

The history of J & A Collins Ltd in the 1960s

by Ted Collins

These are my memories of working for my Dad and his brothers at their business at weekends and school holidays at their factory in Bridgend near Stonehouse in the 1960s.



J. A. Collins building on the corner of Downton Road, Bridgend.



*Ted Collins
and his father Jesse Collins*

Jesse Collins had been to the plastic exhibition at Olympia in London in the late 1950s, looking for new materials to use for manufacture and design. This is where the production of fibreglass mouldings began. One possibility was rowing boats. Also fridges with doors which could be opened from inside, as children had died through being locked in and unable to escape. This involved using magnets, but the idea failed because the magnets froze! They also found a new material called Vinamould which is a rubber type product, able to be melted and used to make flexible moulds.

Gradually, they developed the method which was patented to make coal and log effect fires, using Vinamould moulds to reproduce a very realistic effect. From these you could achieve undercuts with flexible moulds using real coal, logs and plaster of Paris masters. Vinamould could be purchased in red – very flexible and yellow – very firm. It was found that a 50% mix was just flexible enough to extract the moulding but hard enough not to melt during the curing time.



The original moulds were made in a wooden frame or cardboard box. But eventually a fibre glass casing was made for each master, to make the mould more stable for accurate dimension purposes, and also to use less rubber. Once the mould had worn out, the rubber could be re-melted to make new moulds. But this could only be done a few times, as it was very difficult to entirely clean the rubber of fibreglass debris. There was a great demand for these fuel effects, so in the early sixties they moved into a new factory in Bridgend, Stonehouse, calling the company J & A Collins Ltd.



Workers at J.A. Collins.
The young boy is
Nicholas Collins, the
lady on the right is
Dorothy Nelmes.

If you recognise the
other ladies please let
us know.

Gradually they developed a production line, employing many local people. At its height it employed an evening shift as well.

There were several departments there. One room was devoted to making the masters for the fuel effects for the different companies supplied, such as a firm called Price in Birmingham. In the rubber moulding shop was a large 3 phase melting machine, but also moulds were made by melting the rubber in a jerry can over a gas ring, creating terrible smelly fumes. The main fibreglass moulding shop had a circular roller track system. This was where one circuit would complete the moulding process – entailing applying Johnson's liquid floor polish as a release agent, then a coat of gelcoat – both applied by hand using a paintbrush. The glass fibre (coming on a roll called roving) and polyester resin (purchased from Arkright Resins in Camberley, Surrey) were applied by a spray chopper gun chopping it into inch long lengths. It also mixed the right proportion of catalyst to the resin.

Jesse's brother Alec Collins was the main operator of this machine. This was then followed by a team of stipplers who compacted the materials together using a stippling brush. The moulds were then passed through a metal tunnel with heaters to post cure the mouldings. A wind-up alarm clock was used to measure the timing. They were then taken out of the tunnel and extracted from the moulds before being taken to the trim shop, where they were trimmed by a hand-operated swaging machine and tinsnips. Next was the paint shop (paint purchased from Baileys Paint at Chalford, Stroud) where a combination of spraying and hand-painting took place, attaining a life-like effect of the coal and logs. Cellulose black paint was used on the coal, with the edges rubbed with a dry brush with grey paint to resemble ash. The logs had a base coat of black, then 2 shades of brown and a light coat of green paint. Log ends were painted with a dark cream, and when wet, a swirl of brown. Both then received a light coating of micro-dust to create a sparkle in the ashes of the fire. They were then painted with black underneath to prevent light showing through the solid parts of the effect, before proceeding to the packing department for dispatch.

Other products designed and manufactured in the factory were large yellow fibreglass planters, resembling ice cream bars, for the Walls factory in Gloucester, and large yellow houses for R A Lister's grain-drying machine.



Another product was tea trays. The fibre glass moulds were originally cast from an aluminium pattern. The process of manufacture was a coat of simonised polish as a release agent, then two layers of fibreglass chopped strand matt. The variety of colourful patterns was achieved by using patterned material bought from Fothergill and Harvey, with a final layer of fibreglass scrim to achieve a non-slip surface. Once trimmed the edge was either decorated with gold paint or claylastic.

They were then asked by another company to develop fibreglass fishponds, a new product. The first attempt was inspired by a footprint of a shoe. Then a model was made of a much larger pond, incorporating a fibreglass edging of imitation Cotswold stone. The ponds were released from the mould with compressed air.



Photos of a model to agree the full size shape

Sadly after a few years, through fierce competition, the business went into voluntary liquidation and my father passed away in 1969.

I continued in the glass fibre industry for another ten years before moving on to new ventures.