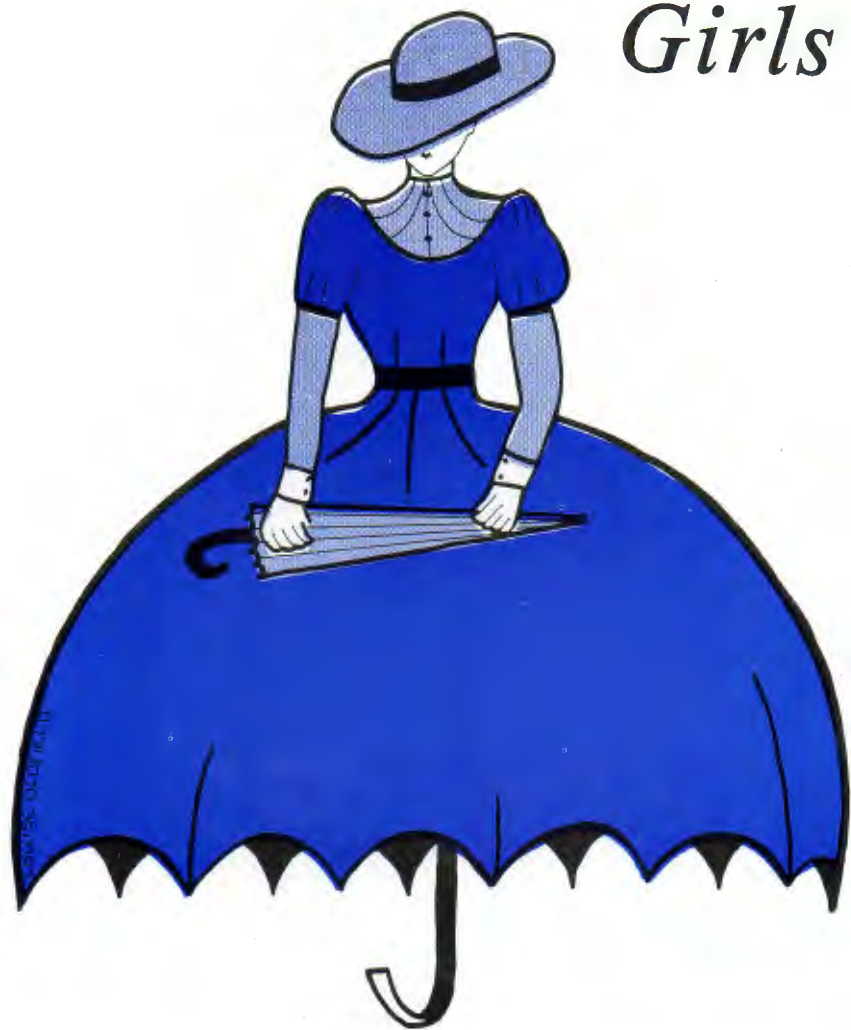


*Stocksbridge* ———  
——— *UMBRELLA*  
*Girls*



**This booklet was produced from oral history research carried out by students from Stocksbridge High School and Stocksbridge Community Library staff, with the help of the many local people and former 'umbrella girls' who got in contact with us after seeing publicity about the project. (See back page)**

