Simon Buteux & Sarah Hayes. Forward by Dr Julian Litten FSA

THE STORY OF NEWMAN BROTHERS' COFFIN WORKS

THE RISE AND FALL OF A **BIRMINGHAM** MANUFACTORY

Newman Brothers produced the world's finest coffin fittings for over 100 years from 1894 until it closed it's doors in 1999. Their furniture adorned the coffins of kings, queens and prime ministers, but eventually, Newman Brothers, once the 'king of suppliers', sadly, died its own death and was forced to down tools and cease trading.

It is with thanks to the vision of its last owner, Joyce Green, that the manufactory and its contents survive. Everything has been preserved in situ, as it was left when its doors were finally closed. The building and its time-capsule contents have been described as Birmingham's 'Mercantile Mary Celeste' and now form the basis of the award-winning Coffin Works' Museum.

COVER DESIGN: Paul Tranter
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The Story of Newman Brothers' Coffin Works

The Rise and Fall of a Birmingham Manufactory

by Simon Buteux & Sarah Hayes

NEWMANS' OF BIRMINGHAM.
PREFACE.

By the close of the Nineteenth Century the Birmingham firm of Ingall, Parsons & Clive, together with the London company of Dottridge Brothers, dominated the funeral furnishing industry regarding the supply of coffin furniture. However, as the majority of their merchandise was somewhat varied in the terms of quality and material, the opportunity for providing items of exceptional quality remained open. This "niche market" was soon occupied by Newman Bros of Birmingham who, whilst competing with the likes of Ingall, Parsons & Clive and Messrs Dottridge Brothers in general merchandise, soon became known as the main supplier of high-quality, solid, cast-brass, nickel-plated and electro-plated coffin furniture at the upper end of the funeral trade. Indeed, it is not far from the truth to say that almost every triple-shell coffin destined for brick-grave, vault, catacomb and mausoleum between c.1890 and c.2000 was provided with handles and breastplates from the Birmingham Fleet Street premises of Newman Brothers.

As with most firms proud of its products, Newman Brothers saw little reason to alter their manufacturing techniques, though, over the years, they did add more modern designs to their range, even venturing so far as to provide a limited range of plastic mould-injected handles, breastplates and lid motifs for those of their clients who were offering cremation as an alternative to burial. In the late 1980s, with cremation being by far the preferred method of disposal, Newman Brothers noticed a decline in the demand for their exclusive high-quality metal products, as a result of which the decision was taken in 1999 to close the firm, rather than to compromise their reputation by providing products for which they had neither the liking, nor the desire, to manufacture.

Thanks to the vision of the company's last owner, the decision was taken to preserve Newman Brothers' premises exactly as it was on the day of its closure, thus enabling the public to see at first-hand the factory from which came the fixtures and fittings used on the coffins of England's kings, queens, nobility and gentry throughout the Twentieth Century.

Dr Julian W S Litten FSA

October 2016

THIS PAGE
The tea station in the Shroud Room at Newman Brothers, with all its original contents can still be seen today. © Coffin Works' Collection

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A SPECIAL PLACE

Newman Brothers' Coffin Works is a factory in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter, which was built in 1894, when Queen Victoria was still on the throne, and finally closed in 1999. It is special for three reasons. First, when the factory closed, almost everything in it was left as if at the end of an ordinary working day – the machinery, the stock, even a pot of tea on the stove. It has been described as a sort of mercantile Marie Celeste. Second, it made a rather unusual product: coffin fittings. These are the handles, breastplates, screws and ornaments for a coffin. They also made the 'soft goods' for a coffin: the linings, frills and cushions, as well as the funerary gowns for the deceased. In fact, they made everything for the coffin except the coffin itself. They sold directly to undertakers, not the general public.

The third reason that the factory is special is that Newman Brothers didn't just make coffin fittings, they made the very best. Amongst their customers were the royal undertakers, and Newman Brothers' coffin fittings have adorned the coffins of George V & VI, Queen Mary, Princess Diana and the Queen Mother, as well as great statesmen such as Winston Churchill.

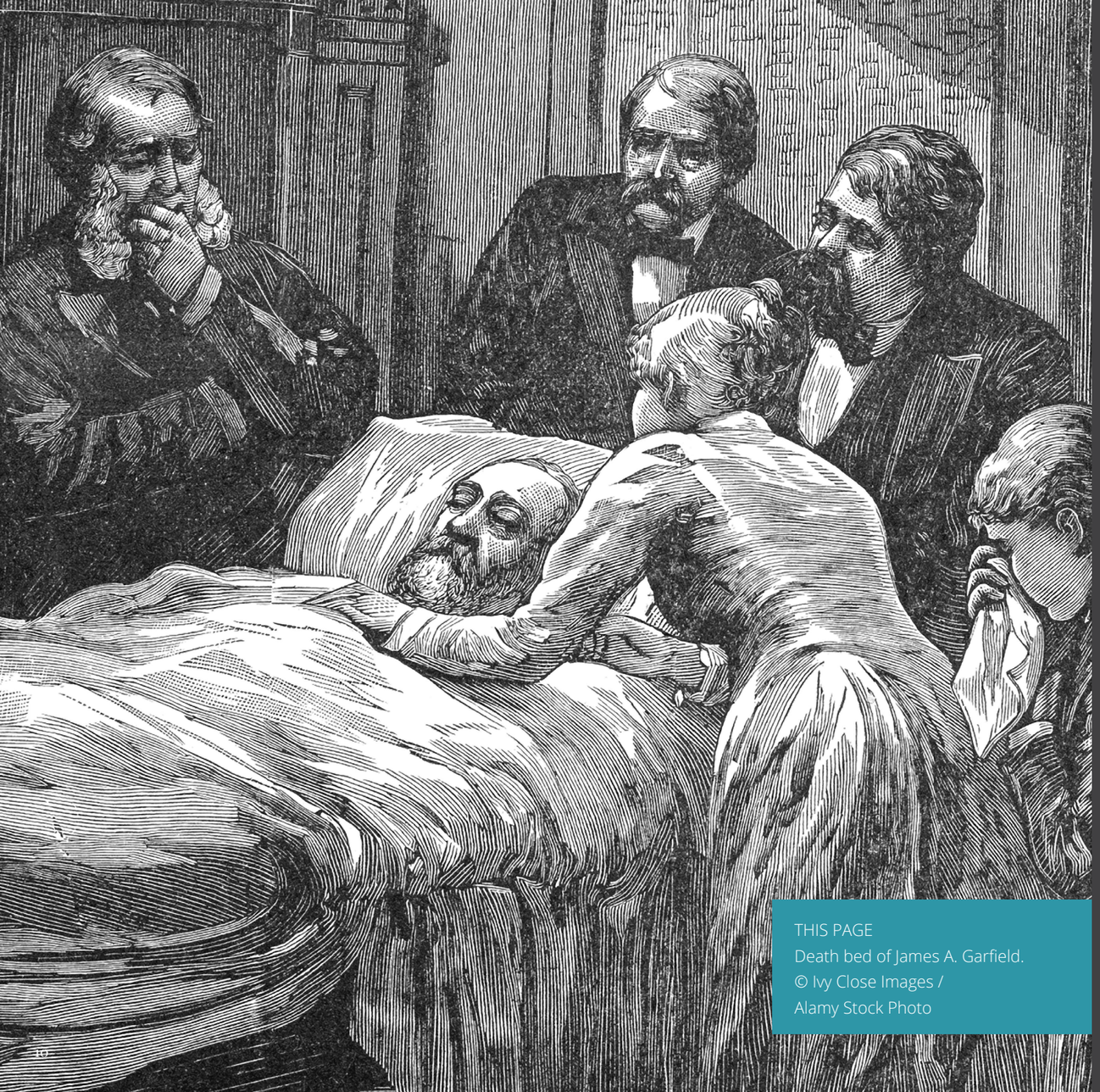
The visitor to Newman Brothers at the Coffin Works steps back in time to experience an extraordinary slice of Birmingham's industrial history.

LEFT
Newman Brothers' staff and workers in front of Stamp Shop, circa 1912.

Over the hundred years that the factory was in business, society changed greatly, and with it attitudes to death and funerals. Newman Brothers represents a period when the fashion for lavish funerals was at its peak, and it declined as attitudes changed, especially after the Second World War. Indeed, so old-fashioned was the factory, that some of the machinery is original, and nearly everything else was very out-of-date by the time the factory closed.

The last proprietor, Joyce Green, who had worked at the factory for 50 years, realised what a special place it was and determined to preserve it as a museum. Heritage organisations agreed, and - although it took 15 years - in 2014, Birmingham Conservation Trust was proud to re-open the factory as a heritage attraction.

Unfortunately, Joyce did not live to see this day.



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Death bed of James A. Garfield.
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VICTORIAN FUNERAL

The Victorian funeral was big business. Mourning etiquette in England had developed into a complex set of rules that all levels of society were meant to follow. It was lack of money that prevented many in the working classes from fully following the rules. For instance, widows were expected to mourn for two full years, wearing special mourning clothing. Only the middle and upper classes could afford the time and cost involved.

Mourning clothing and all the funeral trappings – the horse-drawn cortege, the paid mourners who would grieve on a family's behalf, the mutes who walked solemnly behind the funeral procession as the ceremonial protectors of the deceased – were how a family could show its grief to the outside world, but this came at a price. The priority for the working classes was simply to avoid a pauper's funeral and ensure that they would not be buried in a common grave without a headstone. The rise of the burial club was the saving grace for many poorer people, who would pay a small weekly fee, which would cover their funeral expenses.

CHAPTER ONE

NEWMAN BROTHERS' STORY

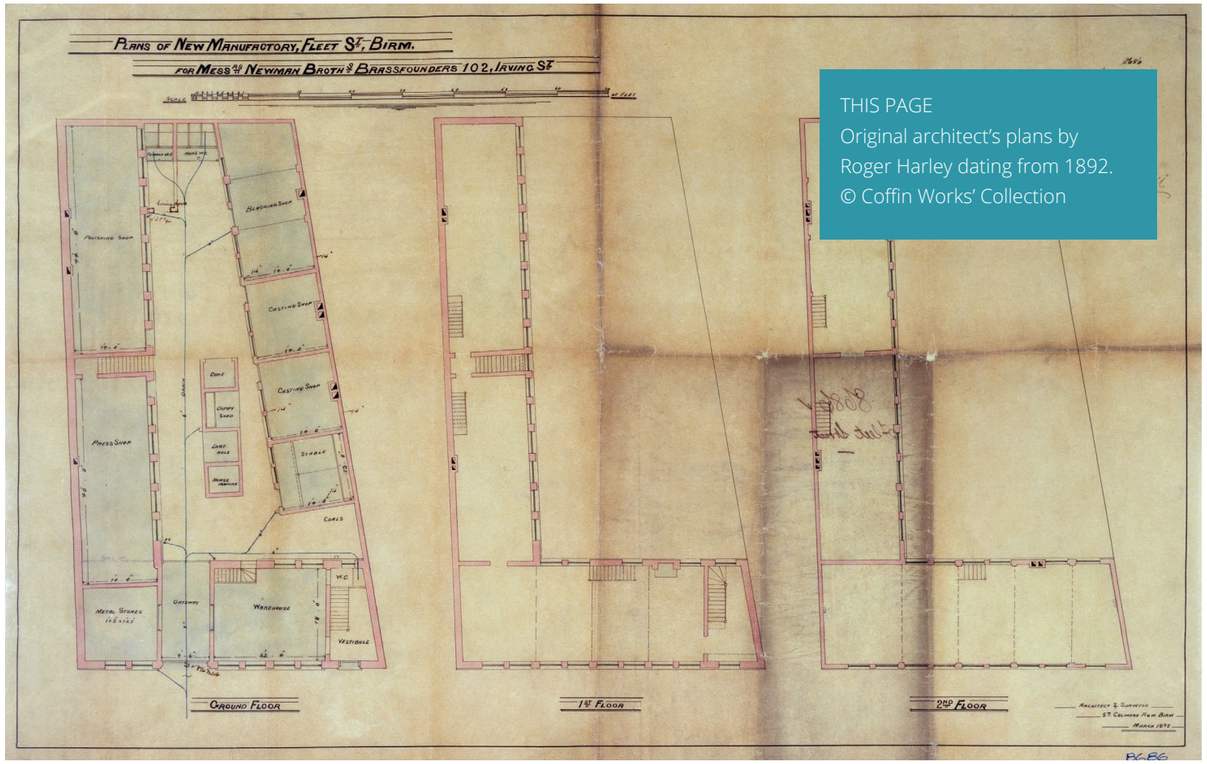
FROM CABINETS TO COFFINS (1882 – 1918)

Newman Brothers was established in 1882 by Alfred and Edwin Newman. They were brass founders, who originally specialised in cabinet fittings (although Alf had earlier worked for a leading coffin fittings company) and worked from rented factories in other parts of Birmingham. In 1892, they commissioned architect Roger Harley to design them a manufactory in the Jewellery Quarter, dedicated solely to the production of coffin furniture – the handles, crucifixes and ornaments that adorned the outside of coffins.

Two years later, they moved into these new premises on Fleet Street, which they called the Fleet Works, but are today known as the Coffin Works.

A GOOD FUNERAL

The move into coffin furniture was probably financially motivated. Newman Brothers entered the funerary market at the height of the Victorian 'cult of death.' There was no other period when the English funeral was more lucrative. The Victorians were obsessed with social etiquette and needed to ensure that their loved ones were given a 'good' funeral. However, a respectable funeral was expensive.



