Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

TRADE AND COMMERCE IN VICTORIAN READING — H11/L

Sutton and Sons Sack



Reading is known as the town of the three Bs Biscuits, Beer and Bulbs the three industries on the which the nineteenth century growth of the town was dependent. The third B - Bulbs - refers to Alfred Sutton & Sons Ltd., the seed grower and distributor.

Suttons began life in 1837 when 'John Sutton & Son' began business. As with both Huntley & Palmers and Simonds the advent of the railway helped the growth of the business. Suttons took pride in producing high quality seeds which, like the biscuits and beer, were exported all over the British Empire. They even began supplying royal farms and gardens and their Reading headquarters were proudly named 'The Royal Seed Establishment'. At the turn of the century Suttons employed 2,000 people and had an annual turnover of £210,000.

The headquarters building fronted Market Place, taking up much of the eastern side. Behind the grand offices facing the street there were six acres of sheds, where the seeds were packed. Suttons produced small packets of seeds for domestic use, but they also supplied seeds in bulk for commercial growers, farmers and market gardens. The sack in this box would have been used for this latter purpose.

The seeds themselves were produced in large fields and greenhouses on the eastern edge of town. In the late nineteenth century passengers on Great Western trains passing through Reading could see both the large red brick Huntley & Palmers biscuit factory, with its smoking chimneys, followed by dazzling fields of red, white and yellow flowers. However, in 1974 the company moved to Torquay, apparently because they found it difficult to get part-time workers.

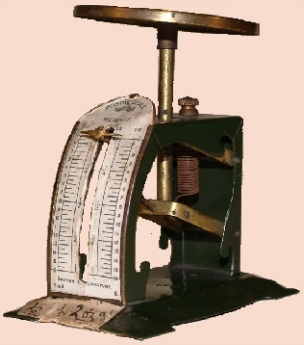


Sorting seed packets in the Market Place headquarters, 1947.

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Postal Scale



Reading's growth, like that of other British towns, was dependent on the development of an effective transport and communication system. Both Huntley & Palmers and Sutton & Son sold their goods nationally and internationally. Reading railway station was opened in March 1840. Sutton & Son had a large mail-order business and made much use of the newly instituted penny post. In 1840 Martin Hope Sutton (the son of John Sutton) began to send out, free of charge, catalogues containing notes for amateurs on the proper methods of cultivating flowers and vegetables. He also sent out catalogues to farmers. Another inducement to order from Sutton & Son was the fact that the firm sent out packets carriage paid. This small set of scales is of the kind that would have been used to weigh packages of seeds in order to work out the cost of postage. It was made by Setten & Durward, manufacturers of office supplies, first established in Birmingham in 1877. They started manufacturing goods with a trademark featuring the letters 'IXL' ('I excell') in 1907. As this is absent from this set of scales, they must have been made before this date.

W. Thorp Stoneware Bottle



While Reading grew because of large businesses like Suttons & Sons, numerous other small enterprises were set up to cater for the needs of the booming population. W. Thorp was probably the owner of a small grocer's shop that sold (and probably made) ginger beer. Coley Street (originally Pinckney's Lane, the name was changed in 1832), where W. Thorp had his business, was once a busy street that ran through the centre of Coley. The bottle probably dates from between 1876-1900. Coley was the area between Castle Street and Berkley Avenue. The land sloped down towards the Holybrook and Coley was famous for Coley Passage, known as the Steps, which ran up the hill and linked together the streets of terrace housing that ran along the slope. The housing around Coley Street was poor and the area had a reputation as being something of slum. W. Thorp must have made a meagre business if he relied entirely on local people. Coley Street disappeared, with the rest of what was once a crowded neighbourhood, when the Inner Distribution Road was built in the late 1960s.

This stoneware bottle was made by J. Bourne & Son of Denby Potteries, near Derby. W. Thorp's name has been quickly stencilled on before firing.

