

## PILKINGTON BROTHERS AND THE GLASS INDUSTRY

BY T. C. BARKER

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IN 1953 Dr. Barker wrote an article in *Amateur Historian* in which he discussed ledgers, day books, minute books, and letter books of manufacturing firms as rich but neglected sources of industrial, economic, and social history. He then went on to advise intending authors of business histories how to supplement their basic material from a dozen sources varying from forgotten family muniments to the minutes of parliamentary committees in the record office of the House of Lords or the railway archives stored at Royal Oak, London. In *Pilkington Brothers and the Glass Industry*, Dr. Barker has taken his own advice. Convincingly he shows us that an industrial story such as he has to tell both illuminates the social and economic history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and requires general history to give it true perspective and explain its significance. For this book is far more than a history of Pilkington Brothers. It tells that particular story against the background of the development of glass technology, the growth of trades unions, the expansion of overseas trade, and the challenge of foreign competition; moreover, it tells the story completely, tracing back the Pilkington family as far as records allow, describing industrial St. Helens both before and during Pilkington supremacy, introducing all the men who, in their several generations, advanced both the firm and the industry, and explaining for the uninitiated the different techniques that have been used in glass-making from the blowing and flashing of crown glass to the newly-invented float process for plate-glass manufacture. Writing a business history is a task not to be lightly accepted, for it demands of the author not only a good knowledge of the industry itself, but also a wide, sound understanding of general history, and an ability to use a variety of the techniques of historical investigation. It is a job for the expert, and Dr. Barker shows that he is a master of the difficult art.

The Pilkington story is a success story, thanks partly to good fortune, considerably to business courage and enterprise, but mostly to the energy and single-minded devotion of many leading members of the family. Each generation has made its

own contribution. The firm's founders were William and Richard, the two sons of Dr. Pilkington, the St. Helens surgeon, who took the initial step towards family prosperity when he abandoned his practice and devoted himself to wine and spirit selling. The two brothers were complementary characters; William the energetic salesman and enthusiastic initiator, Richard the quiet worker, steadfast and reliable both in business matters and in his work in the Congregational church and Sunday school. The four capable partners of the second generation, William Roby, Thomas, Windle, and Richard, steered Pilkingtons most successfully through the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a period of falling prices and profits, and intense foreign competition. They were autocratic employers who exacted hard work and implicit obedience from their employees, but they kept St. Helens in work and steadily prosperous. They loathed trades unions and dismissed as trouble-makers any employees who tried to organise labour, but they provided part-time education for their apprentices, and increasing welfare and sporting facilities for their workmen. During their period of power Pilkingtons expanded their Sheet Works virtually to its present-day limits, opened the Cowley Hill works for plate-glass manufacture, built warehouses in many British and Canadian centres, and sold increasing quantities of sheet, rolled plate, cathedral, and plate glass through their agents in Europe, South America, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. The third generation came into control during Edward VII's reign, and for the next twenty-five years the firm was led by Arthur, Austin, Guy, Norman, and Cecil Pilkington together with Edward Cozens-Hardy, Austin Pilkington's brother-in-law. Dr. Barker does not carry his detailed story beyond 1914, but he does outline the expanding fortunes of the firm under the leadership of both this third and the present generation of directors.

In the course of telling the Pilkington story, Dr. Barker takes us to many different places and explains clearly several interesting problems. At Smethwick in 1828 we see how J. T. Chance, just down from Cambridge, quickly improved the smoothing and polishing of plate glass so that it successfully challenged and eventually ousted crown glass. We go back to seventeenth-century London and eighteenth-century Bristol and Stourbridge to find the beginnings of restrictive practices and *understandings* among glass manufacturers, and to Victorian Sunderland to watch James Hartley roll cheap plate glass for such jobs as roofing the new railway stations. We walk into the countryside to the north and west of St. Helens seeking suitable sand,

sink new pits to increase coal supplies, and buy soda and salt-cake from chemical works in St. Helens and infant Widnes. We cross the Channel both to the woods of Picardy from which the glassmakers at St. Gobain took fuel to help make cast plate glass, and to Belgium whence, in the 'sixties, came large quantities of window glass to challenge British manufacturers, and where forty years later Pilkingtons bought shares in a plate-glass factory at Mauberge and a sandfield east of Louvain in order to guarantee adequate supplies of silver sand. And as the Pilkington organisation continued to develop, we are taken across the Atlantic and into many parts of the Commonwealth seeking orders, finding agents, and building first warehouses and then factories. This book is an excellent piece of Lancashire history, but its geographical limits do not march with the county boundaries.

Several graphs, charts, and columns of figures expound the economics of the glass industry at various stages during the last century and a half, but Dr. Barker never allows his story to linger in the account books longer than is necessary. Human beings are his chief concern, and anyone who is interested in the conditions in which men live and earn their bread will be fascinated by chapter seven, "A Labour Crisis", which describes the sets or teams in which glassworkers were organised a hundred and twenty years ago. The aristocrats of the artisans were the blowers and the gatherers, who, for about forty hours work a week, could earn between £2 and £3 together with a living-out allowance. They were skilled men, but their exacting work had to be done in very hot, airless conditions. In 1845 they discovered they had a scarcity value. This they tried to protect by joining together in a union, the Crown Glass Makers' Society, and to exploit by breaking contracts and seeking better-paid employment elsewhere. Dr. Barker tells the story of Richard Pemberton, who broke his contract with Pilkingtons to take up the post of manager in a Dumbarton glassworks, but who was brought back to St. Helens, tried, and imprisoned because Pilkingtons "exercised their legal right under the Master and Servant law". Blowing glass was thirsty work, and most glassworkers were heavy drinkers. The second generation of Pilkington directors gradually put an end to the practice of drinking beer during working hours, and Windle Pilkington's stormy and angry surprise visits to the Navigation Tavern hard by the works make a graphic item in the lore of St. Helens.

Congratulations to Dr. Barker on the care and thoroughness with which he has brought together his material, and on his clear, interesting narrative! Congratulations also to Pilkington

Brothers on finding so good a historian, and giving him the facilities to do his work well! With this book and *A Merseyside Town in the Industrial Revolution*, which Dr. Barker wrote in partnership with Dr. J. R. Harris, St. Helens bids fair to be the best chronicled industrial town in the British Isles.

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