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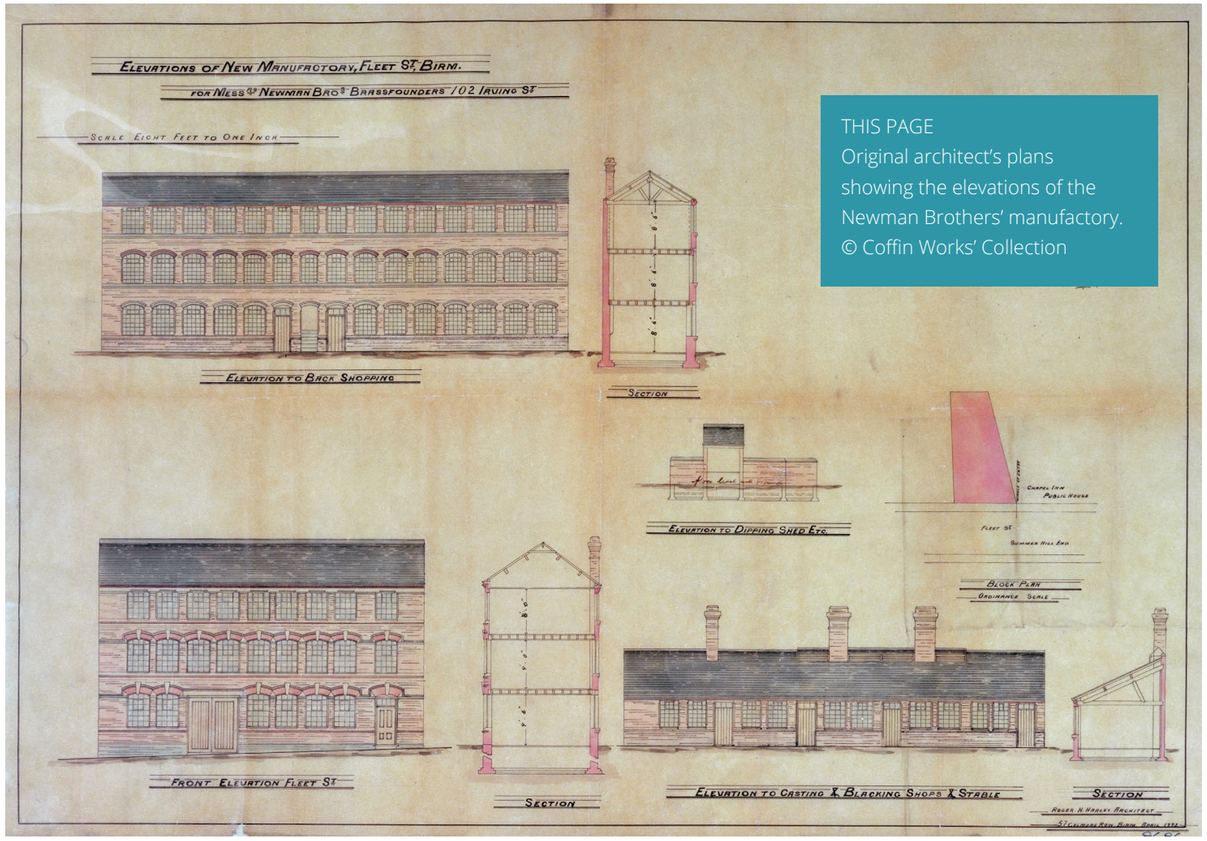
Original architect's plans by Roger Harley dating from 1892.
© Coffin Works' Collection

For a firm of brass founders like Newman Brothers, the change from making furniture for cabinets to fittings for coffins was not difficult. After all, if you could make a handle for a cabinet, you could make one for a coffin. They were very similar in design, and the materials, manufacturing processes and machinery were the same.



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Original architect's plans showing the elevations of the Newman Brothers' manufactory.
© Coffin Works' Collection

THE ALLIANCE

Newman Brothers were relative latecomers to the funerary trade, and with 15 other master coffin furniture manufacturers in Birmingham alone, the trade was approaching saturation. But they took a chance to offer quality fittings at lower prices than the competition. Since 1888 a group of master coffin furniture manufacturers, known as 'the Alliance', had regulated the trade in Birmingham, operating like a cartel. There was an agreement between them to exclude the entry of new competitors. They wanted to stop general brass founders from selling their 'black work'. Newman Brothers must have known about this cartel, but they undercut the Alliance, nevertheless. This was soon to land them in trouble.

In 1895, just one year after the factory had opened, the partnership between Alfred and Edwin Newman was dissolved, and, from then on, Alfred ran the business as a sole trader. We don't know the reason for the end of the partnership, but the nasty conflict with the Alliance that followed Newman Brothers' entry into the trade may have been the cause for Edwin's departure. By 1897, the Alliance had successfully managed to call the Newman Brothers' workforce out on strike, essentially by bribing them, and Alfred was reluctantly coerced into joining the Alliance. Nevertheless, in an effort to expose the underhand dealings of this cartel, Newman Brothers' manager, Edgar Ulysses Kettle, wrote to the Birmingham Post, but found himself threatened by an Alliance member, who said he would -

"punch your - - - - head".

Despite this unpromising start, Newman Brothers went on to become one of the dominant coffin-fitting businesses of the Twentieth Century. The Alliance, unable to control the vast quantity of cut-price goods, eventually disbanded.

THIS PAGE
Advertisement for Peter Robinson's Mourning Warehouse, circa 1890.
© Coffin Works' Collection

By the beginning of the Twentieth Century, Newman Brothers had expanded their production to include a wider range of materials and finishes, including more electroplated products. This was likely an attempt to widen their appeal to the lower end of the market. We have evidence that the factory was producing 'soft goods' – coffin linings and funerary gowns – by at least 1914, but most likely production began before then. In essence, the factory was becoming a 'one-stop shop' where the undertaker could find everything he needed to dress a coffin.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

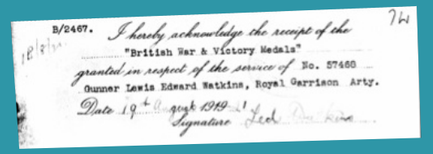
The coffin was a showpiece as much as it was a practical vessel for the dead body. It was customary for the deceased to be laid out at home in their coffin, with the lid off, for a few days before the funeral, so family, friends and acquaintances could pay their last respects. The coffin, with its fine fittings and upholstery, and the funerary gown were all on show. For the family, it was an occasion to display their wealth and good taste, while for the undertaker and funeral furnisher, it was an advertising opportunity.

But the horrors of the First World War led to a decline in the popularity of the lavish Victorian funeral tradition. Nearly half of all those who fought and died for the British Empire never returned home, which put in question the relevance of the grandiose funeral. Families had to deal with bereavement without a funeral and all its trappings. The First World War was a turning point. For many, death was becoming more of a private affair than a public pageant and no longer did people embrace so willingly the pomp of an ostentatious funeral.

LEFT
The funeral of Queen Victoria in 1901 was the epitome of Victorian pomp and ceremony. She however, went against tradition, opting for a white pall for her coffin rather than the customary black option.
© Chronicle / Alamy Stock Photo

OPPOSITE PAGE
Clippings, The Evening Despatch, October 1917

LEWIS WATKINS



B/2467. I hereby acknowledge the receipt of the "British War & Victory Medals" granted in respect of the service of No. 57468 Gunner Lewis Edward Watkins, Royal Garrison Arty. Date 19th August 1919. Signature

Lewis was posthumously awarded the British War and Allied Victory Medals, which were collected by his father on 19th August 1919.

KILLED IN ACTION.

PTE. WATKINS.

Private Lewis E. Watkins, of Nansen-road, Sparkhill, who before joining the colours two years ago worked at Newman Bros., Fleet-street, has been killed in action. Watkins was well known in the athletic world, being captain of the Lozells Harriers and a champion cross-country runner. He was 25 years of age, a winner of numerous prizes, and a promising young athlete.

Lewis was born in 1892 in Sparkhill, Birmingham. By the age of 19, in 1911, he was a 'Brass Polisher' working at Newman Brothers. Although the identification is not certain, Lewis may appear in a photograph of the Newman Brothers workforce taken about 1912, in the front row at the extreme left.

A champion cross-country runner and winner of numerous prizes, Lewis was captain of the Lozells Harriers, with a promising future in athletics. However, on 20th October 1915, Lewis answered the call to enlist and joined the Royal Garrison Artillary (RGA). He had just turned 23 years old.

Lewis died on 26th September 1917, aged 25. The exact circumstances of his death are unknown, but on that day, his regiment was at Polygon Wood, engaged in an action that was part of the Battle of Passchendaele in Belgium. The Royal Garrison Artillery played a crucial role in allowing infantry divisions to advance behind German lines. Lewis was posthumously awarded the British War and Allied Victory Medals, which were collected by his father on 19th August 1919.

NEWMANS AT PEACE AND WAR (1918 – 1945)

Despite the general decline of the extravagant funeral, Newman Brothers seems to have done well until the onset of the Second World War. In 1933, Alfred Newman, who had run the factory as a sole trader almost from the outset, died. He may have known that he was terminally ill, because, in that year, he incorporated the company, which became Newman Brothers (B'ham) Limited. The company was valued at £12,500 (about £786,000 in today's terms), and on Alfred's death, the shares were divided equally between his two sons, Horace and George, his daughter, Nina and his grandchildren. Together, Horace and George took over running the business.

ROYAL CONNECTIONS

Newman Brothers were very proud to supply the coffin fittings for royal burials. Of course, the royal family had no connection with the firm – it was the royal undertakers who bought Newman Brothers' products, which is how they ended up on the royal coffins. Likewise, the royal undertakers were involved in state funerals for non-royals such as Winston Churchill.

From 1928 to 1991, the royal undertakers were J.H. Kenyon Ltd. of Paddington. They therefore undertook the funerals of, amongst others, George V in 1936, George VI in 1952 and Queen Mary in 1953, as well as Winston Churchill in 1965. It is likely that the coffins for all these funerals used the finest cast brass handles and fittings of Newman Brothers' Gothic range. John Kellett, a Newman Brothers' director in the 1950s and 60s, looked after important London clients such as Kenyon's.

From 1991, the royal contract went to another London firm, Leverton & Sons. They undertook the funerals of Princess Diana in 1997, Princess Margaret and the Queen Mother, both in 2002. While there has been some uncertainty whether Levertons also used Newman Brothers' products on the royal coffins, Julian Litten, the authority on English funerals, has confirmed that this is the case.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Queen Mary, wife of King George V and mother of George VI, had Newman Brothers' fittings on her coffin. The cast brass Newman Brothers' Gothic handles were favoured by the royal undertakers, J.H. Kenyon Of London. © Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

THE GOLDEN AGE OF NEWMAN BROTHERS

LEFT
King George V of England died in 1936 and had cast brass Gothic Newman Brothers' handles on his coffin.
© GL Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

RIGHT
Winston Churchill also had Newman Brothers' Gothic handles on his coffin.
©Wikipedia, courtesy of Yousuf Karsh. Library and Archives Canada, e010751643

The 1930s could perhaps be described as Newman Brothers' Golden Age. One reason for this is that they captured the top end of the market, as suppliers to the royal undertakers. The first royal funeral for which Newman Brothers' products were definitely used was that of George V, who died in 1936. Since then Newman Brothers' handles and fittings have adorned the coffins of George VI (1952), Queen Mary (1953), Princess Diana (1997) and the Queen Mother (2002) amongst others. At the other end of the market, Newman Brothers expanded their range to cater for the working classes, many members of which continued to spend disproportionately on funerals.

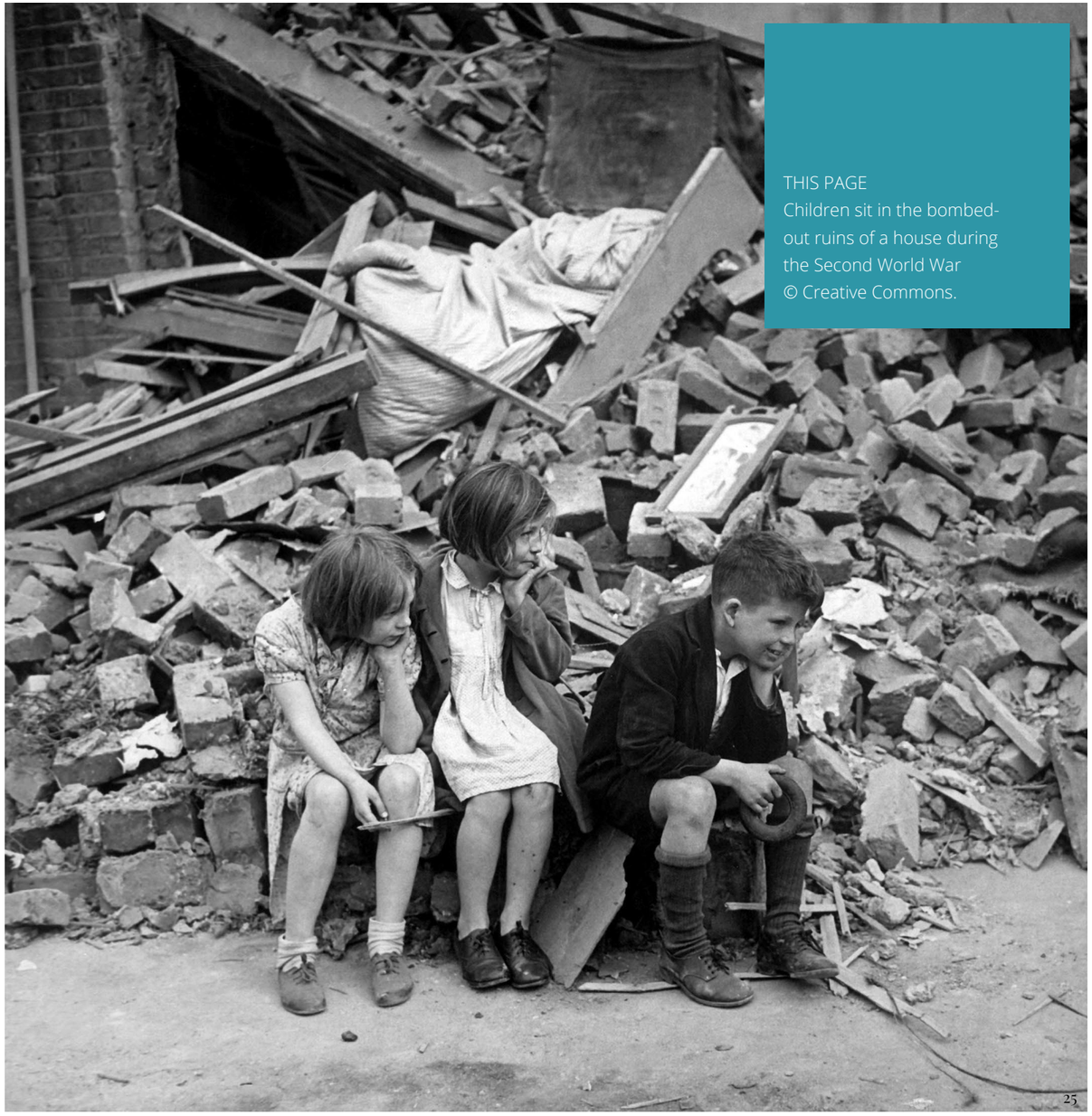
Newman Brothers' products were also popular abroad, especially in Britain's colonies and dominions, such as Australia and New Zealand, South Africa, Barbados, and Trinidad & Tobago, just to mention a few. The extent of the international trade in the 1930s is demonstrated by surviving business ledgers.