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Jones Brothers Bottle



Rather than ginger beer this bottle contained fizzy mineral water. The manufacturing technique to create fizzy water was invented in the late eighteenth century and was soon popular. However, there was always a danger that the gas pressure would build up inside the bottle and the cork would blow out. This could be prevented if the bottles were kept on their sides so that the corks remained moist. Special egg-shaped, round-bottomed bottles were patented by William Hamilton in 1809 to prevent explosions. Later, from about 1870, egg-shaped bottles with a flat-bottom (called 'flat eggs' or 'improved Hamiltons'!) were introduced. This kind of bottle appealed to shop-keepers as it could be stood upright. This bottle is of the 'flat egg' type.

Jones Brothers were a small mineral water company. Their Thames valley location, in Reading and Oxford, is reflected in their trademark, which shows a coxed-eight in full-throttle on a river. In 1918 Jones Brothers merged with another mineral water company, Tunbridge's (established in 1870), to form Tunbridge, Jones & Co. This medium-sized firm was located at 35-37 Castle Street not far from W. Thorp's small shop in Coley. In the 1949 *Kelly's Directory* for Reading they advertise themselves as wholesalers and retailers of 'table waters, wines and ciders'. They also produced fruit squashes and sweet fizzy pops for children. In 1959 they expanded by opening a premises in Craddock Road. However, in 1972 their Castle Street offices were closed and in 1993 the firm closed down entirely.

This bottle was made by Redfearn Brothers of Barnsley. They began trading under that name in 1910. As Jones Brothers merged with Tunbridge in 1918, this bottle must have been made between those years.

Embossing Seal



Embossing seals were used by solicitors and chartered accountants to emboss official documents. This example belonged to Ernest Francis & Son, a firm of chartered accountants, whose offices were at 8 The Forbury, Reading. The embossing plates in this example are for 'Brigham & Co. Limited', presumably clients of Ernest Francis. The two plates could be unscrewed and others inserted for use on official documents for different clients. The Museum of Reading has a number of plates from Ernest Francis for local businesses such as 'Spencers Wood (Tractor Repairs) Limited' and the 'Prospect Park Brick Company' of Tilehurst.

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As Reading grew the need for solicitors, accountants and other services increased. Their offices tended to congregate near the High Court in The Forbury and along Friar Street. Today Friar Street is notable for its pubs and cheap shops, but until the 1960s it was very much the street for the 'professional' classes. This embossing seal was made by Jordan and Sons, who seem also to have been printers and publishers in London between about 1900 and 1935.

Reading Gas Company Embossing Plates



This set of plates would have been used with an embossing sealer similar to the one included in this box.

The introduction of gas was another development which fostered the economic growth of the town. The Reading Gas Company was founded in 1862, out of two rival companies which date back to 1818. Gas was used during this period for both street and domestic lighting. The company's emblem featured the shield from Reading's coat-of-arms. A large and colourful cast iron version of this emblem can be found on the bridge in Gas Works Road, Reading. The gas works were situated here, next to the River Kennet, because gas was obtained from coal and, before the railway came to town, supplies were brought in by barge.

Queen Victoria Diamond Jubilee Horse Brass

This brass plaque, which would have once decorated a horse, commemorates Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. In the sixty years of her reign commemorated by this souvenir Great Britain went through dramatic economic and social changes. Reading, too, changed dramatically, growing from a population of 19,000 at the beginning of the Victorian period to over 88,000 in 1911. If you look closely you will see that it has the dates of her reign 1837-1897 either side of her head and at the top are the letters V and R, which stand for Victoria Regina. The words 'RECORD REIGN' are written at the bottom. The Queen is pictured here looking mature and wearing a crown and a veil, in contrast to earlier images of her on coins and medals where she is often depicted as youthful and without a crown.



The name E. Seymour can be found on the back. This is perhaps the name of the manufacturer. This is a 'cast brass' that is, it was made by pouring hot metal into a cast, or mould. Such brasses often, as here, have two projections on their back surface which allowed for the brasses to be held in a vice during finishing. These were then filed off so that they wouldn't damage the harness.

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