The Mantle Factory

Walking down Lower Kings Road today and passing the entrance into the car park, next to Waitrose, a recent arrival to Berkhamsted might believe that the road layout had always been the same. Berkhamsted residents of longer standing would have a different memory. Until the end of 1969 the car parking area off Lower Kings Road was home to Berkhamsted's "Rag Trade".

What was a Mantle?

The story starts at the beginning of the nineteenth century with a change in ladies' fashion. During the 1830s garments were designed with more shape, to replace the previously worn, loose fitting wraps, scarves and shawls, which had been in favour. The new styles had various names including "casawick", "visites" and "mantelet". They could either cover the shoulders or extend down below the waist depending on the weather; and they ranged from the rather plain to the highly decorative. They could be trimmed with lace, fur or ruffled cloth. One that became popular was called a "mantle".

At the beginning of the nineteenth century ladies' clothing was manufactured by individuals, invariably in their own home, to a specific commission. During the century this began to change, with the development of specific shops selling ready- made clothes much as they do today. Individuals, still working in their own home, produced a number of identical garments, which were then passed on to an intermediary who sold them to the shops. Such a situation was occurring in Berkhamsted.

Hughes & Hawkins.

Henry George Hughes was born in Hackney, London and his birth was registered in the December quarter of 1856, the third son of James and Catherine Hughes. His father was a carpenter and joiner but Henry George had other ideas for his career because by the 1871 census, when he was just fourteen, his occupation was described as "Mantle business", becoming a mantle manufacturer in the later censuses. He never seems to have married and must have been the travelling salesman for his company as in the 1901 census he was staying at the Russell Hotel in Bloomsbury. During the latter part ofthe nineteenth century he had a base in Berkhamsted High Street, in the upper storey of a row of old buildings occupied by the Co-operative Society, at the bottom of Cowper Road. Here he collected the locally home-produced items of clothing for shipment to the London shops. Strangely he never seems to have resided in Berkhamsted. His enterprise appears to have prospered so that he needed to expand the company.

Charles Hawkins now enters the story. He was born in 1840 in the parish of St Margaret's, Westminster the first son of Nehemiah William and Maria Hawkins. He and his father were house painters, until his sister married a man, thirty years her senior, when Charles went to work for his brother-in-law who was a general stationer. With the death of the brother-in-law, Charles seems to have inherited money. In the 1891 census he is listed as "living on his own means" with his mother and widowed sister, who is listed as a mantle maker. Production methods were changing from the individual at home, making several similar garments, to a central separate building where the individuals went to work and a certain amount of mass production could take place. This necessitated the construction of a specific building.

How and where Charles Hawkins and Henry George Hughes met we may never know. It seems likely that Charles provided the money, allowing Henry George to engage the firm of James Honour and Son of Tring to build them a factory, on three plots of land that he had purchased in 1898 off Lower Kings Road. From the Sun Assurance Company registers we know that the builder insured the building and his materials for £5,500, whilst he was building it in 1899, at a quarterly premium of £3 8s 9d. When Henry George Hughes took over the building some time late in 1899 he continued to insure the premises with the Sun Assurance Company, setting the value at £5,500 with an annual premium of £9 12s 6d, rising to £16 6s Od in 1901. The building was of two storeys and built in brick or stone with tiled or slated roof, and it complied with all the necessary clothing factory warranties.

Henry George Hughes is first recorded in the Kelly's London Post Office directories for 1881 as having offices at 114 Queen Victoria Street, moving to56 & 58 Knightrider Street by 1885 and finally to 30 Bread Street in 1900. This would have consequences later on in the story. Hughes described himself as "mantle manufacturer (wholesale)" in the directories, so it is certain that he was having ladies' mantles manufactured and then selling them in London. It is known that he had connections with Berkhamsted so at least some of his mantles were produced locally. Loosley's 1904 Directory for Lower Kings Road lists "Bulbourne Factory: Hughes, Hawkins & Co". Although officially it was called the Bulboume factory colloquially it came to be called the "Mantle Factory", as this was the principle product being made. Right up until 1900 there is no mention of Hawkins in the title of the Company as listed in Kelly's London Directories. The company was simply called Henry George Hughes, Mantle Manufacturers (Wholesale) which implies that Charles Hawkins was probably a silent partner. It is possible that Charles Hawkins provided the money for the building to be erected in Lower Kings Road. The firm prospered but by 1919 Hughes's health was deteriorating to such an extent that he intended

closing the factory at Christmas. At that time the firm employed some 300 people, mainly women, and the accommodation included its own dining hall and open spaces for recreation, including tennis courts. Interestingly there seems to be no further mention of Charles Hawkins.