THIS PAGE
Princess Diana also had Newman Brothers' cast brass Gothic handles on her coffin. © Alamy Stock Photo Keystone Pictures USA / Alamy Stock Photo

SECOND WORLD WAR

The Second World War hit Newman Brothers, and the funerary industry in general, very hard. Contrary to popular belief, war is never a good time for funeral directors or coffin furniture manufacturers. Unlike the First World War, the Second World War saw civilians targeted in large numbers, with over 2,000 people dying in Birmingham alone. This created challenges for the funeral director, who was under pressure to be economical. The Ministry of Health even encouraged local authorities to use cardboard coffins and make shrouds from sheets for unidentified casualties of bombing raids. The funeral directors were outraged, but with rationing of materials, including metals and wood, they were left with no choice but to adapt. At Newman Brothers, the soft goods department, which made the fancy funerary gowns and coffin linings and employed around 25 girls, was forced to close in 1941.

To make it a double whammy, the war effectively destroyed Newman Brothers' international trade. Initially, they tried to carry on as normal, although they had to sign declarations stating that they were not knowingly trading with the enemy. Nevertheless, the company's business ledgers show that many orders had to be cancelled. One example is an order from Malta, dated June 1940, struck through in red with the word word 'cancelled': in that month, the Italian Air Force carried out the first bombing raids on the islands, beginning the Siege of Malta. Between 1942 and 1946 no international orders were taken. The company's ledgers suggest that by 1945 the factory employed only about 20 workers.



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Children sit in the bombed-out ruins of a house during the Second World War
© Creative Commons.

CHANGING WITH THE TIMES (1946 – 1999)

In the post-war years, society's attitudes to death and funerals changed profoundly. New housing was a higher priority than cemeteries, and cremation slowly began to gain in popularity. The number of coffin furniture manufacturers in Birmingham shrank from twelve in 1944 to just three in 1967, with no new companies entering the market after 1949.

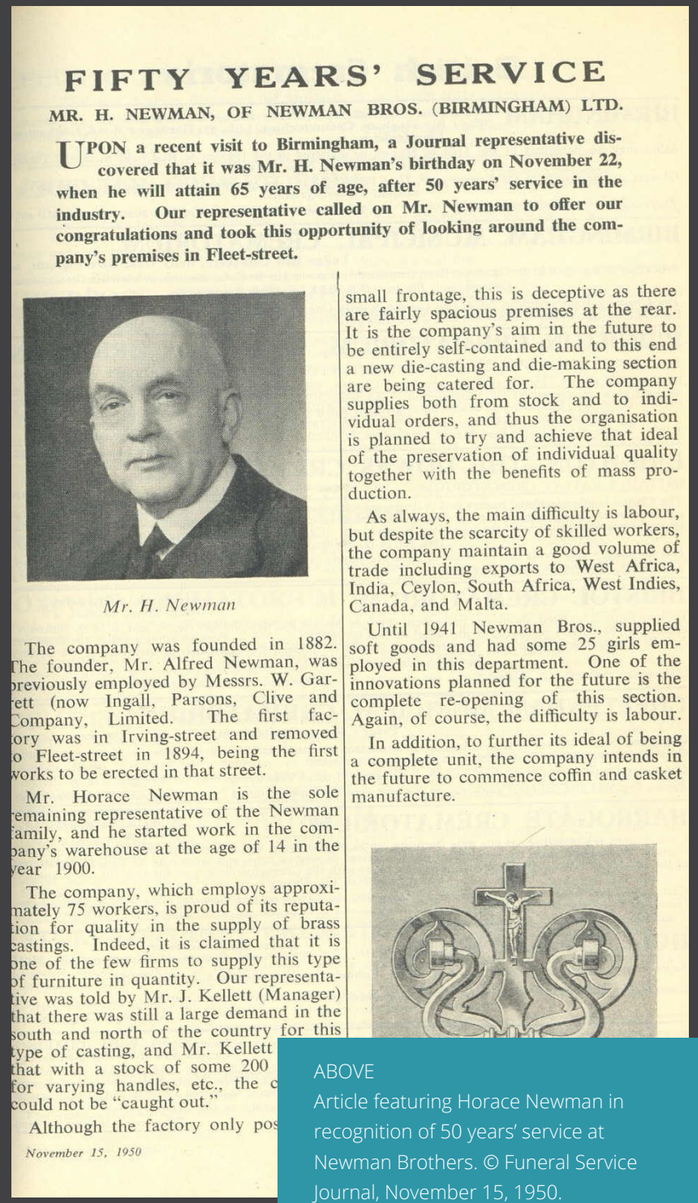
Newman Brothers struggled to recover from the Second World War. George Newman had died in 1944, and his brother Horace was the last member of the family to be directly involved in running the business, up until his own death in 1952.

In 1945, the company had been trading at a loss, and the value of the shares was reduced. However, after the war there was an injection of young blood, which helped to revitalise the company. Among those to join Newman Brothers at that time were Cyril Salt, who moved from another coffin fittings manufacturer that had shut down, and Holford ('Dai') Davies, Charles Floyd and John Kellett, all of whom had served in the RAF. These men were described as commercial travellers, but all of them ended up being directors of the company. In 1949, a girl of 18 joined as the office secretary, who would eventually go on to be the company's last director: Joyce Green.

ABOVE
Joyce Green, last owner of Newman Brothers, circa 1998/1999.

50 YEARS

By 1950, Horace Newman had worked at Newman Brothers for 50 years. He began by working in the Warehouse in 1900, at the age of 14.. His 50 years of service were celebrated in an article in the Funeral Service Journal. The article also described the company at the time, and its plans for the future. It was claimed – perhaps with some exaggeration – that the factory now employed around 75 people, and was "proud of its reputation for quality in the supply of brass castings." By now the overseas trade had resumed and the company boasted of "a good volume of trade, including exports to West Africa, India, Ceylon, South Africa, West Indies, Canada, and Malta." The manager at the time, John Kellett, also had plans to re-open the soft goods department. This was quickly put into action.



FIFTY YEARS' SERVICE

MR. H. NEWMAN, OF NEWMAN BROS. (BIRMINGHAM) LTD.

UPON a recent visit to Birmingham, a Journal representative discovered that it was Mr. H. Newman's birthday on November 22, when he will attain 65 years of age, after 50 years' service in the industry. Our representative called on Mr. Newman to offer our congratulations and took this opportunity of looking around the company's premises in Fleet-street.

Mr. H. Newman

The company was founded in 1882. The founder, Mr. Alfred Newman, was previously employed by Messrs. W. Garrett (now Ingall, Parsons, Clive and Company, Limited. The first factory was in Irving-street and removed to Fleet-street in 1894, being the first works to be erected in that street.

Mr. Horace Newman is the sole remaining representative of the Newman family, and he started work in the company's warehouse at the age of 14 in the year 1900.

The company, which employs approximately 75 workers, is proud of its reputation for quality in the supply of brass castings. Indeed, it is claimed that it is one of the few firms to supply this type of furniture in quantity. Our representative was told by Mr. J. Kellett (Manager) that there was still a large demand in the south and north of the country for this type of casting, and Mr. Kellett that with a stock of some 200 for varying handles, etc., the could not be "caught out."

Although the factory only pos

small frontage, this is deceptive as there are fairly spacious premises at the rear. It is the company's aim in the future to be entirely self-contained and to this end a new die-casting and die-making section are being catered for. The company supplies both from stock and to individual orders, and thus the organisation is planned to try and achieve that ideal of the preservation of individual quality together with the benefits of mass production.

As always, the main difficulty is labour, but despite the scarcity of skilled workers, the company maintain a good volume of trade including exports to West Africa, India, Ceylon, South Africa, West Indies, Canada, and Malta.

Until 1941 Newman Bros., supplied soft goods and had some 25 girls employed in this department. One of the innovations planned for the future is the complete re-opening of this section. Again, of course, the difficulty is labour.

In addition, to further its ideal of being a complete unit, the company intends in the future to commence coffin and casket manufacture.

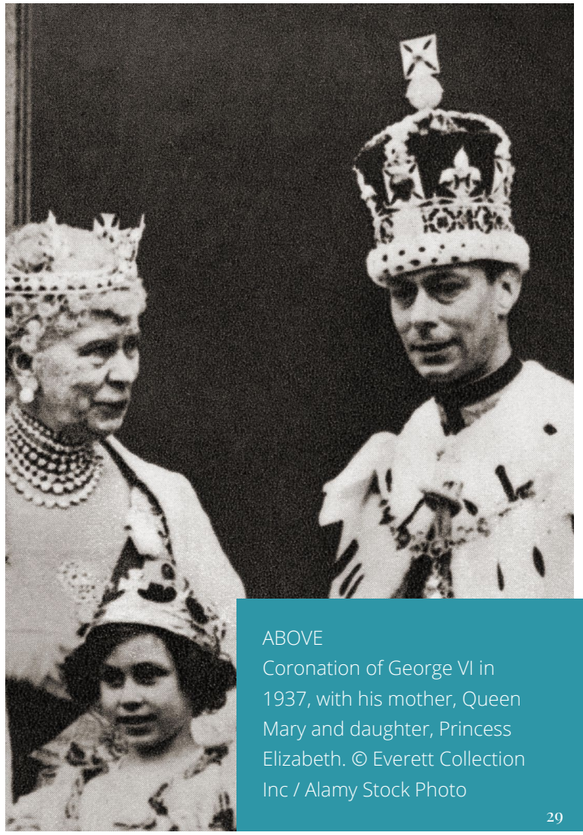
November 15, 1950

ABOVE
Article featuring Horace Newman in recognition of 50 years' service at Newman Brothers. © Funeral Service Journal, November 15, 1950.

ABOVE
Newman Brothers' leaflet, circa late 1940s.
© Coffin Works' Collection

A marketing leaflet of around this time assured customers that, with the lifting of wartime restrictions, Newman Brothers could once again offer "a wide and comprehensive range of Coffin Furniture" and emphasised "dignity in design and workmanship and finish of the highest quality".

Indeed, when George VI died in February 1952, it was once again Newman Brothers' handles that adorned the royal coffin. This must have been a cause of pride to Horace Newman, whose own death took place in November of that year. Shortly afterwards, in 1953, Queen Mary died, again with Newman Brothers' fittings on the royal coffin.



ABOVE
Coronation of George VI in 1937, with his mother, Queen Mary and daughter, Princess Elizabeth. © Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

1950s & 1960s

Through the 1950s and 60s, it was the new directors such as John Kellett and Charles Floyd, who took the company forward and sought to adapt to changes in the funerary industry. The most important of these was the shift from inhumation to cremation. At the end of the Second World War, under 10% of deaths were followed by cremation, whereas by 1965 this had risen to 50%. In the 1960s Birmingham City Council's regulations for cremation stated that "Coffin furniture and fittings must be of a combustible nature and the Corporation reserves the right to remove any brass or metal fittings." This was not good for a company that specialised in metal fittings. Newman Brothers adapted by having their most popular coffin furniture designs made in plastic by an outside supplier, then coated with a metallic finish at their factory: in 1963, they installed a second-hand, vacuum coating machine, which applied the finishes. The factory range which had housed the casting shops and stables was demolished about 1967 and replaced with a modern, two-storey range, containing new offices and workshops. The company records show that a separate firm that manufactured coffins was operating from the factory around this time. The new management aimed to make Newman Brothers a "complete unit" for the supply of coffins, coffin fittings, linings and funerary gowns – everything the funeral director could need.

CHURCHILL

Perhaps the proudest moment in Newman Brothers' history was to have supplied the fittings for the coffin of Sir Winston Churchill, who died in January 1965. Churchill's funeral was a huge event in the nation's history, the largest state funeral that had ever taken place, and the live television coverage was watched by millions. J.H. Kenyon, who had been the royal undertakers since 1928, supplied the coffin for Churchill, so it is not surprising that Newman Brothers' fittings were also used on his coffin as they had been on the royal coffins previously.

The fittings and handles favoured were from Newman Brothers' finest cast-brass 'Gothic' range. A colleague recalled that Newman Brothers' Managing Director, John Kellett, was "very well liked in the trade....and did special travelling....to special customers, big customers in London like Kenyon's." It is said that after Churchill's funeral, Kellett would begin meetings by banging his hand on the table and reminding everyone that it was Newman Brothers that had made Churchill's coffin handles.

ABOVE
Churchill's funeral in January 1965 was the largest state funeral to have ever taken place up until that point. © Wikipedia

THE LAST MANAGING DIRECTOR

In 1976, the two most important directors at Newman Brothers, John Kellett and Charles Floyd, died in quick succession. Joyce Green, who was by now Company Secretary, described the shock of Floyd's death:

> *"I had to come in on Monday, and my first job was to go into our drinks cabinet and have a little brandy with a bit of hot water to calm me down and tell everyone that Mr Floyd had died."*

Joyce Green seized the opportunity to become the managing director of Newman Brothers, buying up of the majority of the company shares with her old colleagues: Travelling Salesmen, Cyril Salt and Dai Davies. Not everybody at the factory was pleased however.
As Joyce recalls:

> *'Oh a woman, we don't want a woman to run, you know, to run Newman Brothers' and I said. 'Well, that's the way it is'."*

IMAGE
Joyce Green sitting in the Newman Brothers' Office in circa 1998 / 1999.
© Coffin Works' Collection

In 27 years, Joyce Green had gone from being Office Secretary to Managing Director, a position she held for a further 23 years. However, it was not an easy time. The market for Newman Brothers' products continued to shrink; cremation continued to increase, and there was a failure to modernise. They relied mainly on their reputation and existing customers.

The workforce was getting older, and, as salesmen such as Cyril Salt and Dai Davies retired, they were not replaced.

While it is easy to criticise Newman Brothers for failing to change with the times, it is perhaps more correct to see this as a refusal by Joyce Green and her colleagues to sacrifice reputation for profit.

> *"Newmans were not willing to go down that path. They knew they still had a discerning clientele, albeit dwindling, but nevertheless they had a reputation, and that reputation had to be maintained, even if it meant their death. And so it was, the king of the suppliers became subject to death itself. Thus the royal supplier went the way of us all."*
>
> **Dr Julian Litten:** Leading funerary historian

CLOSURE

The decision to close down was eventually taken in 1997. On 5th July, Joyce Green wrote to her principal customers informing them of the decision to close. As one customer, Andrew Taylor of A.B. Taylor Ltd, said, "It was a bit of a shock actually as it all sort of came a bit quick." The responses to the letter were exceptionally warm. John Hughes of John Hughes & Son in Anglesey wrote, "Many companies come and go, but you carried a personal loyalty and many of the customers never dream of ending that loyal association." More bluntly, J.H. Porter of H. Porter & Sons observed, "the EEC and 'The Health and Safety at Work' have a lot to answer for...but I would imagine that your Victorian factory would give you many problems."

