

Turnpenny's Furnishing Company

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Before John Turnpenny entered Kearsney Manor, Dover in the final days before his death, on 26th October 2011, he gave me an envelope of notes in order for me to write a history of the Turnpenny family-owned furnishing company. John was the last of the dynasty and I felt honoured to be asked. This article is based on that collection of notes and was written as a tribute to John.

Frederick Charles Turnpenny, born in 1856 at Shoreditch, London, founded the company in Dover. In London his family ran a furniture manufacturing business that he eventually took over with his

older brother Henry. Following a visit to Dover at the end of the century, Frederick decided to open a retail furnishing business in the town and this would include a small workshop to make furniture.

Dover Municipal Charities owned 4 and 5 London Road and in 1904, they granted the leasehold at a ground rent of £10.10s per annum for 99 years to the London, County & Westminster Bank Ltd. The Bank advertised the premises for rent and Frederick made an acceptable offer. The premises were ideal as they stretched through to Bridge Street where there was room for the



Turnpenny's 1906

small workshop. Bringing George Lecomber, a skilled cabinetmaker, with him from London Frederick opened for business in 1906.

During the preparation Frederick's wife Alice along with their children, Frederick Charles (b.1886), May (b.1888), Sidney Bertie (b.1890), Maud (b.1892) and Marjorie (b.1904) moved in. In 1910, the Bank, having gained the freehold, sold the premises to local businessman, George Brisley. By that time the store and workshop were flourishing and the family was taking an active part in running it.

In World War I, the two sons joined up but Sidney returned home wounded. In spring 1919, he married Lilian Vass, who had been born in Ireland of Scottish parents but had come to live in Dover as a child. Very bright, she was one of the first girl students in the co-educational Sixth Form at Dover County School before Kent County Council took over in 1908 from when girls were refused admission. On leaving school, Lilian went on to graduate from Bedford College, London.

By the time Sidney married, Frederick had bought the workshop on Bridge Street and also 13, 14 and 15 Matthew Place for workshops. He had an extension built to join the complex together. The business continued to grow making furniture for stock and catering for special orders. By 1st January 1922, Frederick owned 4 and 5 London Road and as chairman, incorporated the business becoming Turnpenny Bros. Ltd. The directors were Alice and all their children.

Following the death of former Mayor, Matthew Pepper, in 1921, Frederick heard



Turnpenny Catalogue front cover

that the Mayor's business premises at 45-53 High Street were going to be bought by a competitor. He made an offer that was accepted. At about the same time 2 and 3 London Road came on the market, which he bought, leasing those premises to Turnpenny Bros. Ltd. The walls adjoining 4 and 5 London Road were knocked down and the larger, refurbished premises opened in July 1923.

That year saw the birth of John to Sidney and Lilian. They already had one child, Suzanne born in 1920. At the time, Sidney was unhappy about the state of the town, particularly, the 'old men' running Dover Corporation! He decided to do something about it and stood for election as an independent councillor for the Town and Pier ward. The fight was hard and Sidney was beaten by 1013 votes to 393, a third candidate received 161 votes. In his final speech, Sidney said that he had learnt a lot and would stand again. However, that was not to be, instead, he put his family, the firm and the Dover's Rowing Club, of which he was active member, before local politics.

When the fear of competition had passed, Frederick planned to put the High Street property on the market.



Turnpenny - Second Hand Furniture Store, London Road

However, the economic depression of the twenties precluded getting a reasonable price so he converted 45 and 47 into private residences and the remainder was turned into a second hand furniture store. The economic depression of the time ensured that this was successful.

In April 1927, the Company held a *Coming of Age Dinner 1906-1927*, hosted by Frederick. The menu consisted of:

Oxtail soup

Fillet of plaice in egg sauce

Roast beef, potatoes and brussel sprouts

'Turnpenny' pudding and wine sauce

Rhubarb tart

Cheese and biscuits, coffee

The following year the town held an *Old English Water Pageant and Concert on the Sea*, and the Company gained a Highly Commended awarded for the best-decorated boat section.