A Change in ownership.

Another firm, called Corby, Palmer and Stewart, now enters the story. John Edward Corby, Arthur Palmer and James Alexander Stewart established their firm on 27th May 1886. In Kelly's London Directories the firm is recorded as producing "ladies costumes, skirts, blouses and mantles (wholesale)". James Alexander Stewart died 23rd February 1894 but the firm continued to be called by the original title right up until its demise. Initially the firm was established at 39 St Paul's Churchyard, London which is not far from where Henry George Hughes had his offices. By 1908 the firm employed 100 staff at its London warehouse and had a large number of employees in their factories. It also seems to have been expanding with several more offices and warehouses, around central London, listed in later directories. As the two firms were in a similar business and their respective offices were in close proximity to each other, the owners of the two firms probably knew each other. With Henry George Hughes giving up the business Corby, Palmer and Stewart bought him out and continued to employ people at the Berkhamsted factory.

The eastern elevation of the "Mantle Factory" of Corby Palmer and Stewart facing Lower Kings Road shortly before its final closure in 1969.

Business obviously went well as the Bulbourne factory was expanded and the work force enlarged. After the First World War Corby, Palmer and Stewart extended the building with the loss of the tennis courts and a larger separate canteen was built. Between the two World Wars it was estimated that as many as 750 - 800 people, mainly women, were employed there. Many travelled in from Tring, Cheddington and Leighton Buzzard by train as the factory was advantageously situated near the railway station. Pity the poor traveller trying to leave the station at the end of the factory day. Other local industries, such as the brush makers that had employed women, began complaining that there was a shortage of girls. Wages were set under the Wholesale Mantle and Costumes Council. At some time after the expansion the firm bought some land at the Cow Roast that was used by the employees for outdoor games such as cricket and tennis.

A photograph showing the first floor workshop of the "Mantle" factory

The Mantle Factory in print.

Lt Colonel F S Brereton, famous for his period action books, wrote a book published in 1931 entitled *Clothing - An Account of its Types and Manufacture* in his Essentials of Life series. In chapter IV, on mass production, he introduces the sewing machine into the work in a modern factory. This describes some of

the work carried on at the Bulbourne premises. Although the firm is not named he describes a modem factory in Berkhamsted, close to the ruins of the medieval castle: -

“It is a modem factory in which some eight hundred girls work, and a few men who are highly skilled in certain directions. In long well-lighted workshops, containing two hundred work girls dressed in white coats, are ranges of tables, where, seated opposite sewing machines on either side are the majority of girls.”

“In another workroom we see the very commencement of mass production of women’s clothing. There is an immense store of rolls of cloth and other material of every sort and kind and colour. Skilled workmen spread out a roll on a long, smooth table. One of the most highly skilled of the staff of the factory has designed, we will say, a new pattern of coat for a certain size of figure, and has made a sample garment. Once he is satisfied with the cut and the hang of the coat, he makes stiff brown paper patterns, which are all carefully labelled.”

“The man who has spread out the roll of cloth now takes the patterns and fits them together at one end of the roll like a jig-saw puzzle, getting them assembled so as to make the utmost of every inch of material.”