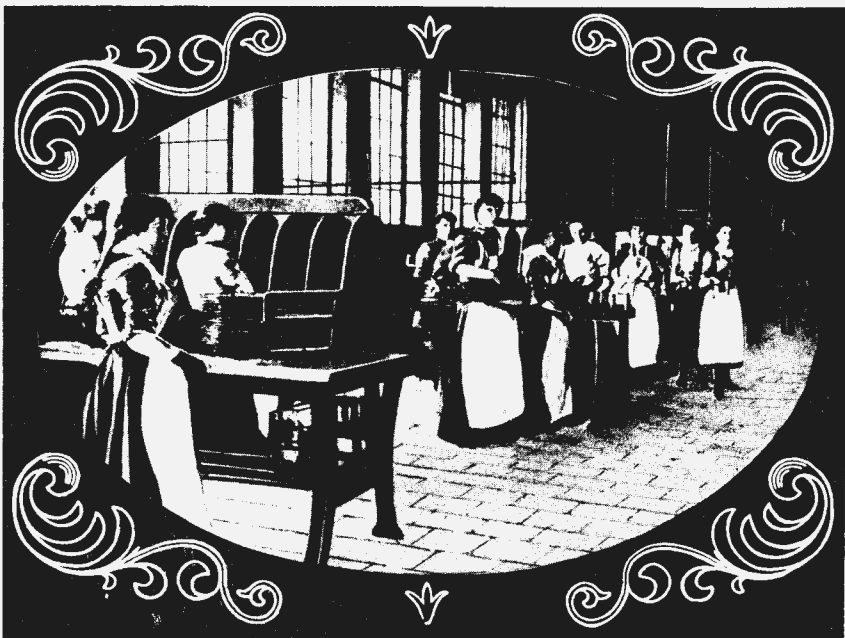
### *5th Year Forum Group*

Michael Bate, Richard Booker, Richard Cheetham, Simon Ellison, Debbie Froggatt, Denise Haley, Wendy Holmes, Kieron Hush, Michelle Jeffreys, Paul Johnson, Louise Oldfield, Mark Raynor, Gary Ryan, Mark Scholey, Susan Storf, Michelle Tingle, Joanne Turton, Joanne Waller, Deborah Webster, Julian Woods, Elizabeth Wright.

These students used some of their 'Forum Group' time on Wednesday afternoons from September 1986 to research this project about 'Fox's' umbrella works in Stocksbridge, interviewing the women and men who worked there in the old days in small groups in both the library and local people's homes.

Several social events were also organised where the umbrella girls met each other to chat about old times — some of their memories are presented here in an attempt to recapture a little of Stocksbridge past.

— *Stocksbridge Umbrella Girls* —



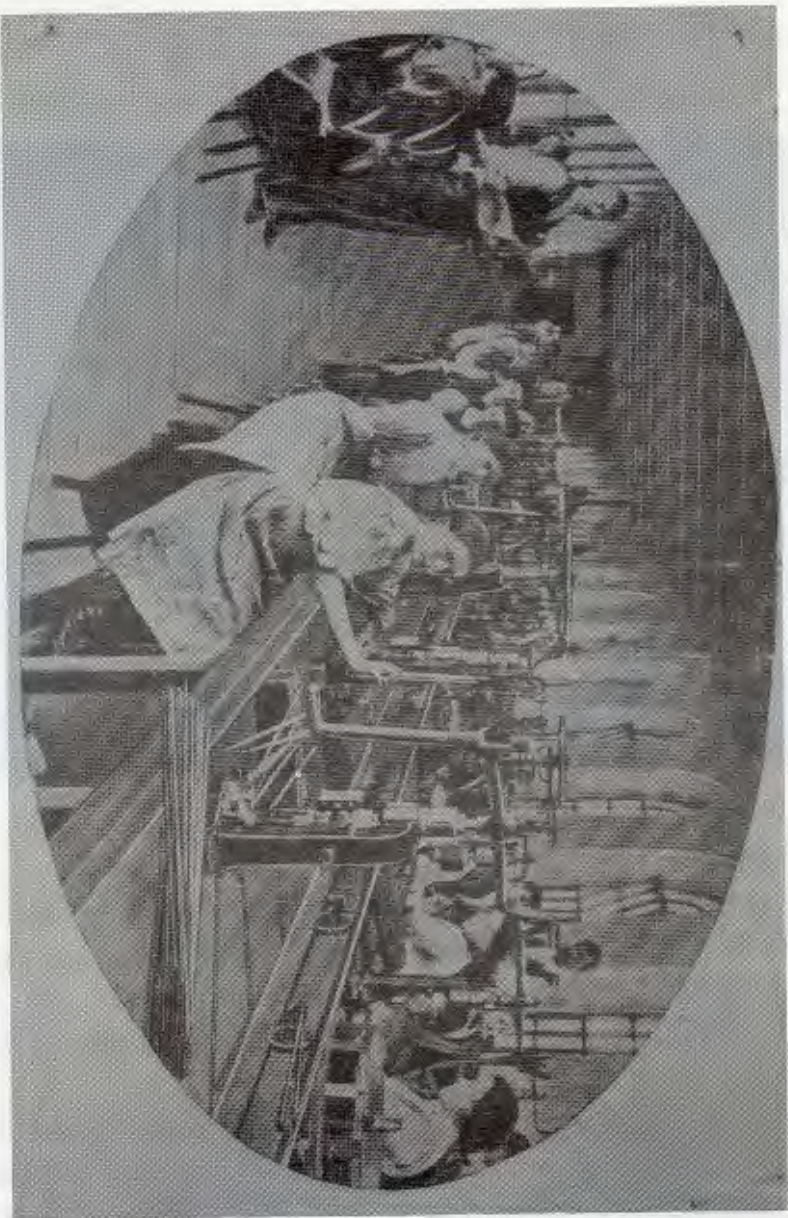
Researched by  
Stocksbridge High School 5th Year Forum Group,  
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Written by Irene Sydes.