Pragmatically, most of the funeral directors wanted to build up a stock of Newman Brothers' products while there was still a chance. Olive Tate, of Joseph Tate in Leeds concluded that "I am a creature of habit, not liking change, and when one has received excellent service for so many years, we are obviously going to miss 'Newmans'.

Clearly Newman Brothers' reputation for quality was untarnished, something that was about to be confirmed in the most unexpected way. Barely a couple of months after the announcement that Newman Brothers was to close, the nation was shaken by the tragic news of the death of Princess Diana on 31 August 1997. The new royal undertakers by this date were Leverton & Sons, who had yet to undertake such a high-profile funeral. Funerary advisor and historian, Dr Julian Litten, recalls being contacted by Levertons for advice on the coffin, and he had no hesitation in recommending the use of Newman Brothers' finest, cast-brass, 'Gothic' handles, as used before with other royal funerals, and as were to be used again on the coffin of the Queen Mother in 2002.

BELOW: The Newman Brothers' cast brass Gothic handle was a favourite of the royal undertakers, J.H.Kenyon of London. © Coffin Works' Collection

ABOVE: Dr Julian Litten's coffin has been prepared with Newman Brothers' coffin furniture, including the Gothic N121/74 cast brass handles used on royal coffins. © Dr Julian Litten.

When production ceased, the business nevertheless kept going in an effort to sell off as much stock as possible, until it was legally dissolved in 1999. The priority for discerning funeral directors was to obtain the remaining, much sought-after, cast-brass items, such as those in the 'Gothic' range. The suddenness of the decision to close seems to be reflected in the way in which the factory was left, with all the machinery and remaining stock – and even personal effects – left in situ. At the same time, Joyce Green appreciated the uniqueness of what was left behind and was soon to become the driving force in the attempt to save Newman Brothers for posterity.

CHAPTER TWO

NEWMAN BROTHERS' FACTORY

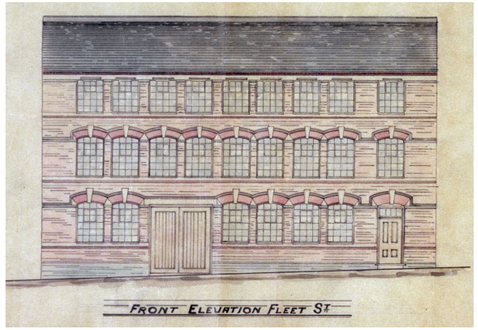
THE FLEET WORKS

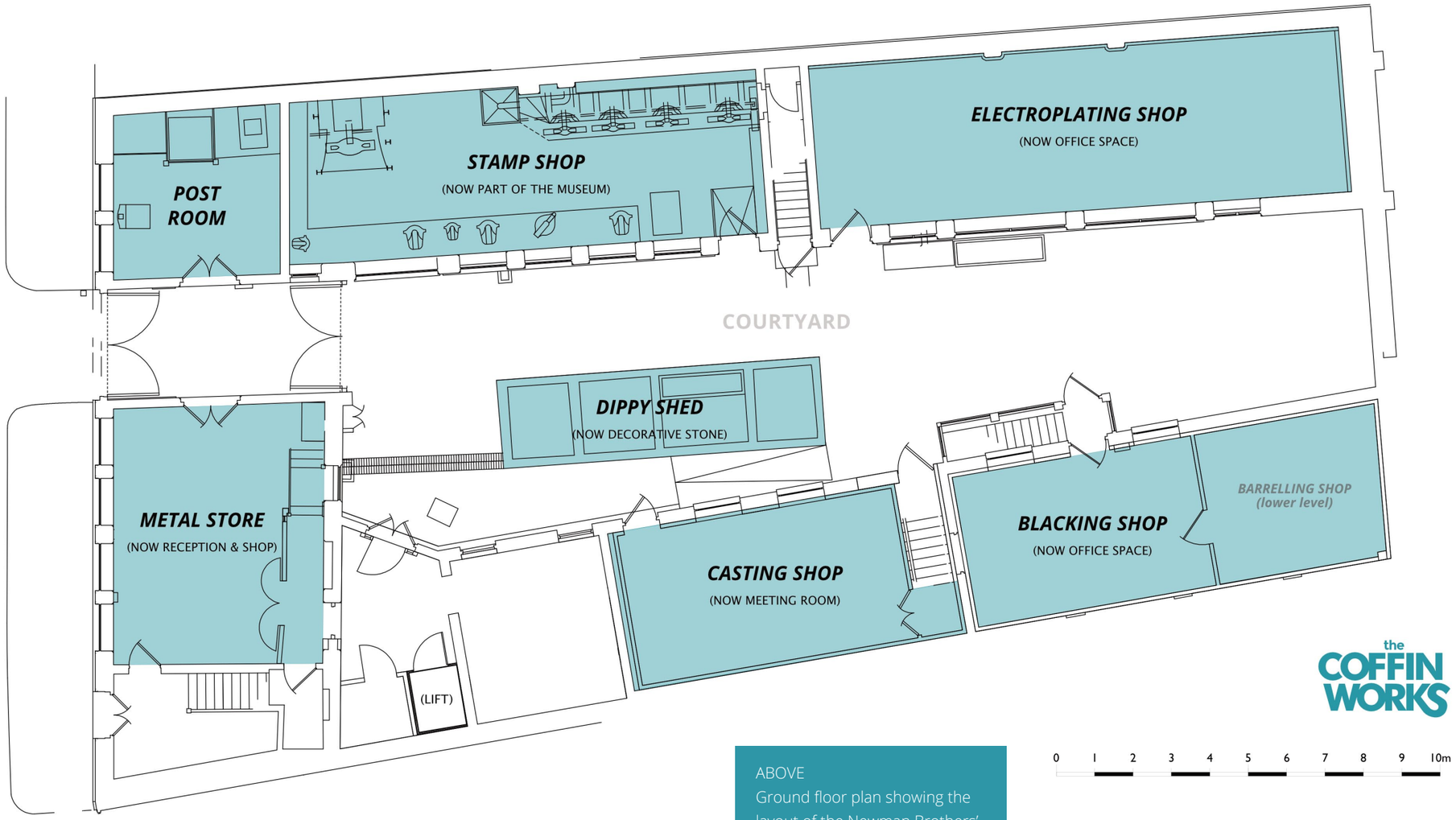
The Newman Brothers' factory, which was known as The Fleet Works, was a purpose-built manufactory, typical of small metal-working factories of the late Nineteenth Century in the Jewellery Quarter and elsewhere in Birmingham. We are fortunate that the architect's drawings for the factory survive, dated 1892, and show the layout as it was originally conceived.

The factory is organised around a courtyard, with the various workshops, each dedicated to a different process, laid out like a production line. On the street frontage is a range dedicated to 'clean' tasks. Here are the offices, stores and warehouses. Running back from this front range, either side of the courtyard are two ranges of what is known as 'back shopping' - the word 'shopping' is a shorthand for workshops. Each 'shop' has its own name and purpose.

GROUND FLOOR

In the later years of the factory, the main workshops on the ground floor were the Stamp Shop, the Plating Shop, the Casting Shop, the Blacking Shop, and the Barrelling Shop. The Casting Shop and Blacking Shop were demolished in 1967, although their position is shown on the present-day plan opposite. The Barrelling Shop, which was underneath the Blacking Shop, still survives.

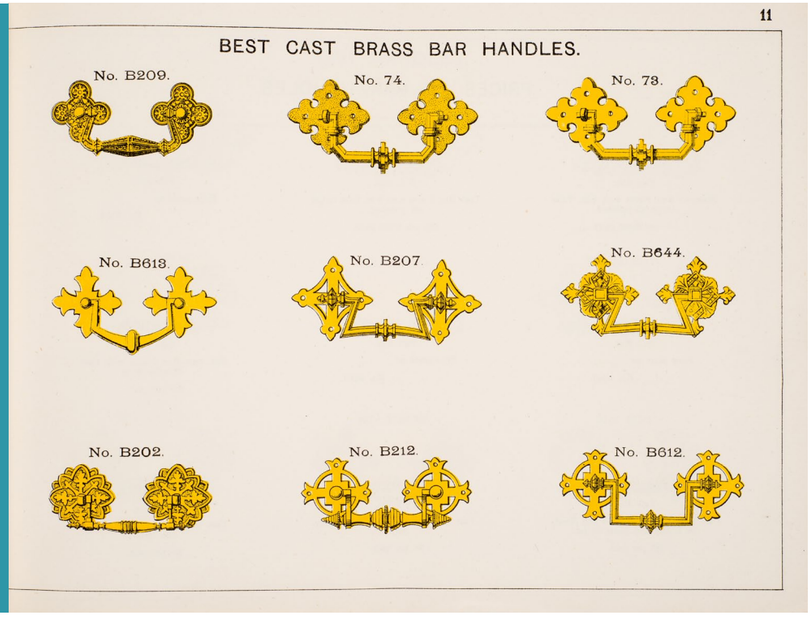




ABOVE
Ground floor plan showing the layout of the Newman Brothers' workshops alongside the location of the location of the Coffin Works' museum today.
© Coffin Works' Collection

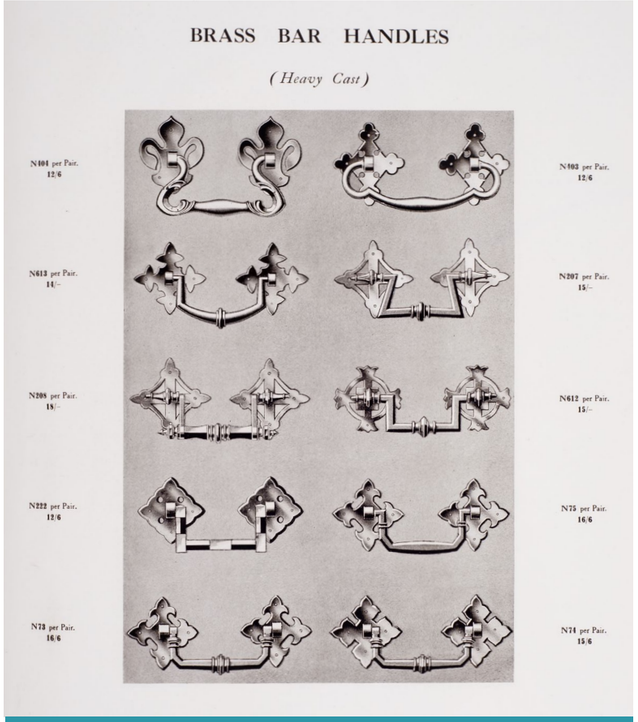
CASTING SHOP

The making of solid sand-cast brass handles probably ceased at Newman Brothers in the early 1950s. Only a small number now survive in the collection. The two catalogues illustrated show changing fashion through time. The 1920s' catalogue shows Gothic-inspired designs, whereas the relaunch after the Second World War includes Art Deco designs (as photographed) alongside more traditional products.



RIGHT
Page from Newman Brothers' first trade catalogue, circa 1894.

CASTING SHOP GALLERY



ABOVE
Page taken from a Newman Brothers' trade catalogue, circa 1920s.

ABOVE / BELOW
Art Deco-inspired brass handles, circa 1930s.

ANTHONY'S STORY

On the south side of the courtyard was the Casting Shop. Here were made the high-quality brass coffin handles for which Newman Brothers were so famous. Unfortunately, the one-storey range containing this workshop was demolished in 1967 and replaced by the two-storey range we see today. However, with the help of Anthony Allen, we can travel back to the 1930s to experience what the Casting Shop was like. Anthony Allen was the son of Arthur Allen, a Travelling Salesman, who worked at Newman Brothers from 1903 to 1939. As a boy in his teens in the 1930s, young Anthony loved to visit his dad's workplace, and years later he has left us with very colourful descriptions of Newman Brothers and the people who worked there. Anthony describes the Casting Shop as...

> *"the heart of the business. The furnace was roaring. There were two clay crucibles full of molten brass, which always seemed to be bubbling like a firework, sparks and smoke and bits of stuff flying up in the air all the time. And then when it came to casting, there were two very tough characters in leather aprons, who seized the crucibles with a great pair of tongs, lifted it out and then the molten brass was poured into what are called core boxes. Again, more explosions when the hot brass went into the damp casting sand – there would be steam and more sparks and more fireworks going up in the air. It was really terribly exciting, I always tried to get there when they were actually casting."*

LEFT
Drawing of the Newman Brothers' Casting Shop by Arthur Allen's son, Anthony Allen produced in circa 2007.

In Anthony's day, the patterns for the handles and other items to be cast were made in wood by a man called Mr Ray. The wooden patterns were pressed into fine casting sand in the core boxes and then removed, leaving a perfect impression in the sand, ready for the molten metal to be poured in. The sand itself very probably came from Key Hill Cemetery in the Jewellery Quarter. This cemetery started life as a sand quarry, and quarrying continued up until the 1930s; the cliffs created by the quarrying resulted in the dramatic landscape that can still be seen in the cemetery today. Interestingly, some coffin handles cast in Key Hill sand will have returned back into the sand at the cemetery on a coffin, in what might be described as a 'circle of death'. The most famous person buried in Key Hill cemetery with Newman Brothers' coffin fittings is the great Birmingham statesman, Joseph Chamberlain, who died in 1914.

Outside the Casting Shop, in the middle of the courtyard, was a row of sheds: a coke store, a dirt hole, a 'Dippy Shed' and a horse manure hole. Using the original architect's drawings as our guide, we have marked out the footprint of these sheds in the paving of the restored courtyard. The Dippy Shed was used for one of the most noxious processes, the dipping of metal castings in chemicals to clean them prior to finishing.

BLACKING SHOP

To one side of the Casting Shop, towards the street, were the Stables. These would have housed the proprietors' horses during the day. On the other side of the Casting Shop, towards the back end of the courtyard, was the 'Blacking Shop'. Blacking was the process of lacquering metal items and involved using noxious hot liquids. Although this whole range was replaced in the 1960s, it was not totally demolished, and during the restoration work in 2014, one of the windows of the Blacking Shop was uncovered and can still be seen today.

THIS PAGE
A japanned breastplate listed under the 'Registered Furniture' section of one of Newman Brothers' earlier catalogues, circa 1910.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

BARRELLING SHOP

Underneath the Blacking Shop, below ground, was the Barrelling Shop. This still survives with some of the barrels in place.

Barrelling was the process of smoothing off the rough edges of cast items by placing them in hexagonal metal barrels, containing bits of leather, cloth and grit, which were continually rotated throughout the day.

