

TH Wathes

A Company History

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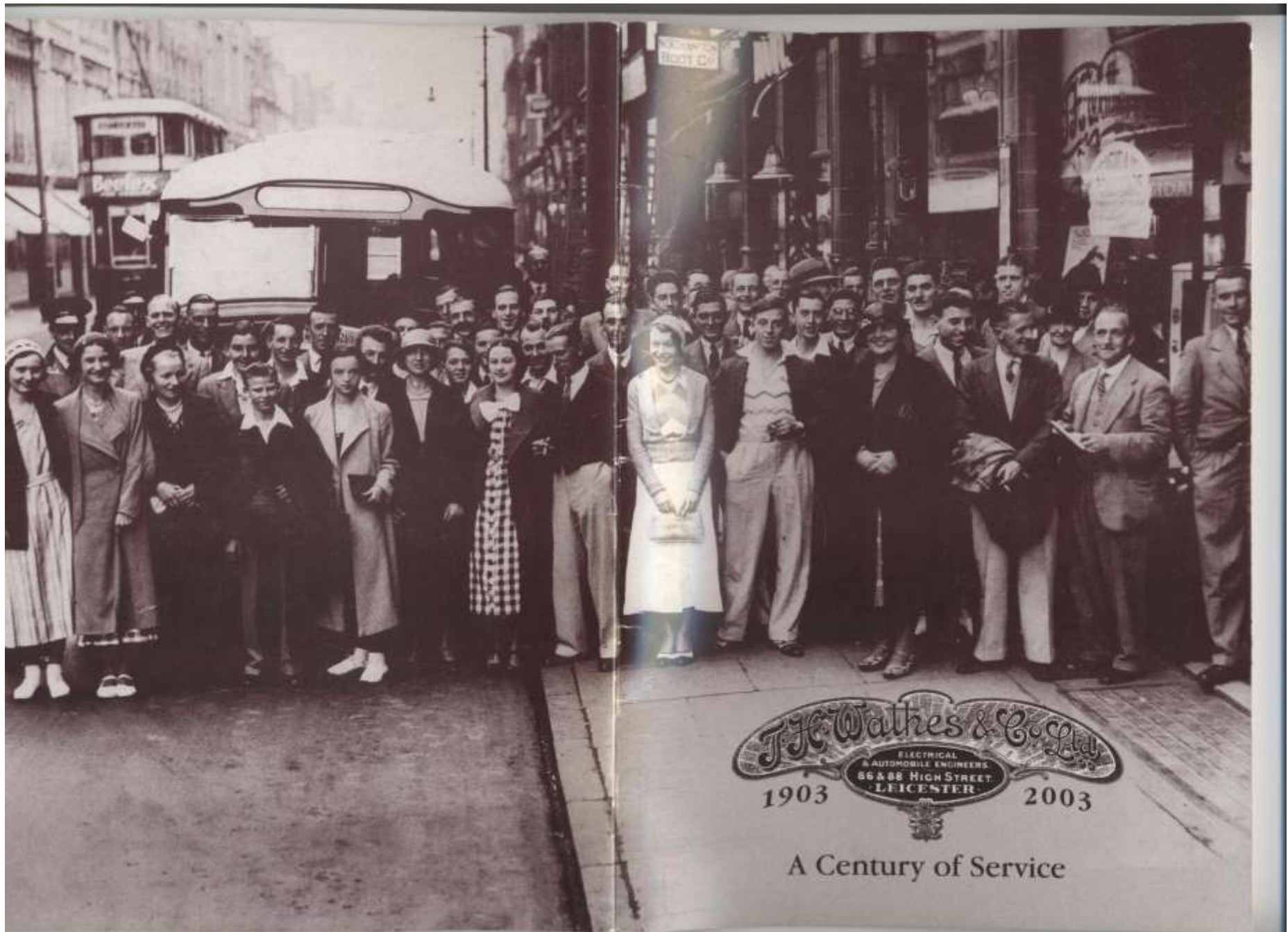
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What did we want to do?

Investigate people's experience of working at TH Wathes.

- Career progression
- Work – what, where, when, why, how, attitudes
- Colleagues
- The company/the business
- Social life
- Reflections

Mr Pursell

Father electrician lived in Clew Pike

002258

in 1926
18 in 1946

left in 1951

Only child

revised 1993

Wathes' Questions

Background information about parents and where grew up. What did you want to be at school? What expectations/options when left school? What work did you get and what did you think of it? Were there any difficulties finding work? If so, why?

How did you get the job at Wathes and what did you know of it when you joined? Any family connections - or church or society connections?

First day? What did you do in the job? How did you learn? Apprenticeships or courses? Hours? Pay - good or bad for that era? Who got the money at home? Status of job (would parents have preferred something else for you)? Standards of behaviour - dress - how were you told what was expected?

What does the work entail? Injuries or near misses? Changes in methods or equipment? How did people cope? Working in mortuaries, hospitals etc. Other places in and around Leicester (De Montfort Hall, the Cathedral, the University etc.) - any unusual places?

Were any jokes/tricks played on newcomers - initiation rites? How did you get on with people at work? Did men and women work together? Were you able to relax and have fun? What social clubs or events, such as dinners, were there?