*Remembered by 'THE UMBRELLA GIRLS'!*

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Making the ribs, 1910



# Making Umbrella Frames

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*'The Manufacture of Umbrella Frames and Tubes at Stocksbridge occupies . . . 300 workers, a majority of whom are girls . . . the finishing department is quite a speciality of the gentler sex.'* (C.H. Bird-David, 1910)

The gentler sex are shown in Plate 1 making umbrella ribs and overseen by a foreman. By 1922 Joseph Sheldon devotes a chapter to the umbrella department in his book *'The Founders and Builders of the Stocksbridge Works'*. Amongst the many men mentioned we do find a few ladies, Sarah Webster, Sarah Marsh, Lizzie Rodgers, Mary Dych, who assisted foreman John Thornhill in the Japan

*Fox under umbrella trade mark.*



Shop, and Mary Lang, known as Bracky, one of the many Irish girls who came to Fox's. Many of the 'umbrella girls' who were employed at Fox's some years later have shared their memories with us of the years spent in the works between 1910 and the second world war.

The process of making the umbrellas seems to have been very long, and the chain of production involved men more extensively in the early parts, whereby the huge coils of wire were flattened, re-shaped and passed through furnaces ready for cutting up. Once the rods, or tubes have been cut off into six feet lengths, by a machine, one of the girls would collect them and hand-saw them into smaller lengths before hoisting them via a pulley, into the shops. By the 1920's this was done by machine.

The longer lengths, the *ribs*, and the smaller ones, the *stretchers*, were hardened and tempered and then intensively tested by hand or machine. *'I had to wear a big brown apron and a leather pad at front, and some things on us arms to protect t'sleeves ; we used to mek our own. This pad was used to straighten ribs and stretchers . . you had to bang them against the pad, else I would have worn me overall out . . . there were little hooks on us benches. We used to straighten 'em if they were a bit bent ; if they were too hard they broke.'*

If the ribs and stretchers were too hard, they snapped under testing and then had to be put aside for melting down ; if they were too soft, they bent and had to be straightened using fingers, a leather pad and a hook.



At the end of the day, the girls divided the ribs, either 21-inch or 24-inch, into bundles separated by pieces of paper, and piled them up. This part of the process was particularly dirty work. There was usually a bucket of water in the shop, the girls bringing in their own soap and towels, and it was the job of the youngest girl to change the water for tea breaks : *'She'd fetch it from t'hardening shop so it were a bit warm'*.