The rotating barrels were driven by 'line shafting', which is essentially long rods running the length of the factory, rotated by an engine. Different machines, whether barrels, polishers or drop stamps, were driven by leather belts running from the rotating line shafting. When the factory was built, a gas engine was used, positioned at the bottom end of the courtyard, furthest from the street. Arthur Allen again:

> *"Also very exciting was the gas engine at the bottom of the yard. It was big, it was very big, it had an eight-foot flywheel, which is something. It fired irregularly sort of boom, boom, bang! boom, boom, boom. Quite irregular. You could hear it all over the factory."*

The gas engine was housed in a pit on top of which were the workers' toilets. Presumably, given that it was such a big engine, this made going to the toilet quite an experience!

WORKSHOPS

Opposite the Casting Shop, on the north side of the courtyard, is a three-storey range of 'shopping', with two workshops on each floor, making six workshops altogether. This range is part of the original factory, built in 1894. The uses of the workshops have changed over time, however. Today, five of the six workshops have been converted into units, let out to different businesses – a yoga studio, design studios and a jeweller's workshop, for example. We will describe the workshops as they were used in the final decades of the factory, before it closed in 1999.

ABOVE
The Newman Brothers' courtyard as it appears today. The earlier Victorian range can be seen on the left-hand side of the image in comparison to the later 1960s' range.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

PLATING SHOP

On the ground floor, at the back end of the courtyard, was the Plating Shop (this was originally the Polishing Shop, as the architect's drawings show). Electroplating was undertaken in this workshop. This is an electro-chemical process that covers metallic objects with a thin 'plate' of another metal to give them the desired look or finish.

The main types of plating that were undertaken in this workshop were brass-plating and copper-plating. The basic equipment comprises large vats containing dangerous chemicals such as sulphuric acid. The items to be coated are dipped into the vat and an electric current passed through them, depositing a thin outer coat of the desired metal.

Anthony Allen describes the whole set up as...

very Heath Robinson. One had the feeling that you could be electrocuted just going through the door... fumes and bubbles, and slightly frightening."

LILY ROADS | DIAMOND LIL

Lily Roads, known as Diamond Lil, was a plater at Newman Brothers. She did nickel plating, brown bronzing and black bronzing. She was quite the character and was known for her long hair, wearing wellingtons, and telling people's fortunes by reading their teacups.

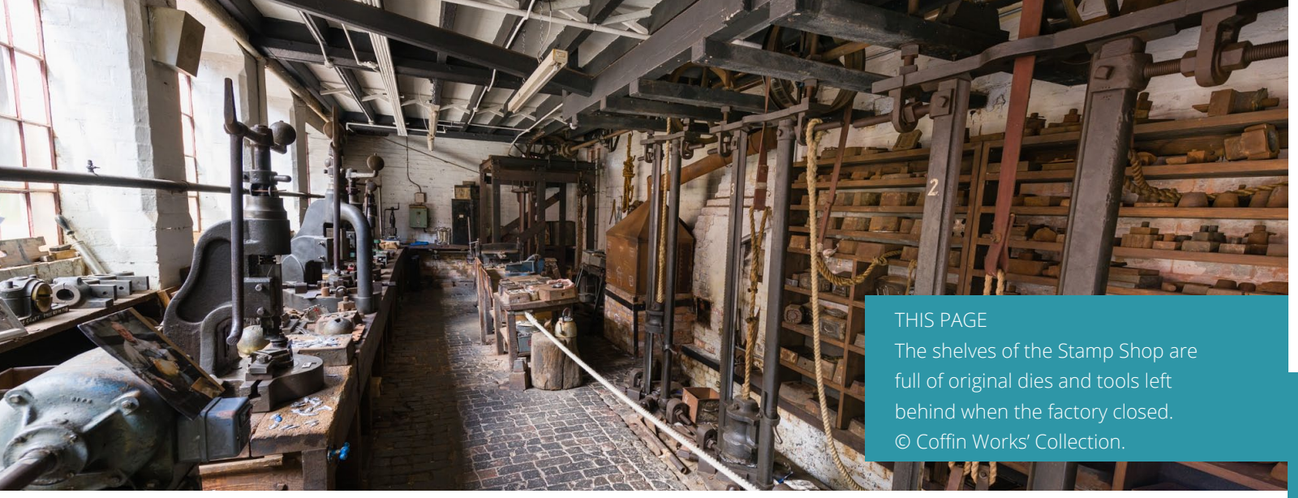
ABOVE
The Newman Brothers' Plating Shop was too contaminated to incorporate into the museum and was instead renovated as one of the Coffin Works' commercial units. © Coffin Works' Collection.

LEFT
Victorian 'urn motif' ornament, circa 1890s.

RIGHT, TOP
Art Nouveau-inspired handles, circa 1890s-1910.

RIGHT BOTTOM
The nickel-plated Crescent handle was also a favourite of the royal undertakers. All images © Coffin Works' Collection.

PLATED OBJECTS



THIS PAGE
The shelves of the Stamp Shop are full of original dies and tools left behind when the factory closed.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

STAMP SHOP

Also on the ground floor, next door to the former Plating Shop, is the Stamp Shop. This still survives, with much of the original equipment intact and working, and forms one of the highlights of a visit to the museum. Along with casting, stamping was one of the two basic processes by which items of coffin furniture were made in the factory. Stamped products could be mass-produced in great numbers and were much cheaper to make than cast products. The basic piece of machinery is called a 'drop stamp'. The process involves stamping a shape into a sheet of metal by dropping a heavy metal weight or hammer. In the Stamp Shop at Newman Brothers, there is a 'battery' of four drop stamps, from small to large, together with one very large drop stamp on its own. These are used to make coffin fittings in a range of sizes. The smallest drop stamp is suitable for making ornaments the size of a coin, while the biggest drop stamp was used to produce the breastplates that go on the lid of a coffin, engraved with the name of the deceased.

As well as the drop stamp itself, the other key piece of equipment is the 'die'. This is a block of steel engraved with the shape of the object to be stamped out. These can be intricate in design, and it takes great skill to produce them; the craftsmen who made the dies were called 'die sinkers'. The die sinker at Newman Brothers for many years was Mr Ray, the same man who carved out wooden patterns for the castings.

Anthony Allen recalls him as...

...a delightful old character, Mr Ray, he had very small steel-rimmed spectacles and he made all the patterns. He had a block of tool steel, incredibly hard. He'd draw a design on it and it would probably take him two months to chisel it out, like a wood carving almost. And if you look at the Stamp Shop here, you'll find some of them. They are beautiful bits of work and it was an incredible job. He not only made the big ones, he made all these little ones as well. He once made a pattern for me in wood to make a steam engine."

However, the die is only half of the job. To stamp out the pattern in a sheet of metal, a corresponding 'positive', or raised shape, is needed to fit into the 'negative' shape carved into the die. This positive shape is called the 'force', and is made out of lead. To make a force, the die is fixed under the hammer and molten lead is poured into the carved pattern in the die. A temporary wall of clay around the edge of the die keeps the molten lead from spilling out. The hammer is then gently lowered onto the lead. After about ten minutes, the lead force sets and sticks to the bottom of the hammer. Everything is now ready to stamp out a coffin fitting.

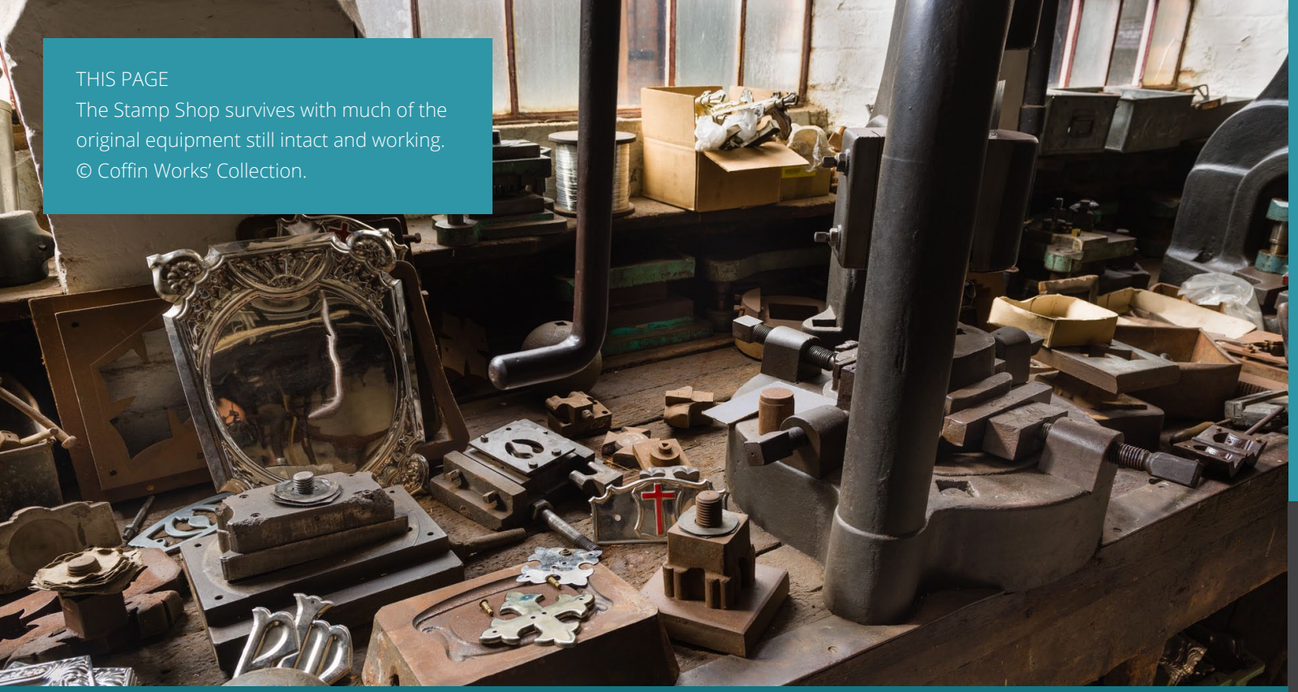
ABOVE
The shelves of the Stamp Shop are full of original dies and tools left behind when the factory closed.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

OPPOSITE
Fly presses were used to finish the stamped products by cutting off excess metal.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

The hammers are too heavy to lift and drop without mechanical help. This is provided by the line shafting, which was originally driven by the gas engine at the end of the courtyard, but is today driven by an electric motor. The line shafting rotates continuously. Over the shaft, round a wheel, run ropes or straps attached to the hammer. To raise the hammer, the operator – who is called a 'drop stamper' – pulls on the rope, and the friction from the rotating wheel helps to lift the hammer. Then, in Anthony Allen's words, ***"loose the rope, BANG, loose rope again, and they were ever so quick. I wondered how they kept their fingers."***

Once the item had been stamped into the sheet metal, the excess around the edges needed to be trimmed off. This was usually done using a fly press. The fly presses in the Stamp Room are lined up along the bench under the window.

This common piece of hand-operated machinery works by using a weighted arm – 'the fly' – to turn a screw, that drives down a trimming tool of the required shape to cut off the excess metal. Other tools can be fitted to a fly press for many different purposes, including stamping and punching holes. Like a drop stamp, operating a fly press all day was hard work, often done by women.



THIS PAGE
The Stamp Shop survives with much of the original equipment still intact and working.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

Mark also hurt himself in the Stamp Shop:

"I just caught the tips of my fingers on the guillotine at one time, and I had to go to hospital. There was no guard; I mean there is a guard now. I think it was added later on."

The hours in the Stamp Shop were long, from 7am to 7pm, Monday to Friday and 7am to 1pm on a Saturday. Many of the workers were not paid a wage, but instead did 'piecework.' This meant that they were paid a fixed amount for each piece they made. The more complicated a piece was, the higher the amount the employer paid for it. Piecework encouraged staff to work as fast as possible, to make as much money as possible. Their own safety was often sacrificed for speed, and accidents were not uncommon. Many a drop stamper lost a finger or two.

NORMAN AND MARK, DROP STAMPERS

Mark Finn was the last drop stamper at Newman Brothers. He started working at the factory in the mid 80s, at about the age of 17 or 18. At first, he did all sorts of general jobs - packing, unloading wagons – but gradually took over the drop stamping from a man called Norman, who taught him the trade. In Mark's words...

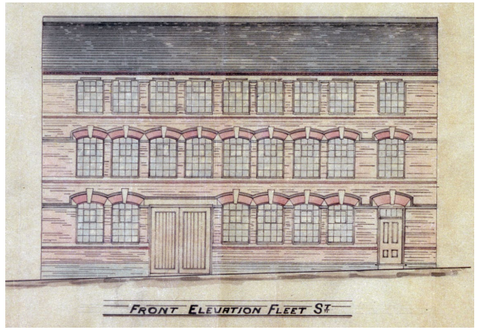
> *"he was a nice old chap. A bit of a character. He'd always go off at dinner time. He'd have a two-hour dinner. I can remember him going off to The George and he'd have a few. He'd always come back a bit the worse for wear on the afternoon and he'd still be operating all this machinery and the stamps. So, you can imagine he'd normally run out of money by Wednesday or Thursday, and he was always trying to sub his wages to keep him going for his next dinner."*

Norman told Mark lots of stories about drop stamping, although Mark was never entirely sure if they were all true:

"He did tell me one about the Big Stamp, somebody getting their head stuck in that at some point. When it was I don't know, it could have been a long time ago, I don't think it's true. I think Norman had lost a couple of fingers at some point."

