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The Stonehouse Paper & Bag Mills, Ltd.

THE HISTORY OF LOWER MILLS.

Rapid Rise to Posterity.

As we journey up and down the Stroud valley there seems to be no end to the variety of industries to be found nestling by the side of a gently flowing stream or at the foot of one of the beautiful Cotswold eminences. So our representative on his quest for new and interesting industries to put before the readers of the "Chronicle" is ever stumbling upon something different, his latest find being the Stonehouse Paper & Bag Mills, Ltd., Lower Mills, Stonehouse.

The demand for paper bags of every description and size is indisputably great, there being multifarious uses to which they are put by every class and denomination of people. A single paper bag is used over and over again. It is received by the housewife from the grocer containing a pound of biscuits, and, when empty, is employed to pack lunch for the paterfamilias or the boys at school.

Notwithstanding the number of times one bag may be used, the demand is enormous, and to successfully and economically cope with this it is necessary that the most ingeniously contrived and accurately working machinery is used.

THE ROMANCE OF LOWER MILLS

The Lower Mills at Stonehouse were erected thirty years ago, and were originally intended for the manufacture of broad cloth. Mr R.S. Davies laid down an excellent plant here for cloth manufacture and the business succeeded but with the introduction of the brighter mode of dress, the demand for black material upon the manufacture of which the mill was engaged naturally fell off and Mr Davies, who was joined in the business by his sons, decided to relinquish it altogether about a quarter of a century ago, thus proving once again the truth of the saying, "You may as well be out of the world as out of the fashion."

The Lower Mills were subsequently empty until 1919 when the building was taken over by The Central Paper and Bag Making Co. Ltd. who installed up to date machinery for the production of paper bags. The Company, probably owing to bad trade following the war, found it impossible to continue operations, after two years working, and in 1921 the concern went into liquidation, and the factory was again shut down. This state of affairs did not last for long however, and in August of last

year the premises were purchased outright by Mr. Joseph Corrigan and Mr. J.S. Corrigan and the Stonehouse Paper & Bag Mills, Ltd. was formed. Not one whit daunted by the previous failures of the previous occupants of the building, they saw the many advantages of the site for paper bag making and soon had things in full swing. Mr. Joseph Corrigan and his son Mr. J. S. (John Stuart) Corrigan, who are the directors, have both had a wide experience of the business, and so rapid has been the growth of the factory under their able management that, from a very modest beginning – there were only two girls and one man employed when the factory was reopened – they are now the largest paper bag manufacturers in the county of Gloucestershire outside Bristol and employ 36 workpeople.

Before the inception of the Company, paper bag making in the Stroud Valley was practically unknown and so the main difficulty experienced by the firm was to find suitable labour. They believe in employing local labour and to do this successfully it was found necessary to import one or two experienced hands to teach the art of bag making to those of the local residents they were able to employ, but apart from these few all the employees at the Lower Mills are natives of Stonehouse and district – a great boon to the residents when one comes to consider the large numbers of unemployed in the county. Therefore the workers owe a deep debt of gratitude to Messrs Corrigan for their kindly foresight in giving them the opportunity of becoming acquainted with what bids fair to develop into one of the most important industries in this part of Gloucestershire.

THE FACTORY

The premises of the Stonehouse Paper & Bag Co. Ltd. comprise a long and compactly constructed red brick building, three stories in height, the whole covering an area of 1000 square feet. It is ideally situated in a pleasant environment, there being excellent views of the surrounding country from every window of the factory, while as regards transport facilities the works could not be better placed, being in close proximity to the Stonehouse Midland and Great Western Railway stations.

The main machine shop, which is excellently lighted and ventilated, is 97ft by 25 ft. Here are installed 12 bag making machines of the most modern type, which turn out the paper bags at the rate of 200 per minute each and only require the attention of one operative to each single machine.

On the top floor the directors are experimenting with two new machines of particularly clever design, a large battery of which are at present being built for them, to make the cone type of bag at 260 per minute. There is also in this room a plant laid down for the rapid production of writing pads, exercise and memorandum books etc., which is another phase of the firm's activities, and there are some very wonderful machines which we will describe later.

Another department of interest is the printing room, which is 34ft by 25ft in extent, and here are erected three printing presses, used for printing upon the bags the

names of the numerous firms whom the Company supply, and the production of the artistic covers for the writing pads.

The ground floor which is devoted to the paper cutting machine, engine house, stock room and paste making plant, is 99ft by 25ft in extent. The Company has a new method of making their paste, which must be of the very best quality. Instead of the usual method of pouring boiling water on the flour, the new method is to place a steam pipe into the preparation and eject a flow of steam into the flour, thus producing paste of a stronger consistency. The preparation is then worked through a grinding mill, which crushes up all the lumps – a fault often found in bags (we refer to badly pasted seams) being thus entirely eliminated.