*'I used to put the long rib and the short rib together, and we'd rivet them with a little hammer, it were like being in prison.'* This was *gitting* : once the ribs and stretchers had been inspected and passed, they were sent to the *gitting* shop where the ribs were fixed to the stretchers using *gits* ; testing was carried out to see if the ribs had been cracked by the *gitting*. At this stage the ribs were still very rough and dirty.

They were then sent to the japan shop for lacquering. *'I was offered t'chance to work in t'japanning shop'* — and many girls seized the opportunity to get away from the dust and grime. The ribs emerged from being japanned all black and shiny, and the girls from this shop could be identified by the deep black stains of their pinafores. The ribs were rechecked for length and entries made in their notebooks of how many bundles had been completed. The next stage was *'pegging'* or *'bodging'* to remove any lacquer from the holes, before tying-in the ribs by fitting into a notch and runner to make the frame.

*'Some ladies put the Fox's paragon trade mark in'. Each umbrella bore the company trade mark which was fitted on by hand to one of the ribs ; brollies for ladies and gentlemen's walking umbrellas had an additional 'ferrule' on top. A final check and the frames were ready to be covered and despatched all over the world.*

*Inside cap for Fox 'Paragon' rib framed umbrella (1860).*



*'I used to tie the ribs of the umbrella frames together. We had a small hammer and a little anvil and a pair of nippers. After threading the ribs through the little knotch we twisted it off, the wire, to make a very small knot, then put a runner where the tube went, then it was completed in another department where handles were put on.'*



# Working at Sammy Fox's

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*'There were nothing else to do in them days you had either to go into service or you'd go into t'umbrellas. There were nothing else at all.'*

*Inside cap for 'Fox' solid rib framed umbrella (1850).*



In the early days of the century in Stocksbridge, girls were expected at thirteen years old to go into service or join Fox's. Many followed in their sister's footsteps and the first days were very bewildering. *'She (my sister) took me down in this funny place, a dirty old bench it were, and there we sat eating our breakfast — there were this great machinery in — it was some underground place... where we had to have our breakfast. We went home for us dinners.'*

*'Polly, I've brought you some lasses, now which does tha' want? Well... I'll 'ave that little 'un there' — and that were me! I were that small I couldn't reach machine. They'd to put me on a duckboard to stand on.'*

Breakfast was usually at about 8.30 after a six o'clock start; the girls carried some bread, and some tea in a blue can which they mashed at work. Sometimes they had to work through, sneaking bites of the bread from under their overalls. Because there was no canteen, 12.25 saw the roads around the works were crowded with bodies scuttling quickly home for dinner. *'We wore them berets — at dinner time we din't have time to tek 'em off, us mothers would have dinner ready and we'd sit with them on and have us dinner and rush back again straight away.'*

In one instance a girl's father also worked at Fox's; she had to run home, collect her father's hot dinner tied up in a basin and deliver it to a part of the works which was a very long way. It was many years before her father discovered he could get out through the 'top-end' and meet his daughter there. *'It saved us. We'd been going round there all that time and then he thought hissself about poking out there to meet us.'* She then ran home and was met at the door with her dinner. *'My dinner were a slice or two of bread in those days'*

Hours were long, 8 until 5.30 or 6. At busy times, which was more often than not, the girls had to arrive at 6 am. The starting wage at 13 seems to have been between 7/-

*Photo : Courtesy Mrs. E. Hill*



Sorting the ribs, 1929

and 9/- in the early 1920's, rising to 14/9d at 16. *'Come on Alice, I'll tek you to work, but tha'll have to stop in t'time-ouse while they set thee on.'*

On arrival at the works, the girls had to climb upstairs to clock in. Late arrival at say 6.03, meant working until 6.30 for no pay.