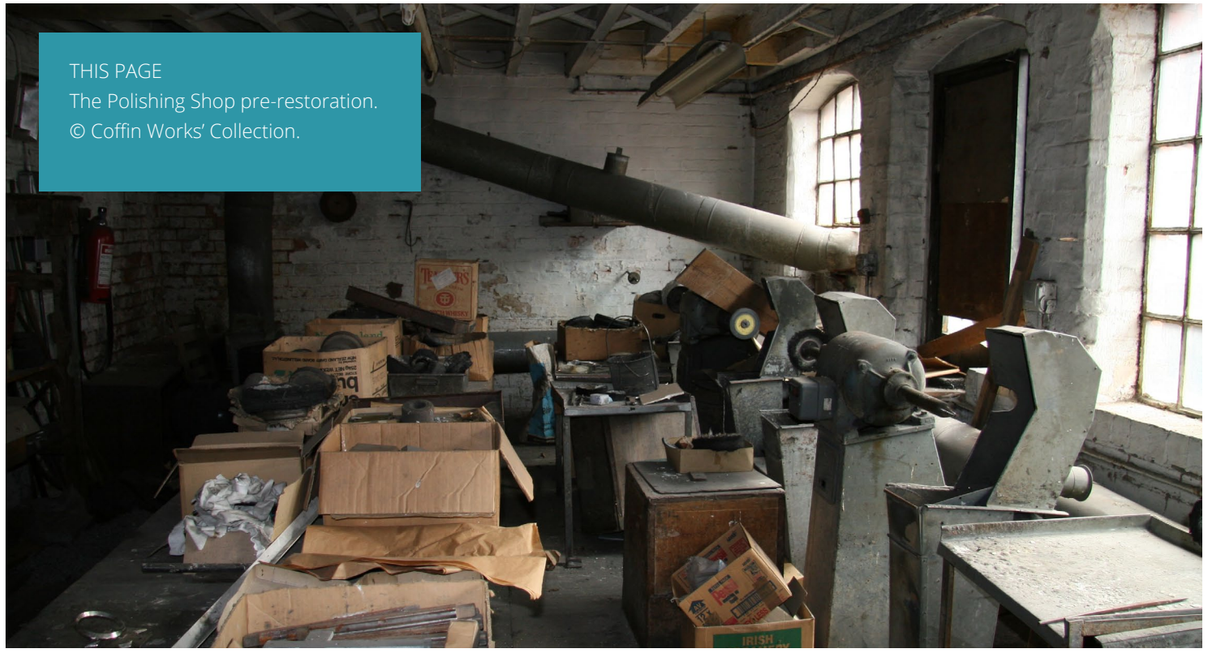
FIRST FLOOR

Typically for the Jewellery Quarter, the factory's offices are on the first floor. This is for security, because it is here that the safes were located. Also on this floor is the Warehouse, where the goods were stored. The workshops in the North Range housed processes that used lighter machinery than those at ground level.



FLEET STREET

ABOVE
Floor plan of the first floor showing the layout of the manufactory from the 1960s.
© Coffin Works' Collection.



THIS PAGE
The Polishing Shop pre-restoration.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

POLISHING SHOP

Once products had been cast or stamped (and sometimes plated), they would often need to be polished. This was done in the Polishing Shop, on the first floor above the Plating Shop. Originally the polishing machines were driven by a gas engine, but by the 1930s, they had individual electric motors. The polishing machines were essentially large spinning wheels, with a 'polishing mop' attached to the rim. Anthony Allen was much taken with the ladies who worked in the Polishing Shop and recalls,

"they were completely enshrouded; they usually had rather large bosoms, so that they had something to lean on the wheel."

WAREHOUSE

The Warehouse, on the first floor, was where Newman Brothers' finished products were packed and stored, ready for dispatch. The company prided itself on the quality of its packaging. In the Warehouse today, we can see a wide range of products in various stages of packing. First they were carefully wrapped in brown paper, then put into cardboard boxes, often with brightly coloured labels, colour coded for quality and product type.

The workers in the Warehouse, mainly ladies, were amongst the poorest paid in the factory. Nevertheless, many of them, such as Dolly Dunsby, the Warehouse Manager, were strong characters.

Goods for dispatch would be taken down to the Post Room on the ground floor by means of a hand-operated hoist. The hoist is quite possibly an original feature of the factory and is still in full working order. The hoist mechanism can be seen in the Shroud Room above.

THIS PAGE
The Newman Brothers' Warehouse as it appears today.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

ABOVE
Dolly on holiday in Scotland in 1980. Newman Brothers paid for her to visit with her brother, Charlie. © Coffin Works' Collection.

ABOVE
Newman Brothers' workers, including Sylvia Kimberley, top left, Dolly Dunsby, top middle and Joyce Green, top right. © Coffin Works' Collection.

ABOVE
Dolly, celebrating her 80th birthday at Newman Brothers in 1981. © Coffin Works' Collection.

DOLLY

Dolly Dunsby began working at Newman Brothers at the age of 14 in 1915. She had the choice of working at a biscuit factory or Newman Brothers, but chose the latter because it paid more. Dolly managed the Warehouse and eventually 'the works', giving out the day's jobs to the polishers. However, Dolly had to fight to get her job as Warehouse Manager. Although Dolly had worked for Newman Brothers for 30 years, when the job became available, she wasn't at first offered it. She felt so strongly that 'she fought her corner' with Horace Newman and eventually got the job. She continued in this role for another 30 years, finally retiring at the age of seventy-five in 1975.

In the early 1960s, a few of the ladies at Newman Brothers, led by Dolly Dunsby, went on strike after a disagreement with the directors about shortening their tea break. Dolly Dunsby, Alice Overton and others walked out on strike. The company was left with no Warehouse staff, which stopped production. The ladies were eventually convinced to come back to work by the directors, Mr Kellett and Mr Floyd, several days later, and production resumed.

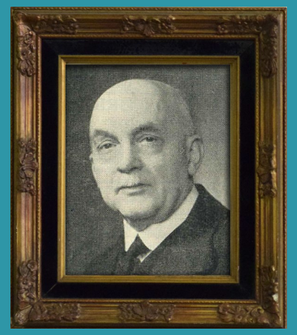
Dolly's one ambition was to visit Scotland. Five years after she left Newman Brothers, aged 80, the company paid for a holiday in the Highlands with her brother, Charlie. While Dolly hadn't always been the easiest employee, this is testament to how much they really valued her.

THIS PAGE
The Newman Brothers' Office as it appears today. It wasn't updated after the 1960s and still retains many pieces from that period and even before.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

OFFICES

Next door to the Warehouse are the Offices. First floor offices are typical of the Jewellery Quarter, usually approached directly by a staircase leading from the front door. This was the arrangement at Newman Brothers. The door into the offices contained a hatch for serving clients. This door led into the 'small office' (not part of the museum), leading off from which was the 'main office'.

The Offices are where we would have found the directors, such as Horace and George Newman, and of course, the office secretary. The secretary from 1949 onwards was Joyce Green, who eventually became the Managing Director in the 1970s and the factory's last owner. On the shelves are the order books and ledgers, some written in Horace's beautiful 'copperplate' handwriting. On the desks and tables is all the equipment that you would expect to find in a well-equipped office of the 1960s. When the factory closed in 1998, they were still using typewriters, a Gestetner copying machine, a Grundig Stenorette dictaphone, adding machines and a comptometer. Funeral directors would phone in their orders, which were relayed to the workers via the factory tannoy system.



HORACE NEWMAN

Horace Newman joined the family business in 1900 at the age of 14, working in the Warehouse, and later began working in the sales office, managing the accounts. In 1950, Horace was recognised by the Funeral Service Journal for his 50 years' service. Just two years later in 1952, he died, ending the direct Newman family connection to the company. He was described as:

'a very, very sociable man. A little tiny man, he used to scurry along very quick. He wasn't much bigger than what I am now actually. He looks tall on that photograph, but he was a small man'.

Joyce Beadle

GEORGE NEWMAN

Born in 1889, George was the second oldest of Alfred's children after Horace. Despite this, George seemed to have run the business with his father, while Horace spent most of his time in the office 'looking after the books'. In the words of Joyce Green, "George had charisma and everyone loved him." We're not sure when he began working at Newman Brothers, but it's likely that he joined not long after his brother Horace, in 1900. From the 1911 census, we know that he was a 'merchant's clerk' working in the coffin furnishing trade, and by 1939, George is listed as a director at a coffin furniture manufactory along with his brother, Horace. George was described as the 'leading light' at Newman Brothers, but at the age of 55 in 1944, George died. With the company already struggling, this was a key moment in its history. Horace was now the last of the Newman family with a direct involvement in the business, but this long line would end in 1952 with Horace's own death.

THIS PAGE
Wills Castella Cigars, circa 1960s, found in the Newman Brothers' Office, were a favourite of the directors.

OFFICE MAKEOVER

The Office was given a complete makeover around 1960 in the fashionable style of the day. The panelled doors were made flush with hardboard, the old iron-framed windows, with their small window panes were removed and replaced with large-paned Crittall windows. One side of the room was kitted out with fitted cabinets, shelving and cupboards. This makes the office stand out from the rest of the factory – even from the outside – which was not similarly modernised.

Occupying pride of place in the fitted unit is the directors' drinks cabinet, with bottles of Worthington's Pale Ale, El Terreno sherry, Grand Vin Mousseux sparkling wine, and a tin of Wills Castella Cigars. The cabinet was presumably used for entertaining clients and for special occasions. The office was not, however, somewhere that ordinary factory workers would be found.

Elizabeth Weaving, who worked upstairs in the Shroud Room, recalls, "We never saw the Office; even at interview, I never saw the inside of the office". She describes the values of the factory as "very Victorian...but so long as you kept your nose clean, you were fine and you got on well".

JOYCE GREEN

THIS PAGE
Image taken of Joyce Green, or Miss Green to most, in the Newman Brothers' Warehouse extension, circa 1998-1999.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

Joyce Green, or Miss Green to most, was the last owner of Newman Brothers. She began working at the company in 1949 at the age of 18, becoming office secretary:

> *"I had to promise Horace Newman not to tell them how old I was because they were under the impression that I was much older than I was and I knew I'd get terribly ribbed, as a younger person, if they found out exactly my age. So, Horace and I had this secret until of course, it came out unexpectedly when I was twenty one…they made me a key…it was adorned with purple ribbon and I had a nice present off them, all the factory collected… it was all made by hand and I imagine, it could have been Tom Chapman that made this from the stamping shop."*

Miss Green was soon promoted, recognised as a young talent by the company directors, becoming company secretary in the early 1950s. In the late 1970s, she'd become the main shareholder director, after two directors, Charles Floyd and John Kellett, died in 1976, leaving Joyce to run the business.

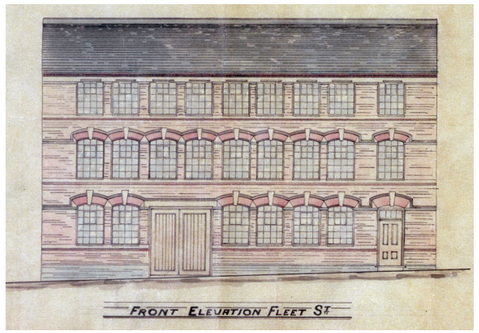
It was Joyce's wish for Newman Brothers to become a museum. After five vacant years and tireless campaigning, she sold the business to Advantage West Midlands (AWM) in 2003, on the basis that the building would not be used for residential use for a period of five years. This gave the project enough time to raise funds to fulfill her dream.

The project suffered highs and lows after losing funding in 2007, but by 2010, it was back on track. It was Joyce's steadfast determination that enabled us to be able to share such an important part of this country's heritage. Unfortunately, she died in 2009 so didn't get to see the project through to fruition.

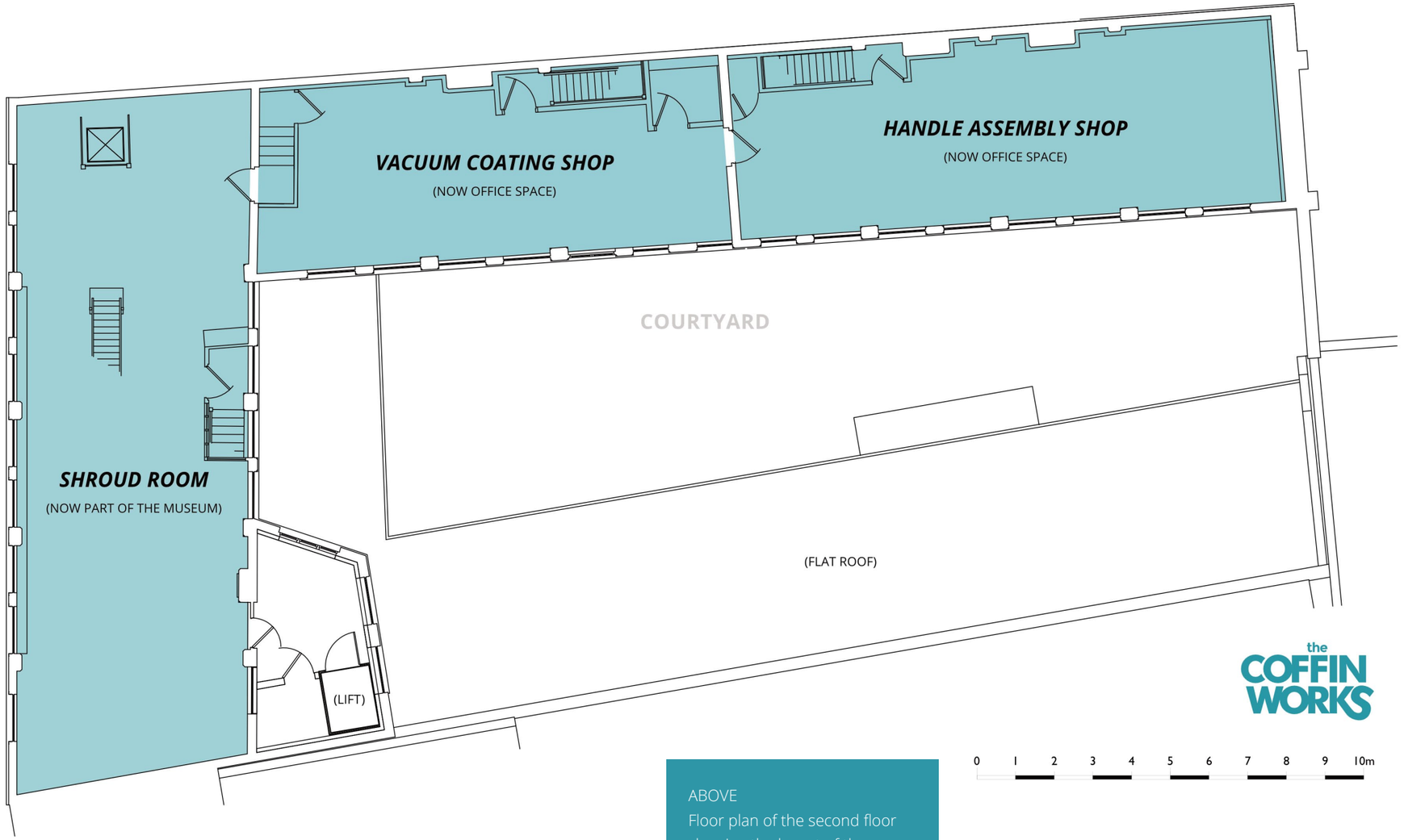
SECOND FLOOR

The most important workshop on the second floor was the Shroud Room, which the ladies who worked there more commonly called the Sewing Room. This occupied the whole of the front range, and its height maximised the available light.

We don't know what the second floor rooms of the North Range were originally used for. In the later years of the factory, however, they contained the Casket Handle Assembly Shop and the Vacuum Coating Shop. The South Range never had a second floor.