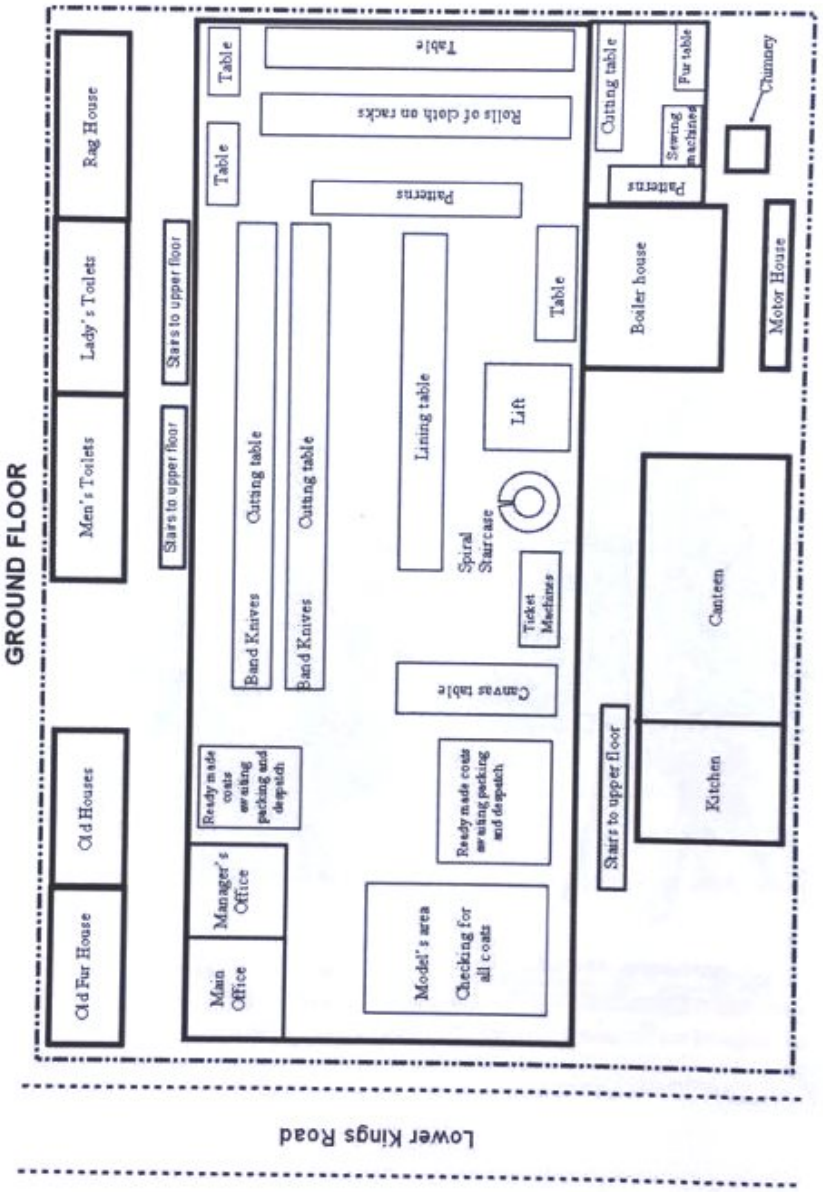
He then cuts the length used and places the finished pattern over a new section of cloth. The process is repeated until he has a pile of similar lengths of cloth with the pattern fixed to the top most one.

“He stands behind the smooth band-saw table. Through a small hole passes a bright, thin steel band like a piece of tape, for it is only about half an inch in breadth and on edge is extremely sharp.”

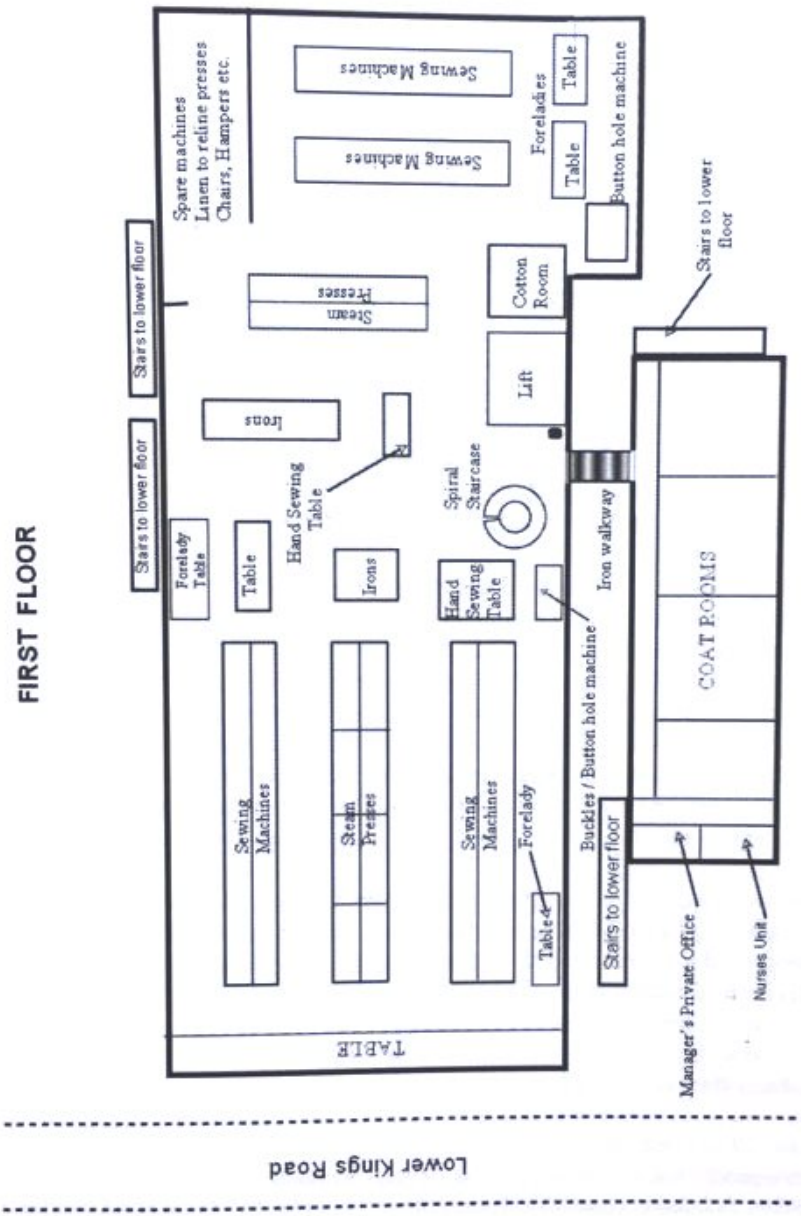
“He may have twenty, thirty, forty double layers of the exact size of the one on which he has marked the pattern.”