At the end of 1929 the owners of the Kings Hall cinema in Biggin Street, decided to convert it into a theatre. This required the whole auditorium to be re-seated and re-carpeted. The Company won the contract and work started on Sunday evening 22nd December. The Company used only their own permanent staff and it was completed by the evening of the 24th. The subsequent publicity brought in more custom.

Having bought 2 and 3 London Road from Frederick, in December 1930 the Company purchased 4 and 5 London Road from him and converted the building into a series of showrooms. It also purchased 3, 7 and 9 Bridge Street along with 13, 14 and 15 Matthew's Place and bought specifically designed motorised vans from local manufacturer, Tapleys.

With the sinking of Betteshanger colliery in 1924 and coal being produced commercially from 1927, the Company expected that the miners would need new furniture. They leased 28 King Street, Sandwich but the shop ran at a loss and was closed in 1931. At the same time, the prevailing economy was sliding into an increasingly deeper depression and prior to Christmas 1930 the Company, for the first time, placed an advert in the local papers offering 5% discount to anyone buying furnishings for cash.



Turnpenny Interior

The following year they converted 45 and 47 High Street into a shop while 49, 51 and 53 were converted into garages for the Company vans, with storage and accommodation above. By this time, the founder, Frederick, was suffering from ill health. He was spending time in Margate when he died on 8th April 1932 at the age of 71. Alice, his wife, died in 1934. Their grandson, John, was at that time a pupil at Dover College.

In order to try to get the national economy moving major legislation on slum clearance was introduced by the Government in 1930 and was taken up by Dover Council. New houses meant a demand for new furniture and Turnpenny's allowed theirs to be bought in instalments. The effect was miraculous with the workshops working at full production. Business was so successful that they produced their own catalogue and opened an extensive pottery department and also diversified into prams, cots and high chairs and they were kept busy up until the outbreak of World War II.

War was declared on 4th September 1939 and most of the staff were called up. This left A J Horn, the Company Secretary, Messrs Lecomber & Cook in the workshop and Messrs Hobbs, Godden and Reynolds as drivers. Following the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940, the rush to leave Dover was on and the removals and storage part of the business was kept busy.

With the continual bombardment during in the Battle of Britain, most of Dover's shops closed and Turnpenny's were considering doing the same. Lewis Hobday of Buckland Mill gave Turnpenny's office space at their premises in Reading, Berkshire but the shop, with reduced supplies, relied heavily on repairing furniture. On 13th November 1940, an unexploded bomb in Bridge Street damaged the rear of the London Road properties and the workshops. The buildings took 4 weeks to be made safe and cleared.

As Dover was in the front line of the German offensive, trade was poor and in

1942, the government introduced the Utility Furniture scheme. New furniture followed prescribed guidelines, was strong, simple and lacked ornamentation. It was also rationed and restricted to newly weds and people whose homes had been destroyed through enemy action. Very few newly-weds made their homes in Dover and those whose homes were destroyed moved elsewhere. Nonetheless, furniture repairs kept the firm very busy and in July 1943 four of Dover's furnishers, one of which was Turnpenny's, agreed to close for the same week in order to give their depleted staff a 'well earned rest.' Danger was never far away, and on Wednesday 6th September 1944, the front of the London Road shops suffered shell damage. Nearby 53-year old Fred Mead and 18-year old George Locke were killed and seven people were injured.

That summer Dover youth organisations had paraded through the town to St Andrew's Buckland Church. The organisations taking part included 60 Army cadets - under Captain John Turnpenny.

The last shell of World War II hit Dover at 19.15 on Tuesday 26th September - the town had been devastated. As soon as the London Road premises were cleared, the shop opened. The Reading office closed in April 1945 and all the staff returned safely from the war. The demand to mend war damaged furniture and the repairing of second hand furniture escalated ensuring that all the staff were fully occupied. At the outbreak of the war John Turnpenny had been at Dover College and just prior to evacuation of the school in 1940 (to Politimore House, Devon) he was

elected a prefect going on to become Head Boy. On leaving school, John trained as a quantity surveyor and on 1st June 1946 was appointed a Director of the firm.