How did people feel about the management - the Wathes? What was the relationship between father and son, and who did people defer to? Memories of the Wathes and other characters. SW was picky about who Wathes worked with. Would he hire/fire people personally?

Disputes? Trade unions? Chances of promotion? What was the work culture like? How much experience of other work environments did you have and how did Wathes compare? How did the Wathes 'ethic' (honesty, accounting for everything) affect your work? Was there rivalry between departments - how did electricians regard refrigeration?

Do you remember getting your first fridge? Were there any special Frigidaire deals through Wathes? Could you get your car done cheap - any staff perks?

Did you hold down other jobs at all? More than one job at a time? Was there much working away from home?

War - how did the war change attitudes (if at all)? Did work practices change? Did the business side of things change in the war - rationing etc. - did anything sell particularly well, did buying patterns change, did Wathes do any war work?

How different - if at all - was the post war period to that before the war? Why was this so? The week's paid holiday came in around there - had stamps before.

Who used refrigeration when it first came in?

it's unclear when the St Nicholas premises were bought and moved into. Any information about this? Smell of cheese, cobbler's shop, police cells etc.

Relationship with Frigidaire? Expansion in 1950 to Peterborough - how did this proceed? Extensions at St Nicholas as well.

How did people feel about Wathes family members being recruited to the staff? Were the differences between a family firm such as Wathes and other firms?

Memories of the 50th anniversary. Around this time a profit-sharing scheme was introduced - how did people feel about this?

What do you remember of the record bar? Who worked where - how was the work force distributed? Pros and cons of being where you were? How much communication between electricians/refrigeration/car servicing etc?

It seems to mainly be the refrigeration side of things that expanded in the late 1950s, early 1960s - is this so, and how did people feel about this? Was there a stated policy for expansion? What was SW's attitude to business in this respect? Tarrant's (electricians) and Walker Brothers (refrigeration) acquired. How did the air conditioning come about?

When PT took over there were about 200 employees. Did it feel like a small, medium, or large company? Small enough so that everyone knew everyone else's business, or not? The Racing Times - did technical people have much to do with the sales force?

However, when PT took over there were renamings and expansions galore. How did people feel about this? Did older employees worry about jobs? What problems, if any, were there? Did the 'feel' or culture of work change then, or has it not changed, or did it change at another time? Was there any effect from all the name changes?

How has the culture of work changed over the years? It's been said that the manufacturer used to be king and now it's the customer - fair comment or not?

How has technology changed the work? How did people feel at the introduction of computers? How smoothly did the introduction of computers go? Computer aided design

Did you ever think of changing jobs?

M. W. W.

Peter Thurnham Questions

A bit of family background – any history of business – ambitions at school – university – what convinced him to go to Harvard Business School?

Harvard – differences in approach: what was the UK attitude to business (was he too young to really know?) – how did the Americans differ – how did the course change his attitudes, if at all?

Back in the UK – what were his ambitions now? – did he have political ambitions at this point (if not, when did these arise?). What were his first steps – what problems did he encounter – how did he come to Wathes?

How did he assess the situation at Wathes (it seems to have been doing okay from the minutes)? – was he aware of the way Leicester companies interacted – does he know if this was typical of towns/cities in England? – what did he want to do/change – how did he go about doing this – what problems did he encounter?

What was the climate for business in the area/England at the time, as he saw it? What long term aspirations did he have for the company and how did he plan to do this? What was the thinking behind the run of buying up companies?

Questions for current MD

A bit of family background – any history of business – ambitions at school – what possibilities were open to him? What options did he consider?

Apprenticeship or training, what happened there. How was the business perceived at the time as a career prospect?

What was the set up at Wathes when he joined – what did he make of it – first job, duties, jobs done, anecdotes – comparisons with other jobs. What was the feeling about work in the 1980s (the Thatcher years etc.)?

What was the progression up the career ladder (this was something people said barely existed beforehand).

What did he want to do when he took over – how did he address the financial problems – what was the market like, competition etc.

Family businesses - how did family affect running of Wathes?

What role have the unions played over the years?

How important to have managerial training?

How has technology changed things? CFCs etc.

Taking over companies – mistakes taking over one led to a smoother take over of another. Explain the sorts of mistakes and lessons learned.

How did he react to the Thurnhams splitting up the company? Had a management buyout been on the cards at all? What considerations did they have to make.

What are the issues with being a market leader – monopolies? How do you plan for the future – consolidation or expansion? What is the key to keeping the company going – is it decentralised control, geographical spread?

The social side of things, are there clubs, Christmas dinners – would people go for these sorts of things? Pensions – still a company one?

Outcomes:

- Book
- Presentation at luncheon
- Interviews
 - 10 interviews
 - Length 50 mins to 4½ hours
 - Most between 1½-2 hours
 - Men of similar ages, backgrounds
 - One woman – daughter of S Wathes
 - Minidisc – CD – hard drive

What did I find? Personal views which illustrate:

Starting work age 14

Apprenticeships, often interrupted by WW2

Very common story in Leicester for that generation – shared experience

Skilled trade – pride in expertise

Details of electrical work, refrigeration, air conditioning - anecdotes

Doing business in Leicester – post war networks

Growth of, and pros and cons of, fairly typical small family business

Breaking down of ‘post-war consensus’

Arrival of non-Leicester Peter Thurnham and new, modern, ways of working

Changes in the industry generally