On Saturday there was cleaning up to be done as well (unpaid). Starting at 11.30 in the rivetting shop the girls had to collect up the rivets from the floor with magnets, sprinkle the dust with water before sweeping and then place brown paper sheets under each bench. The benches were then scrubbed down and the window bottoms cleaned.

*'There were wooden floors, and we used to have to go round with a lekking-can, like in t'garden, to slack dust down so we didn't get smothered in dust.'*

*Trade marks tablets attached to a stretcher on every frame.*



## Pay & Conditions

*'Mester Hayward were a very, very strict man.'*

*'Bet tha' daren't blow that paper bag up'  
'Course I dare' . . . Wilf Harward come racing down  
t'shop. 'Who were that . . . you be careful. I sacked thee  
sister 5 times.'*

*'If tha' can tek time off in my time tha can tek it off in thee  
own.'*

*'As soon as they got married or got pregnant they had to  
leave. If they had a rush order they'd send for married  
ones back, and as soon as they were done they'd sack  
'em again.'*

*'We didn't get much wages but we had happy times . . .  
it's nice to meet old friends at these meetings.'*

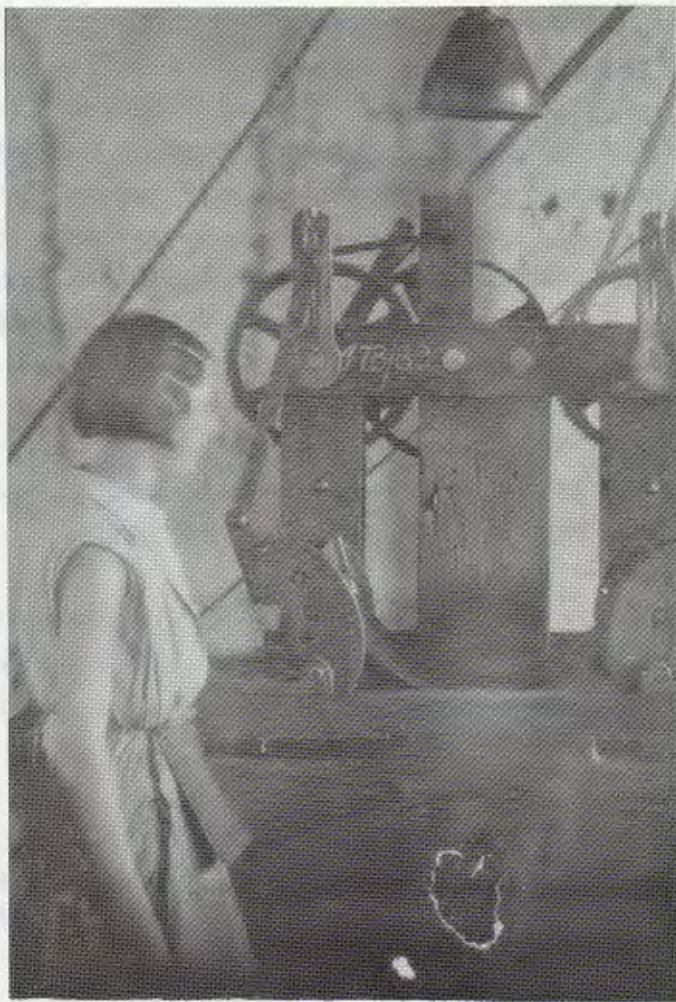
The first pay packet was handed out at the end of the second week, the joy at receiving it was tempered slightly after having to give mother two thirds of it, but it did provide *'Money to buy some dresses'*.