In this way one cutter can accurately cut a large number of exactly similar sized pieces of the pattern which when separated will be sewn by the girls into an exact copy of the newly designed garment, bringing mass production techniques to a simple operation.

An advertisement showing two types of mantles that might have been made in the Berkhamsted factory.



Ground floor plan of the Mantle factory



First floor plan of the Mantle factory

Consolidation and Decline.
Both before and after the Second World War there was a strong social club in the firm. Employees, who wished, paid a few pence each week to use the canteen after work for cards, darts, table tennis and dominoes and there was a record player that was used for the occasional dances. Football, cricket and tennis were played at the ground at the Cow Roast. Works' outings to seaside resorts were also organised. One of its past employees described it as a "nice happy factory of a family business".

The finished garments were sent to London by train packed in large wicker baskets (see acquisitions on page 70) but latterly in stiff cardboard boxes. Each had the firm's name boldly printed on the inside of the lid and a serial number on the outside end. Of course in those days of steam engines each train had a guard's compartment into which any parcels could be loaded at each station for onwards transportation to their destination, via the motor transport department of the railway company. Materials were sent in reverse. Corby, Palmer and Stewart designed and produced a range of ladies' coats and suits called "The Corby Classic". These and other lines were sold through Britain's leading department stores such as Gamages, Derry & Toms and other big stores throughout the country.

In 1939 with the advent of war clothing was put on ration. Corby, Palmer and Stewart were employed making army khaki, airman blue battledresses and National Fire Service uniforms. But the requirement for uniforms soon declined and about three-quarters of the factory was then requisitioned by the Ministry of Supply for the production of aircraft parts. A grandson of John Edward Corby (one of the founding partners of the firm) Robert A Corby, worked at the factory until the start of the war when he joined the army. In 1944 the Hertfordshire War Agriculture Executive Committee took the land at the Cow Roast, that the company owned, to help with the war effort.

After the war Robert Corby returned to be the managing director of the firm. There was still rationing, skilled labour was scarce and money was not freely available. Times were hard for the firm with business only picking up slowly. Competition, especially from abroad was having a greater impact, so productivity had to increase with fewer employees. Even seemingly unconnected changes, like the way the railways operated with a centralised collection, and the closure of uneconomic lines, added yet more difficulties to the firm.

During the 1950s and 60s Corby, Palmer and Stewart were buying virgin wool cloth from producers, one of which was Samuel Salter & Co Ltd of Home Mills,

Trowbridge, Wiltshire. Correspondence relating to new samples and colours of their materials, which were being purchased by the company, would indicate that they were buying top quality material for their range of clothes.

The "Rag Trade" was always a very cut-throat industry and many companies excelled and then declined. By the 1960s Corby, Palmer & Stewart was feeling the pinch. Early in 1969 the firm was taken over by Dennis Day Ltd and in November 1969 the shock news emerged that the Bulbourne factory was to close for economic reasons. By this time the work force had declined to about 150 employees. According to Kelly's London Post Office Directories it seems that the London warehouse continued until 1972, at least in name, when the address was given as 13 Poland Street. This was the same address as Dennis Day Ltd., gown manufactures. The firm had bought out Corby, Palmer and Stewart for a reported figure of £75,000. It seems that the name Corby, Palmer and Stewart was kept for a few years; probably because of the high esteem in which the firm had been held, or simply to continue using the "Corby Classic" design label. Thus ended over seventy years of the "rag trade" in Berkhamsted.

In 1980 Dennis Day Limited had become Dennis Day International and was based in London's Coate Street, Bethnal Green. They were then making and selling suede and leather coats with a workforce made up of people from the local, largely immigrant, population.

Ken Wallis

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