FLEET STREET



ABOVE
Floor plan of the second floor showing the layout of the Newman Brothers' manufactory from the 1960s onwards.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

CASKET HANDLE ASSEMBLY SHOP

In the later years of the factory, the workshop on the top floor above the Polishing Shop, became the Casket Handle Assembly Shop. 'Caskets' are the American equivalent of coffins. Coffins have a classic, six-sided coffin shape, widest at the shoulder and tapering to the head and feet. The lids are generally flat and are screwed down. The screws are decorative as well as functional, with different kind of heads, such as 'castle' and 'plume.' Caskets, on the other hand, are a rectangular box, but often with a fancy raised lid, which is hinged.

The handles on a casket consist of two long bars, running the length of the casket, and attached to it with decorative brackets.

Caskets are in general more expensive than coffins. Since we have no evidence that Newman Brothers exported to the United States, we assume that they manufactured the casket handles for the domestic market, particularly for those of Afro-Caribbean origin. Perhaps, too, some people wanted to have a 'Hollywood funeral'.

LEFT
Casket shop pre-restoration.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

VACUUM COATING SHOP

Next door to the Casket Handle Assembly Shop on the top floor was the Vacuum Coating Shop. This workshop only came into existence in 1963, when Newman Brothers bought a second-hand vacuum coating machine. This machine was used to put a metallic finish on plastic products. As we have seen, the switch from inhumation to cremation was accompanied by a switch, enforced by regulations, from incombustible to combustible coffin furniture. Newman Brothers responded to this change by buying in plastic handles, made to their own designs, then giving them the desired metallic finish using their own vacuum coating machine.

THIS PAGE
The earliest date we have of a the Vacuum Coating Shop existing at Newman Brothers is 1963.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

THIS PAGE
Newman Brothers' workers pose for photo in the Shroud Room or 'Sewing Room' in the late 1950s.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

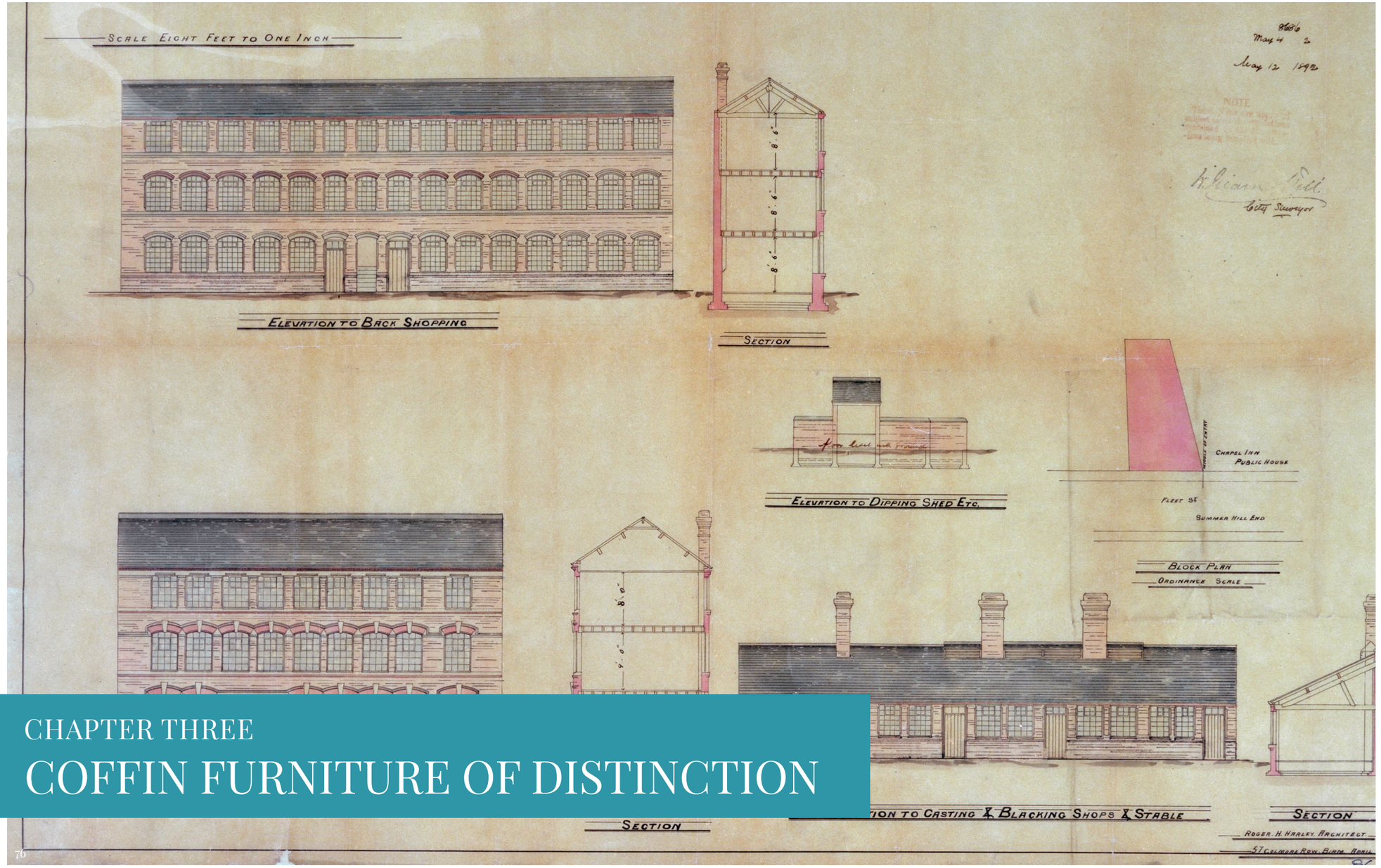
SHROUD ROOM

Occupying the whole of the top floor of the front range of the factory is the Shroud Room (or Sewing Room). This was almost exclusively the domain of women; at least 15 ladies worked in the room. Here were made the funerary robes, in which the deceased would be dressed, and the pillows and linings for the coffin. On the shelves are the roles of material, originally silks, cottons, satins, Swansdown and lace - by the later years, all largely synthetic.

Occupying the centre of the room are tables which were used for cutting material. At one end of the room, next to the hoist is a 'crimping machine'. This old piece of machinery, which probably dates from the early decades of the 20th Century, cut the scallop-shaped edging into the material. Under the front windows, along the length of the room, runs a long bench with nine sewing machines – Singers, Pfaffs and a Wilcox & Gibbs – and an 'over locker', a sewing machine designed to join seams and stitch over the edges of cut fabric so that it doesn't fray. The windows above the bench provided the seamstresses with good natural light, but the bottom panes are made of opaque glass, either reeded or frosted, so that the ladies wouldn't be distracted (indeed many of the windows in the factory were designed in the same way). Elizabeth Weaving, who used to work in the Shroud Room, remembered how cold it used to get...

"In winter it was very cold in here, because of the old Victorian windows. In the summer, it was the reverse, because you've got all this glass, and it's really hot. And I know sometimes it could be that cold that you could actually see frost gathering on the inside of the panes, and you'd sit with your jacket on, or run across to the fire, especially when we had our breaks. And stand like the Victorian gentlemen!"

By all accounts, the atmosphere in the Shroud Room was rather jolly. The ladies listened to the wireless over speakers fixed to the ceiling and wall; *Workers' Playtime* and similar programmes. They joked about the work, describing themselves as "making clothes you would be seen dead in". At the heart of the room is the all-important tea station, still with the crockery, gas fire and toasting fork in place.



CHAPTER THREE

COFFIN FURNITURE OF DISTINCTION

WHAT THEY MADE AT THE FACTORY

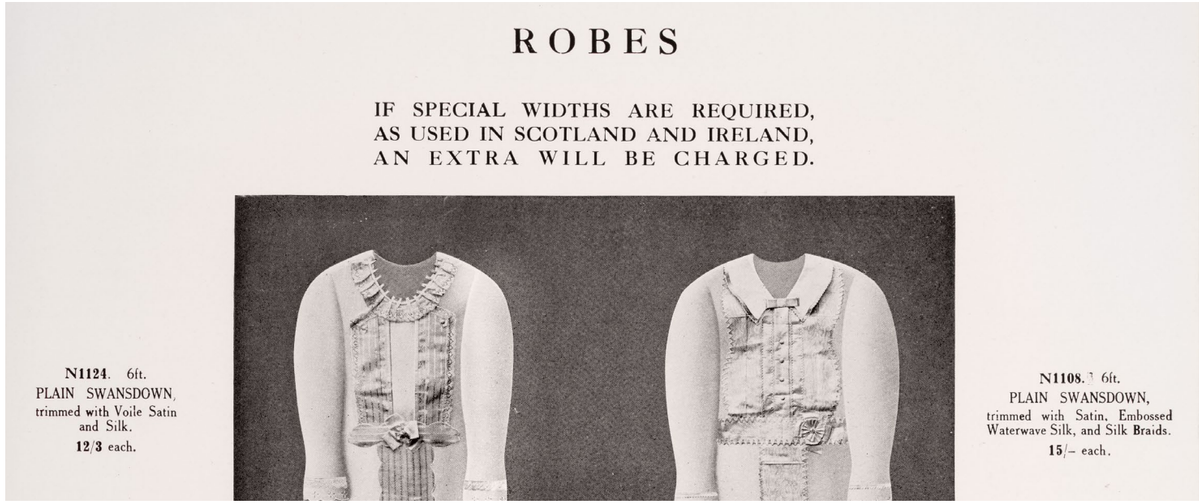
In the Newman Brothers' collection, there are six different trade catalogues, dating from the early years of the factory to the 1960s. These give us a good idea of what the company sold, although not everything in the catalogues was made at the factory. Likewise, there are some Newman Brothers' products that don't feature in the surviving catalogues. The catalogues were aimed almost exclusively at funeral directors.

HIGHEST QUALITY

The earliest catalogue we have may well date from 1894, when the factory opened, or a little later. The highest-quality products were made of solid brass, but there were cheaper versions available in "imitation brass" (plated) and nickel-plated. The types of products include cast 'bar' and 'ring' handles, stamped ornaments and back plates for handles, and stamped breastplates (the plate that goes on the lid of the coffin and is engraved with the name of the deceased), together with coffin nails and screws, corner clips and wreath holders. Very few of the products in this catalogue remain in stock, although the dies for one or two of the designs are still on the shelves of the Stamp Room.

LEFT
Inside page of Newman Brothers' first trade catalogue, circa 1894.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

OPPOSITE
Robes or shrouds from a Newman Brothers' catalogue, circa 1920s. The Irish and Scottish, in comparison to the English, favoured a wider panel of 'ruffling' on the torso, hence the note at the top of the page which reads 'If Special widths are required, as used in Scotland and Ireland, an extra will be charged'.
© Coffin Works' Collection.



By the 1920s, Newman Brothers had widened their range to include "coffin furniture of every description, shrouds, robes, side sheets and frillings." A catalogue of around this time includes a range of robes, mainly in Swansdown with silk and satin trimmings, and a wide range of frillings in a variety of fabrics. The range of coffin fittings had considerably widened, and the catalogue from this period includes japanned (black lacquered) breastplates, and a range of coffin lace (which despite the name is a decorative finish made of metal). The fittings were available in "white", "white and black" "black and gold enamelled and gold, or any fancy colours". There are two types of designs, 'General' or 'Registered'. 'General' refers to common designs that stayed in fashion, and were made by all the manufacturers. 'Registered' designs, on the other hand, were exclusive to a particular manufacturer, and copying was not allowed. These designs had to be registered with the Board of Trade. Indeed, in 1958, Newman Brothers were taken to court by Charles Hill & Co. (CHILLCO) for infringement of a registered design. The matter was settled out of court, and Newman Brothers' director, John Kellett, maintained that they had taken inspiration from an Australian design very similar to the CHILLCO one they had been accused of copying.

The next surviving catalogue we have dates from the 1960s, suggesting that Newman Brothers either didn't produce any catalogues between the 1920s and this point or that some are missing. There are many Newman Brothers' designs that don't feature in the surviving catalogues, so it is plausible to suggest that we do not have the entire collection. Some of their most exquisite Art Deco handles, for instance, do not feature in their surviving catalogues, but the Registered Design numbers illustrate that they are Newman Brothers' products. By the 1960s, Newman Brothers had significantly reduced their product range so that it contained just over 60 products, compared with over 200 at their height before the First World War. The most significant change is the introduction of plastic furniture. This ties in with the purchase of a second-hand vacuum coating machine, which applied the metallic finishes to the plastic handles.

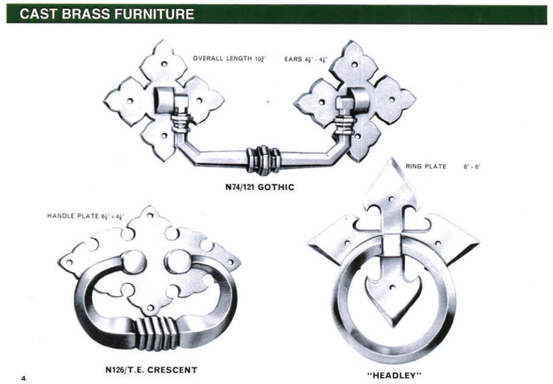
Their range of cast furniture had also dramatically reduced, featuring on just one page of the 1960s' catalogue. As their casting shops had been demolished by this point, it seems likely that they were still having a limited amount produced off site. By 1957, they had outsourced work to GEO. Gale (Die Casters) LTD. Die casting was economically more beneficial than sand casting, as you could keep the metal tool afterwards, whereas sand casting required making a pattern or impression in sand for each and every product. It was not only time consuming but not as accurate as die casting. Newman Brothers' failure to modernise their own equipment seems to have contributed to their eventual demise. Most of the furniture they produced was either stamped and plated in-house, or, in the case of plastic and die-cast products, bought in from outside suppliers and finished or coated on their premises.

LEFT
The Newman Brothers' cast brass Gothic handle was a design that first appeared in the company's Victorian trade catalogues.

BELOW LEFT
Newman Brothers' ledger of Registered Designs.

BELOW RIGHT
Newman Brothers' last catalogue produced in the 1960s was used as the main catalogue until the company closed in 1998.

Newman Brothers do not appear to have introduced any new products after the 1960s and continued to use this catalogue up until they closed in 1998. It comprises their most popular products during their time in business, and the oldest product to feature is the cast brass Gothic handle, which features in their earliest catalogue dating from the 1890s. This is the handle that they are perhaps best known for, because it is the handle that has been used on the coffins of royalty and Winston Churchill.