*'I was on piece work ; my sister she were on day work . . .  
she got about 7/- a week, and I was on piece work and I  
could earn about 7/- a week. I think we got 2½d a  
gross . . but I can't remember . . '*



*'It were 9/- a week. It went up on your birthday, but not a lot. You used to have to go in and ask for a rise when it were your birthday.'*

*'I went to work in a shawl when I first started in 1913, then in a coat when I got a bit more cash.'*



*Photo : Courtesy Mrs Oxspring*

Testing the ribs, 1931

## Health & Safety

*'Worst accident we knew about were a girl who worked in t'Japan shop who got a false leg because she'd caught it in t'machine.'*

*'There were no toilet, and if you wanted to have a wash (it were dirty work) there were just a bucket for us, with some soap.'*

*'Each machine had an arm with a naked flame, that was what we had to use for light. We did get the odd burn as we wore greasy gloves, but that was what we had to accept in those days, not many danger guards.'* (c. 1913)

*'I loved the night shift in t'war when there were no gaffers. Women did very heavy work in t'war, lifting sheet metal when there were no cranes.'*

*'Long hair had to be tied back from your face so as not to catch in machines.'*

*'Marion Firth was t'union woman for t'umbrellas.'*



**ÆGIS PARAGON**

## After the Hooter blew

*'An outing were to Sheffield. . . there were trains run from Smithy Hill, the paddy train to Deepcar Station and then we picked up a train to Sheffield.'*

Dances were held frequently at the Victory Club, Midhope School and Bradfield, and cost about 1/- and the girls walked home as there were no buses. An annual dance organised by Fox's was held at the City Hall and buses were provided for the employees. Some of the girls used to enjoy attending Harvest Festivals at the various churches; the Garden Village Tableau offered the chance to decorate a dray for the theme *'Fox's Frames Cover the World'*.

The *'Fuddle'* at Christmas time offered the chance to bring in pork pies, trifle, sandwiches and eclairs, and if there was any spare cash, trimmings to decorate the benches and window bottoms. Weekly savings helped to spread the cost. Carols were sung and *'t'bosses used to come round and wish us all the best.'* Some of the girls were in the *'Folly Troop'*, the works entertainment troupe, and the *'Ladies Jazz Band'* (see plate 4), and it was possible to find a husband in the works! *'There was a break. . . I wasn't supposed to go into t'works, the rail mill. I wanted to go with 'em. . . and I met him (my husband) then. He were an electrician at Fox's — that's where I met him.'*

*'Do I have any particular memories of my time at Fox's?  
. . . Just happy.'*

*Photo : Courtesy Gertie Caswell*



*'Ladies Jazz Band', late 1920's*

## **Glossary of Terms**

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*Bending.* This was done to umbrella ribs and stretchers on a press, as part of the testing process.

*Bodging.* Picking or knocking the lacquer out of the holes in umbrella ribs (after varnishing in Japan shop). Later known as 'pegging'.

*Ferrule.* Pointed spoke put on the tip of ladies' and gents' walking umbrellas. (Hence the umbrella-cum-walking stick.)

*Gitting.* Joining the ribs to the stretchers by rivetting them with a little hammer into holes on the flat end of the stretchers.

*Heading.* Fitting little tips onto the end of the ribs.

*Japanning.* Dipping the umbrella frames and tubes into brown lacquer.

*Offalls.* Leather caps to protect finger and thumb while pressing ribs against a leather pad to test for strength.

*Pinning in.* Fitting the two bits of stretcher together with a hinge.

*Ribs.* Long flexible pieces forming the dome of the umbrella (now often called 'spokes').

*Stretchers.* Shorter straight pieces joining the ribs to make the frame open when completed.

*Tips.* Small pieces on the end of the ribs to which the cover was attached.

*Tube.* Shaft of the umbrella.

*Tying-in.* Fitting the notch and runner to the ribs to complete the frame.



## Our Thanks To . . .

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for their help in chatting to us about the old days in the umbrella shops.

Thanks also to Stocksbridge Library staff especially Jean Couldwell, and photographer Colin Johnson (Stocksbridge College).

*IF YOU HAVE ANY MEMORIES YOU WOULD LIKE TO PASS ON, WE WOULD BE PLEASED TO HEAR FROM YOU.*

*Sally Christopher*

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*Photo : Courtesy Mr. Swallow*



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