

FOX UMBRELLAS AND PARAPLUIES

By Brenda Duffield of Stocksbridge and District History Society

A familiar aspect of Stocksbridge manufacturing history still holds its fascination because of the unanswered questions about a neglected area of its development. Until quite recently little has been known of the details of its expansion or of the business pressures which led to the eventual closure of the Umbrella Department at Stocksbridge Works.

Then in the late 1980s, Trevor Lodge was given access to Company records and produced a series of articles in the Works Gazette entitled **The Stocksbridge Story**. In Part 16, **Pastures New**, he summarised the history of the umbrella and explained how Samuel Fox triumphed over his rival manufacturers by applying for patents as early as 1852. He had his colleague and old friend Joseph Hayward to thank for the design of the grooved rib in lightweight steel, which made the modern umbrella so much more manageable than the old contraptions of cane, whalebone and canvas. Hayward also invented the **machine** for producing multiple wires and another which would clean, straighten and temper the ribs.

At this point, on referring back to Joseph Kenworthy's 1914 book **The Old Cotton Mill at Stocksbridge and what it became**, we can find a detail which leads to an explanation of a later mystery. In the chapter on **The Paragon Frame and its Inventor**, he recorded that Samuel Fox had to wait for a rival's patent to expire before he could proceed with manufacture, not because of the design of the rib itself, but because of the round-headed pin inserted at its tip. Of such minutiae is Local History sometimes made!

The mystery arose when we noticed in the Census of 1861 a man of German descent who was entered as a Glass-blower, over a century after glass production had ended in this valley. It was not until a descendant of his applied for help with her family tree that we discovered that he had been recruited to supply the glass tips which now were applied to the umbrella ribs. The 1865 Children's Employment Commission report explained the procedure: *In one shop a number of girls were engaged in what is strictly glass work. They tip the umbrella ribs with a glassy substance to imitate ivory, by heating the iron red hot in gas jets blown by steam power, and applying a composition* Christian Schultz was described in 1871 as a Manager, probably of that department. His son, Henry, also became an employee, in the Engineering Department.

It is such personal details which cover the bare bones of historical fact. More than a century later, a valuable personal record was made in **Stocksbridge Umbrella Girls**, an Oral History project conducted by Sally Christopher and

Irene Sydes with a 5th. Year group at the High School in 1987. The ladies whose reminiscences were recorded worked between 1910 – 1914, and are listed inside the back cover. This booklet contains copies of some of the trademarks used, and is still requested from time to time by certain booksellers. [You could reproduce this cover, but not the trademarks it contains.]

Expansion of Umbrella production came about due to the need for greater power than the fall of water from the River Don would generate. Samuel Fox bought the disused Ecklands Bridge Paper Mill at Millhouse, Thurlstone, in 1866 and converted it to wire-drawing. However, by 1876 he found it was no longer profitable. He told the Board, of what was by now S. Fox & Co. that Joseph Hayward and another employee, their Company Secretary William Hoyland, wished to use it for manufacture of umbrella frames. William Hoyland's ideas of how the business should develop did not coincide with Fox's, but he did not stand in their way. The Board agreed to lease the Eckland Bridge Works to Hoyland and Hayward, providing they purchase all their steel from Stocksbridge Works. The new Company was registered as William Hoyland & Co. and took out a patent for the Flexus frame. Eventually, William Hoyland purchased the property outright.

In 1987 William Hoyland & Co. was acquired by the Readicut Group and the following year saw the reconciliation with Fox in the renamed Hoyland Fox. The Company twice won the Queen's Award for Export Achievement, and in 1992 was presented with the Master Cutler Award by the Duke of Edinburgh. In the 21st. century Hoyland Fox continue to produce sports umbrellas. Eighty percentage of production is exported, mainly to France. A single retail franchise in this country is held by a firm in High Holburn, London.

Hoyland Fox own the trademark rights and kindly gave us permission to use the Paragon name and the Fox under the Umbrella logo for our quarterly newsletter.

[Please reproduce this cover title-page here if possible]

France had been a customer of Samuel Fox in the early days, but he found the duty levied on his frames too high to be profitable. His response was typical of that astute business brain. In about 1860 he opened a factory in Amiens, with an import base at Boulogne. He persuaded a number of skilled workmen to go there to set up production, under the control of his nephew, William Fox. This firm eventually became independent and in 1905 was registered as William Fox & Co. (Amiens) Ltd., but never really prospered, and was wound up in 1914.

No list has ever been found of who those emigrant workers were. The only clues are the names of children, born in France, who came back here and figure in later Census Returns. In 1871 Annie Braddock, niece of Albert

Schofield, aged 11, was living with him at Half Hall and ten years later was in lodgings at Corn Mill Row and described as an Umbrella Worker, born in France. Albert Braddock was 18 in 1881, nephew of Albert Schofield, born in Amiens. In 1871 also, Widow Hannah Firth had a son Thomas, 14, and a daughter, Hannah, 13, both Millhands and born in Boulogne, France...

Again, it was an enquiry from a granddaughter of the younger Hannah which led to the discovery of an entry of marriage in Ecclesfield Church Register. Her father was Joseph Firth, umbrella maker. He had signed the register, so was literate. There was a family story that he had died in France and had been brought home for burial. There were two burials of a Joseph Firth at the Ebenezer Chapel in 1861 and 1863. The daughter Hannah became Mrs. Henry Bodsworth and produced a family of 21 children. Older readers may remember their shop on the corner of Victoria St. and Manchester Road.

Now we know that at least one family actually settled in Amiens, and the information came from an unexpected source. Correspondence with ex-pat. Harland Thickett has recently revealed that he has relatives there. Six generations back, Henry Thickett, son of Thomas and Ann Thickett (nee Brammall) of Midhope, married Marie Louise Pauline Brielle of Amiens at Folkstone on 25th. August 1862. Their son Henry was born the following year at Amiens as have five more generations of Henry (not Henri) Thicketts. Still living are Hubert Henry, his sons Eric Henry and David Henry, and grandsons Julien Henry and Henry Hubert Serge Thickett. The only puzzle now is how they pronounce it.

Further details of the French Thicketts show links with other names. The wedding of the first Henry was witnessed by William Braddock, and his early death, perhaps of cholera in 1870, was witnessed by Benjamin Fox, factory manager. French records are very detailed; the report of the marriage of the second Henry included the names of grandparents as well as parents, with the date and place of death.

M. Thickett believes that the factory was bombed in 1914 and no attempt was made to rebuild, but the street is still known as Rue des Parapluies.

Meanwhile, at Stocksbridge, events had taken a different turn. S. Fox & Co. continued to take on new ideas – the invisible seam in 1885 and the Fox steel tube in 1902 and, in face of increasing continental competition, the beaded – edge rib in 1934. After a break enforced by World War I, and as part of the United Steel Companies, a new generation of nimble-fingered girls had to be trained in the multi-skilled work. The Fox Cub frame was made from hardened and tempered carbon spring steel solid ribs and stretchers, fitted to a springless wooden shaft. making it strong and wind-resistant. In 1967 the British Steel Corporation took control of Stocksbridge Works and in 1970

closed the Umbrella Department after more than a hundred years of production.

A set of photographs were taken before closure, most of which are labelled with the process being demonstrated, but only some with names of the individual worker. We have identified Joyce Brookes, Wendy Cooke and Grace Cardwell, but appeal to readers to help with those reproduced here.