During this time, shortages of materials had led to price rises for repairs and then the Government introduced Purchase Tax on new furniture. These hit the firm hard, but following the abolition of the Utility Furniture Scheme in 1952 and the repairing of war-damaged property and building of new homes, the firm slowly returned to its pre-war output of new up-market furniture.

The premises on London Road were revamped and turned into extensive showrooms on three floors, where customers were encouraged to wander round on their own 'but with experienced sales staff at hand.' The Company became a member of the National Association of Retail Furnishers that guaranteed furniture standards. However, the Government's stop-go economic measures made long-term decisions untenable.

The 50th Anniversary of Turnpenny's was due to be celebrated in 1956 but at the time, there was a credit squeeze, so the celebration was deferred. Then on 26th July, the President of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, announced the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. One of the effects of the following crisis was an increase in fuel prices leading to general inflation and a further squeeze on credit.

To keep prices down, mass production of furniture in specially built factories was on the increase and rendered Turnpenny's workshops almost

obsolete. Repair work was sub-contracted out. However, 1960 saw the Gateway flats, on the seafront, completed and many of the incoming residents of the 221 flats wanted new furniture so Turnpenny's saw a boom in sales.

However, in 1964 Flashmans, Dover's oldest furniture shop closed down and nearby, Henry Hart and Co. went into voluntary liquidation. Turnpenny's took over the latter's storage accounts.

The following year, 1965, Turnpenny's sold their High Street premises to Drum Development Ltd, who demolished the properties and built the shops we see today. Initially, Turnpenny's considered buying the Valley Works, Temple Ewell, as workshops but due to the instability in the economy, they purchased smaller property in Coombe Valley Road.

In April 1966, the Chancellor of Exchequer, Jim Callaghan, introduced Selective Employment Tax aimed at shifting labour from service industries to manufacturing. This precluded the use of the Coombe Valley Road premises as workshops and staffing levels were reduced at the London Road shop. The following year saw the economic crisis that culminated on 19th November 1967 when the £ was devalued making imported goods more expensive.

In an effort to keep going Turnpenny's joined the Floreat Marketing Group, a national association of private independent furnishing retailers, who collectively bought in bulk for independent family businesses. Turnpenny's also exhibited at the Calais Trade Fair and in Belgium, in the hope of encouraging people from the Continent to visit Dover and buy

furniture. 1970 the Falcon Hotel at the corner of Bridge Street was demolished exposing the old Turnpenny workshop building that can still be seen today.

John Turnpenny's close friend, Richard Barwick, died in July 1982 and between them, they had been responsible for the post-war development of the Walmer and Kingsdown Golf Club. That year John was elected President of the Club. Two years later, in September 1984, John made the decision to close the shop.

John took an active interest in the education of young people and became a trustee and administrator of the James A Johnson Dubris Trust. This provides grants to help Dover teenagers with their university education. John was elected the President of Dover College's Old Dovorians in 1985 and again in 1987. That year, after 20 years as a local magistrate, he took over as chairman of the Dover and East Kent bench.

Lilian, Sidney's widow, died in July 2001 at the age 108. She was the oldest inhabitant of Dover at that time. Her longevity, according to John, was a gin at lunchtime and whisky in the evening.

Honorary Freemanship of Dover was reintroduced in 2010 and John was given the honour along with Bob Tant and Jack Woolford. At about the same time, John recommended me to Dover Town Council for a Civic Award for my work as a local historian and in trying to secure, through the legal system, a Community Hospital for the town. On 26th October 2011, John Harvey Turnpenny, always a gentleman, died and is sadly missed.

All photographs are courtesy of John Turnpenny