

Life of a Coventry Watchmaker Mid - 18th century

By 1850, Coventry was the main centre in the United Kingdom for the assembling and finishing of watches particularly for the cheaper markets. In 1860's there were 90 watch manufactures in Coventry, with a work force of 1250 men, 667 apprentices and 30 women. A lot of watch making rarely took part in big factories even when a watch manufactory did exist. Many employees would complete their work outside of factories in their homes. As the trade expanded watch makers spread westwards to Spon End and suburbs of Chapelfields and Earlsdon.

The watch industry saw a decline in employment numbers because of various contributing factors towards the 20th century. Such as pausing production to produce munitions during World War One (WWI), and the competition from the American and Swiss watch industry which manufacturer cheaper watches to England. This is reflected in the employment number of the Coventry watch trade as in 1911, statistics presents only 1500 watchmakers in Coventry. This blog explores the work life, schedule and rules of a Coventry watchmaker from the Late - 19th centuries. By analysing transcript notes from Rotherham and Sons Ltd and excerpts from '*Past, Present and Future of the English Watch Trade*' which explores the connection of watch making to the history of Coventry. The sources detail the lives of Coventry employees and apprentices in the watch trade.

Work Ethic

Watchmakers were dedicated to their craft, prosperous business in the summer led to working 71 hours and 45 minutes, six days a week excluding breaks. In the winter business was slow meaning employees only worked 62 hours and 30 minutes excluding break times.



Smith & Sons, watch balance manufacturers. Interior of workshop.

The watch production process before machinery was a taxing job having to work very long hours sometimes even more in the busy periods to keep up with sale demands. In intense periods some employees would leave the shop for a few hours to rest- only to come back and continue to work. This sentiment was fuelled not only by business but for monetary reason. As employees would receive payment once they had their work examined and it was deemed fit for sale.

This is presented in the Rotherham and Sons transcript notes as a story of an employee rushing to have his work examined to get paid.

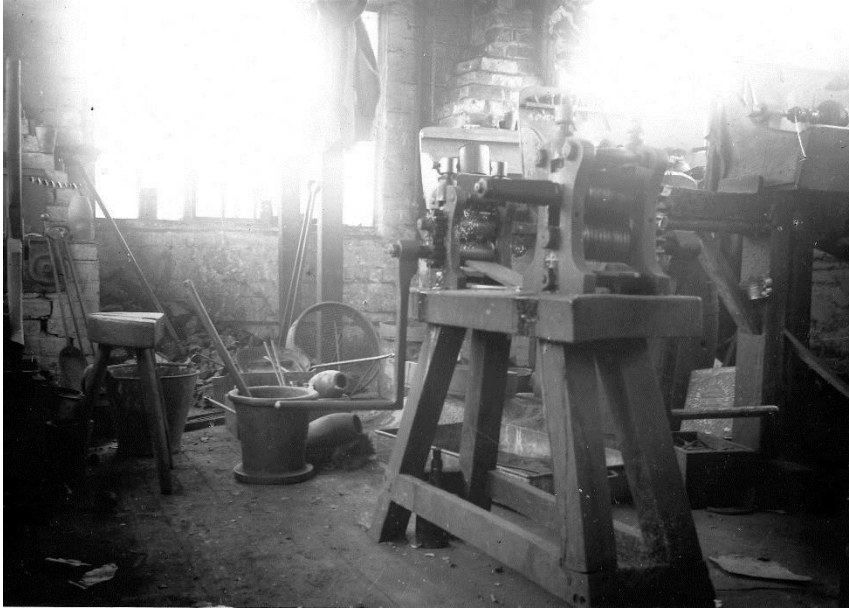
'On one occasion one of these took his work to the factory just on closing time, and it being a rule to examine the work before paying for it and, the light not being good enough for the master to examine it properly he told the man to take it away and bring it again in the morning. "What time, Sir" asked the man, "any time you like" was the answer. The man went away but he was there again at 5 o'clock in the morning and rung up his employer who came and asked what he wanted, he told he had brought his work as arranged. "I did not think you would come at this unearthly hour" was the reply, however the work was taken in and examined and paid for when the master said "This once but don't come the same trick again" the man replied "I should not have done it now sir, only I wanted the money to take me to Chester races".'

Season schedules - Factory/workshop (not including working at home)

Watch makers had two timetables for the summer and winter working hours. In the year 1860 the summer work schedule would begin on the 1st of April to the 1st of September. On weekdays labours began their shifts at 6am and finish at 8pm with a 40-minute break for breakfast, one hour for dinner and 15 minutes for tea. It was not uncommon for trade employees to work 6 days a week. A Saturday's workday was shorter than weekdays only working 12 hours from 6am to 6pm. With a similar break schedule as the weekdays minus the 15 minutes tea break. In the winter watchmakers work from 8am to 8pm with similar break schedule to Saturday.

Saint Monday

After working long hours 6 days a week, watchmakers would take part in what became known as Saint Monday. Throughout the industrial midlands Monday was taken as a holiday. Holidays were rooted in religious festivals thus the name Saint Monday. This was seen as a holiday to most watchmakers and industry workers. Saint Monday was a practice in which many workers would refrain from coming to work and spent the day drinking and in entertainment instead. It is said, *'certainly half of the number of watchmakers in the works would never turn up on a Monday'*. They would stagger back to work on the Tuesday or even Wednesday. This holiday came to an end in 1866/87 when Saturday working hours were reduced by ending the day at 2pm. The shorting of the of work hours from 6am to 8am start time with breakfast before working and finishing work at 7:30pm led to Saint Monday traditions becoming less frequent.



Gold Worker's
Workshop (watch
case making)

Factory Rules

Watch manufactories imposed strict rules to their employees and if any rules were broken, they would be fined. Some of the rules include *'going to work on Monday clean shaven or be fined 2d.'* Another rule was that *'all workmen were to appear in a clean apron on Thursday morning or be fined 3d.'* Also, there were strict rules on punctuality as tardiness was treated with discipline. In excerpts of *The Past, Present and Future of the English Watch Trade* states the master would *'stand on top of the stairs leading to the shops holding a rather thick stick with which he would topper the apprentices as they came up late.'*

As machinery is introduced into the watch industry many changes took place. Technology resulted in the loss of employment numbers in the trade to the upcoming motor industry, and international watch markets. This meant the work schedules and production had to change to harmonise with the industrialisation of the watch trade.

To find out more about Coventry watch makers you can access the Coventry Archives collections on Coventry Collections or email to archives@cvlife.co.uk.

Sources used:

Joseph McKenna, *'Clock and Watch Makers of Central England'* (local studies library)

PA1467/47/1: Rotherham and Sons Limited, Typescript *notes on the history of Rotherham and Sons Limited and the watchmaking industry*

PA1467/48/1: Typescript account of *"The Past, Present and Future of the English Watch Trade"*