

Report for the October 2016 meeting of the Malvern Civic Society

On Friday 9th October John Berkeley talked to us about Brandauer, a longstanding precision-engineering company in Birmingham. He told us about the very interesting development of this company, which started off two centuries ago manufacturing pens and which has now become a manufacturer of components for the Large Hadron Collider. There was even a connection with Malvern.

John joined the company in 1967, then left to work for Rover for twenty-four years, returning to Brandauer in 2001 as Chairman. He retired three years ago when the company celebrated its one hundred and fiftieth anniversary.

The company is a family firm that is still owned by descendants of its founders. It owed its success to immigrants, starting with Jean Petit, whose grandson Joseph joined forces with Charles Brandauer to establish the company in 1862. Charles Brandauer was the son-in-law of Carl Kuhn who first acted as agent for Joseph Petit when Joseph set up his own company in the 1850s. Carl Kuhn himself had begun producing steel pens in Vienna and had the first pen factory anywhere in Europe. Joseph was a pen designer and toolmaker, and with his lead and experience the firm was making pens with over four hundred designs by 1890. For many centuries just quill pens made from birds' feathers had been used for writing. The speaker showed us an example of a quill pen and the contrasting sophisticated elegance of Brandauer pens. Birmingham in fact became the centre of the pen industry, with more pen factories than the rest of the world put together. The coming of mass production meant that a steel pen could be reproduced.

The processes for pen manufacture were already established by 1862, however there was the same secrecy for the production of pen colours as there was for the production of Worcestershire Sauce. Through the different stages of blanking, piercing, slitting and stamping, there could be defects occurring, and when that happened, the value of the pens was deducted from the operators' wages. Working conditions were hard, with sackable offences including things like making too much noise or singing at work, all stated in a Brandauer rules book. However, workers put in long service too, for example, Fanny Philips retired in 1961 after working for Brandauer for seventy-one years!

In Victorian times a pen had to match the style of writing required, so there were different types, colours, sizes, rib widths and prices of pens. There were different pens for schools, banks, railway companies, ladies.... and indeed there was something for everyone. They were sold in exquisitely beautiful boxes and also displayed at exhibitions such as the Great Exhibition in 1851. Brandauer pens were exported all over the world.

From starting out as a partnership, Brandauer became a limited company in 1901 and continues to trade as C Brandauer and Co. It sold its Grade II listed building in 2000 and moved nearby. At the time of the First World War, Brandauer's son Frederick lived in Milbourne Lodge, Church Street, Malvern, but was arrested in 1917 and taken to Alexandra Palace in London, an assembly point for arrested aliens. Rather than be repatriated to Germany, he committed suicide. The speaker appealed to us to hear more about this property and showed us a photograph.

When Edward Augustus Gordon, with a motorbike background, married into the family, the company began to diversify in metal pressings. During both the First and the Second World Wars, Brandauer was involved in making aircraft parts and then made other products like sound recorders, washers, copper safety spanners and foot-pedal parts for the Singer sewing machine. It now produces parts for the construction industry as well as the medical healthcare sectors. Seventy percent is exported and much goes to China. Brandauer was the only technical company that could produce a shielding strip, the necessary part for the Large Hadron Collider, required by CERN in Switzerland at its experimental base.

Chairman Clive Hooper gave the vote of thanks for this very interesting talk which was followed by a question and answer session. It was confirmed that all the nibs are made of steel and that it is possible to make a large variety of colours from steel. There was also a small-scale production in gold by Brandauer. For more on the company's history, please see: www.brandauer.co.uk.

The next meeting will be the Annual General Meeting at 7.30 pm on Friday 11 November, followed by a talk from Dr Freddie Gick of Civic Voice, the 'umbrella' organisation for Civic Societies. In 2017, the first talk will be held there on Friday 13 January and will be given by Hannah Thomas about The Worcestershire Wildlife Trust.