The power of the whole works is provided by a Fielding's 32 h.p. gas engine, the gas for which is made on the premises by means of a suction gas plant. The engine is connected to a dynamo for the production of electricity with which the entire building is illuminated. As a standby the firm have another gas engine, so that if the main engine breaks down the factory may be kept running until repairs are effected.

All the above-mentioned departments our representative saw working at high pressure and he was informed by Mr. J.S. Corrigan that the chief difficulty being experienced at the present time was to get sufficient labour and lay down plant quickly enough to cope with the ever-increasing demands, which are coming in every day for the products of the company.

PAPER BAG MAKING

As there are no English paper mills capable of producing the required qualities of paper the firm import very large reels from abroad. When the long rolls of paper are received at the factory they are first slit into the required sizes by means of a special cutting machine. The prepared rolls are then taken to the machine room and placed on the bag making machines. To describe the process of bag making so that it may be most easily understood it is well that we follow the actions of one machine from the time when the paper is attached to it until the bag is produced in the finished state ready for the market.

The roll of paper is placed on a spindle situated at one end of the machine and is passed over a roller on the side of which a paste wheel is attached. The paper is drawn along towards the middle of the machine and gradually wrapped around a plate, called a "former" until it has become a flat tube. At a controlled time the paper is cut off by a revolving knife into lengths which can be changed as desired and an arm then comes down from another pasting wheel and creases the bottom of the bag. At the same time the paste received from the rollers first mentioned is conveyed to the flange, and the next operation is the closing of the flange to the main tube, or, as it has now become, bag. This is done by the bag passing between a long endless felt, under pressure between rollers. These rollers and the felt are heated by gas to ensure the seams being well sealed and the paste dried. The bags are shot out into

a collecting box and counted automatically in 50s or other desired numbers and if necessary may then be strung in little bundles.

The great advantage of this particular type of machine is that it may be used for a very large range of sizes. The Company also have apparatus for printing the bags as they are produced. This is one of the most modern inventions in the bag trade, and is a very great time saver.

The making of the cone shaped bags is a much quicker and more intricate operation. So rapidly does this machine work that it was not possible for our representative to follow the operations until it was disconnected from the shafting and worked slowly by hand.

The roll of paper is attached in the same way as before, and the paper passed over a paste wheel. A saw-edged knife then falls and cuts the paper at the same time producing the familiar fringe on the top of the bag. The cut sheet is then gripped by a finger which folds it and the bag is sealed and shot out on to a table. When 50 have been made a bell rings and the operative gathers up the bags and strings them up with the aid of a clever attachment, situated on the side of the machine.

WRITING PADS AND EXERCISE BOOKS

The writing pads and exercise books made by the Company are of the finest quality and have a large sale all over the country.

The sheets are first ruled on an automatic ruling machine, which, if necessary, rules both sides of the paper at once and in two colours. If the paper is for writing pads then it is counted and the strawboard for the back is attached. The large sheets are then chopped into certain sizes and the pads are made up. The top is then attached and the pad is again trimmed in the guillotine and is then ready for sale in the shops.

The method of making exercise books is as follows: the large sheets are taken from the ruling machines and folded to the required size and then inserted into the covers and stitched in a very wonderful machine which will stab through for three quarters of an inch thickness down to two sheets of paper. As with the writing pads, the exercise books are then trimmed in the cutting machines, and are sorted ready for the customer.

EMPLOYEES VIEWPOINT

Everything possible is done for the comfort of the employees, a consideration which it does not pay any employer to neglect, and we can unhesitatingly say that perfect harmony reigns supreme at the Lower Mills. The directors are fitting out an excellent dining room to enable the workpeople to enjoy their food in comfort. This room contains every modern convenience, and is complete with a cooking stove, tables and many other fittings calculated to help the employees in their lunch hours.

THE FUTURE

The successful future of the Company seems assured for many reasons. In the first place they cater for a large clientele in a commodity that is at all times in request. Can anyone imagine the chaos that would arise if the housewife could not be provided with a handy bag in which to take home her purchases, at any class of shop? Further the bag must be of strong texture, as so made as to render fear of disaster out of the question. The Stonehouse Paper & Bag Mills, Ltd. place such bags on the market; they are beyond dispute some of the best produced and herein is to be found the explanation of much of the success the firm have attained. The enterprise and enthusiasm of the heads of the concern are to be commended, and the example they have set would be hard to emulate. Further they are to be congratulated on doing what others engaged in other classes of industry have already done, taken over derelict cloth mills, and putting in the place of the former staple industry of the Valley different manufactories which have provided employment for many hundreds of hands. In mills formerly used for the manufacture of cloth we have hosiery works, piano factories, printing works, paint works and paper bag making works. We wish them all the success they deserve for doing, as Messrs. Corrigan have done, their share in reviving the industrial prosperity of the beautiful Stroud district.

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