HOW NEWMAN BROTHERS SOLD THEIR PRODUCTS

Among the most important staff employed by Newman Brothers were the travelling salesmen, many of whom went on to be directors. Each travelling salesman had his own 'patch' where he would tour around the undertakers or, in rural districts, builders and carpenters, who doubled up as undertakers. The work was hard and meant being away from home for days or weeks at a time, travelling by train, motorcycle or car. Typically, they would spend the nights in commercial hotels, specifically catering for salesmen and other businessmen. We know the patches covered by specific salesmen, because their expense claims survive in the Newman Brothers' collection. One of 'Dai' Davies' patches, not surprisingly given his name, was Wales and the Marches, while Arthur Allen often worked in Ireland. John Kellett, Newman Brothers' director in the 50s and 60s, looked after London and especially the royal undertakers, J.H. Kenyon Ltd.

The job of the travelling salesmen involved keeping existing customers happy and, of course, finding new business. The key tool of the trade was the travelling salesman's bag, full of catalogues and samples. We are fortunate that four of these bags were left at the factory, still with their contents inside. The handles and other fittings are proudly mounted on presentation card, while the fabric samples of funerary gowns and coffin linings are displayed together in a manner similar to a carpet sample book. Before making a visit, cards would be posted out to prospective clients, advising that a travelling salesman would be visiting in the next few days.

An important quality of any salesman is, of course, patter. The Newman Brothers' salesmen that we know about, such as Arthur Allen and Dai Davies, were handsome and charming men, with colourful lives.

Another way in which Newman Brothers promoted their products was through exhibiting at trade shows. Perhaps the most important show was the annual exhibition of the National Association of Funeral Directors (N.A.F.D.), where suppliers to the trade showed off their wares – coffins, coffin fittings, hearses, memorial cards, embalming fluids, artificial wreaths and much more. The Newman Brothers' trade stand at the 1951 N.A.F.D. exhibition in Blackpool displayed three coffins and a casket, each with a distinct style of fittings, such as 'The Hereford' or 'The Beresford'. No fewer than 16 display panels showcased the handles, back plates, crucifixes, breastplates and other fittings produced by "The House of Newman".

RIGHT
A reproduction of a Newman Brothers' Travelling Salesman's bag.

BELOW
Newman Brothers' Trade Show Stand from the Blackpool Exhibition in 1952.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESCUE AND RESTORATION

THE RESCUE MISSION

In 1999, the firm of Newman Brothers (B'ham) Limited was finally wound up, and more than a hundred years of history seemed to be over. The likely fate for the dilapidated old factory was demolition.

IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY AND HERITAGE

That the Newman Brothers' factory has survived is due to the combined efforts of the factory's last proprietor, Joyce Green, and of many organisations and individuals who recognised its importance for the history and heritage of Birmingham and the nation. It was fortunate that in 1998-99 English Heritage was engaged in a major survey of the manufactories of Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter and 'discovered' the Newman Brothers' factory as part of this work, just as it was in the process of winding down. English Heritage recognised its importance immediately and granted it a Grade II* listing in 2000, protecting it from demolition.

Although listing meant that the commercial value of the site dropped drastically, Joyce Green and the handful of staff that had stayed with her through to the end were fully behind the move to save the factory for posterity. However, it was one thing to get the building listed and to prevent its demolition; it was quite another to find the funds for repair and restoration and to find a new use for the former factory that would give it a long-term future. Already in fairly poor shape at the time of its closure, from 1999 onwards, the unoccupied building began to deteriorate rapidly. Soon, the Coffin Works was on the English Heritage 'Buildings at Risk' register.

LEFT
The Newman Brothers' courtyard as it appeared in 1998, when the factory closed.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

Birmingham Conservation Trust (BCT) first became involved in the Coffin Works in 2001, when a report was commissioned to look at the options for the future of the building. The report concluded that turning the whole factory into a museum would probably not be financially viable (it would not generate sufficient income to maintain the building) and recommended mixed use – about half of the factory would become a museum, with the rooms preserved as near as possible to how they looked when the business closed, while the other half of the building would be converted into units for let. This would generate two distinct income streams to ensure a sustainable future.

In 2002, BCT submitted a bid to Advantage West Midlands (AWM), the regional development agency, for AWM to purchase the building and its contents, on the understanding that the Trust would undertake the work. This turned into a nail-biting experience for the Trust, as AWM did not complete the purchase, for £400,000, until 31st March 2003, in the final hours of the financial year.

Now there 'just' remained the task of raising the funds for the repair and conservation of the Coffin Works. In the vanguard was BCT's dynamic Director, Elizabeth Perkins, who was at the time heavily engaged in the restoration of the Birmingham Back-to-Backs and negotiating their transfer to the National Trust on completion. The first series of the BBC's ***Restoration*** programme, hosted by Griff Rhys Jones, offered an early opportunity. The excitement mounted in August 2003, when the Coffin Works reached the finals, but it was not to be; Victoria Baths in Manchester took home the £3.4 million prize money. Nevertheless, the programme had raised the profile of the Coffin Works, and it featured again in Radio 4's ***Hidden Treasures***, presented by Lucinda Lampton, in July 2004.

However, problems were emerging. Surveys had established that the Coffin Works was badly contaminated; it was also riddled with asbestos. Advantage West Midlands put the project on hold while the problems were dealt with. As months turned into years, the overall condition of the building was also deteriorating. Despite emergency repairs, the state of the roof was getting worse, and water was pouring in, collecting in buckets, which BCT staff and volunteers had to empty every time it rained. This put at risk the building's contents, especially the more fragile items such as paperwork in the Office and fabrics in the Shroud Room. The decision was made in 2007 that the contents – everything except the heaviest machinery – would have to be moved to safe storage off site, but not before it was all carefully photographed in situ and catalogued so that one day things could be returned to their former places. All this involved more trouble and expense.

Before the contents were removed, one other very important piece of recording needed to be done – getting on record for posterity the stories of surviving former workers, while their memories were fresh. In 2006, the last proprietor, Joyce Green, and as many of the employees as possible were interviewed on camera, in their old workplace, bringing the memories flooding back. It is their stories (the likes of Elizabeth Weaving, Sylvia Kimberly and Mark Finn), often emotional, that provide much of the information used in this book.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth Perkins and her colleagues at Birmingham Conservation Trust were also working on all the research and paperwork needed for major grant applications. Initial applications to Advantage West Midlands and the Heritage Lottery Fund were turned down (part of the issue being who should pay what). Plans were altered, and hopes were dashed again, but by March 2009, everything looked set fair for the project to get the funding it so desperately needed, with revised applications submitted to both Advantage West Midlands and the Heritage Lottery Fund. Then disaster struck. In the wake of the 2008 recession, the government cut almost all funding to the regional development agencies, and AWM had to withdraw its funding offer to the Coffin Works. It was back to the drawing board; historic building conservation is not for the faint-hearted.

Elizabeth Perkins, director of Birmingham Conservation Trust between 1999 to 2012, involved local school children in the rescue mission of the Coffin Works.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

Without funding from Advantage West Midlands and in the climate of post-recession austerity, plans for the Coffin Works had to be scaled down. Fortunately, in the process of winding down, AWM agreed to sell the Coffin Works and its contents to Birmingham Conservation Trust for a 'knock-down' price. Birmingham City Council provided a grant of £150,000, which made the purchase possible, and, by August 2010, the Trust was proud owner of the Coffin Works, albeit in a derelict state. English Heritage contributed a further £450,000 for repairs, which would help to take the Coffin Works off the Buildings at Risk register, and, by June 2011, the Heritage Lottery Fund had approved a grant of £999,400. Things were going in the right direction at last, although it wouldn't be until 2013 that all the funding needed for the almost £2 million project had been put in place, and work could start on the restoration. It had taken 14 years.

Sadly, Joyce Green, Newman Brothers' last Managing Director, without whom the rescue would probably never have happened, did not live to see the happy day; she had died in 2009. Elizabeth Perkins, who as Director of Birmingham Conservation Trust had never given up on the project through the highs and lows of the struggle to raise the funds, had eventually moved on to a new job in 2012, leaving it to a new Director, Simon Buteux, to oversee the 'easy bit': the restoration work itself.

LEFT
Parts of the Newman Brothers' Manufactory were boarded up in 1998 to project it against vandalism.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

BELOW LEFT
The pre-restoration factory was the perfect place for performances and proved popular with many drama groups.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

BELOW RIGHT
Restoration of the original Victorian windows in 2014.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

RESTORING THE COFFIN WORKS

The restoration of Coffin Works took a year, from August 2013 to August 2014. The first task was to make the building wind and watertight. The roof was in a dreadful state, with water pouring in, and needed complete replacement in Welsh slate, like the original. Each of the iron-framed factory windows – and there are about 90 of them – needed repair to a greater or lesser extent. This was painstakingly done mainly in situ, by a specialist craftsman and his lad, over the course of the year. Many of the window panes were cracked. To decide whether a cracked pane needed replacement or could stay, a simple rule of thumb was used – 'two cracks and you're out'.

With the building weatherproof, attention could turn to the interior. In the half of the former factory that was to become the museum, the aim was that the rooms would look as near as possible to how they did in 1999, when the factory closed its doors for the last time. Of course, some things had to change: the rooms needed heating and rewiring, and the whole specification had to be brought up to meet modern fire regulations. Mostly, this was achieved as inconspicuously as possible. Another challenge was making the factory, with its many steep staircases, accessible to wheelchair users and others with limited mobility, through finding a suitably unobtrusive location for a lift.

LEFT
The Casket Handle Assembly Shop post-restoration, now home to Coffin Works' tenants.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

While the overall aim in the museum half of the building was to change as little as possible and to introduce essential modern features as discreetly as practicable, in the other half of the building, where the rooms were to be converted into office/workshop units, a different approach was taken. Here many more changes were made, introducing WCs and kitchenettes, carpets and modern lights, but still retaining many features from the days when the factory was in operation, leaving the modern units with plenty of character.

CREATING THE MUSEUM

From August 2014, when the contractors handed back the keys to the Trust, to the day set for the 'grand opening', there were just two months to recreate the rooms that would form the museum. Nearly all the contents of the building – furniture, materials, stock, office records, personal items and all but the bulkiest items of equipment and machinery – were held in storage in a warehouse on the outskirts of Birmingham. At the beginning of 2014, the first member of the museum staff, Sarah Hayes, the Collections & Exhibitions Manager, was appointed. Throughout the year, Sarah and a dedicated band of volunteers worked at the warehouse, conserving and cleaning the artefacts, beginning a more detailed catalogue, and preparing everything for the big move back to the Coffin Works as soon as the restoration work was complete.

ABOVE
Stan Whitehurst in action re-creating hand-painted signs in the Coffin Works' Museum in 2016.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

Then for two very busy months, September and October 2014, Sarah and the team worked to put things back where they had come from and recreate as far as practical what the factory had looked like when it had closed 15 years before. As only half of the former factory was to become a museum, many of the items had to go back into storage, but now in a dedicated 'Conservation Store' that had been created in the 1960s' wing of the factory. Here, too, the most valuable and delicate items – things like the old accounts ledgers – could be kept safe in environmentally-controlled conditions, and a programme of further conservation and detailed study could begin.

THIS PAGE
Cataloguing the collection was a mammoth task. Over 800 boxes containing the Newman Brothers' collection were removed from the manufactory in 2007 and kept in storage until 2014.
© Coffin Works' Collection.

THIS PAGE
Project contractors, Fairhurst Ward Abbotts hand keys over to Birmingham Conservation Trust Director, Simon Buteux on 23rd August 2014.

Meanwhile, specialist conservators worked to get some of the machinery working again - sewing machines, the clocking-in machine, even the factory tannoy. The biggest task (carried out by Ian Clark Restoration) was to get the drop stamps and fly presses in the Stamp Shop safely operational again. The demonstration of this machinery in action is one of the highlights for visitors to the museum.

Had Birmingham Conservation Trust succeeded in restoring the building and its contents without losing the character of the factory? The only people who could tell them that were the former workers, and the answer was 'yes'. When Mark Finn, the last drop stamper at Newman Brothers visited the Stamp Shop he was asked anxiously whether the Trust had got it right. "It's just as I remember it," he said, "except that you've moved the guillotine", which was true – one of the little compromises that had to be made to make room for visitors.
While Sarah and her team were working on the collection, there were many other tasks to be done before the museum could open. There was a shop to fit out, stock to be designed and made; signage, a sound system and the inaugural exhibition in the Gallery to be installed, and much else. The biggest and most important task, however, was to recruit and train the numerous volunteers – at least 40 were needed – who would work 'Front of House' and provide guided tours. While each Newman Brothers' volunteer Tour Guide brings their own personality and interests to the job, the key facts and the main lines of the story need to be accurate.

By 24th October 2014, everything was ready – just – for the grand opening.
The BBC and newspapers were there; speeches were made; toasts were drunk; the Lord Mayor of Birmingham cut the ribbon (in fact a length of frilling for the inside of a coffin), and, at long last, the Coffin Works was open again. The party went on late into the night.

RECOGNITION

It takes a certain kind of determination, enthusiasm and dedication to see through a project like the Coffin Works, surmounting obstacles and recovering from setback after setback. So many people and organisations contributed to the effort by giving time, effort, expertise and money, that they cannot all be acknowledged.

THE AWARDS AND OTHER ACCOLADES THAT THE COFFIN WORKS HAS WON ARE FOR ALL OF THEM:

Winner: Birmingham Civic Society Renaissance Award 2014
Winner: RICS West Midlands – Best Building Conservation Project 2015
Winner: RICS West Midlands – Best Tourism Leisure Project 2015
Winner: Historic England Angel Award – 'People's Favourite' Award 2015
Winner: Institute of Conservation – ICON Conservation in the Community Award 2015
TripAdvisor: Certificate of Excellence 2015 – 2018
Winner: Museums + Heritage Awards – Customer Service Award 2016
Winner: West Midlands Museum Development – Young Volunteer 2017
Winner: West Midlands Museum Development - Best Customer Service 2017
Winner: BVSC – Young Volunteer of the Year 2017
Visit England: Quality Assured Visitor Attraction Best Told Story 2018

The Coffin Works Museum has won a string of awards including the ICON award for 'Conservation in the Community' (ABOVE) and a Renaissance Award from Birmingham Civic Society (LEFT).
© Coffin Works' Collection.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the financial contributions of those who had faith in the book, it would have ended its life as something for future technology archaeologists to muse over. Therefore, massive thanks must be given to those who gave the necessary CPR to the text.

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No5 BARRISTERS CHAMBERS

OWEN EDMUNDS

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