

Empire Paper Mills, Greenhithe



OVERSEES WORKERS

With reasonable pay, more work than workers, and good prospects, the mills became attractive to ambitious people of nations of the former British Empire. “The arrival of those from overseas did not cause a great deal of hostility in the early days because there was a plentifulness of work. Even as employment became tighter, there remained an acceptance of different cultural traits. There has never really been much racial tension around Gravesend. Don’t get me wrong, it was there but mild when compared to other areas in the county.”

INVESTMENT DEPRIVATION

After the war, everything was in short supply, so most industries boomed. A criticism levelled at Reed was they began enjoying taking the high profits in the early days without re-investing. So when the Scandinavian paper mills began exporting, the local mills became unable to respond effectively due to the lack of investment. “A good example was the new Aylesford newsprint

machine. Installed during the mid-50s, it was not until 1990 before Reed did a major rebuild, and that was the first meaningful investment in 40 years!”

LOCAL ECONOMICS

When EPM closed in 1996, Tony moved employment to Sittingbourne Paper Mill until 2006, when he finally left the paper industry.

The mills were the economic hub for all the towns from Dartford to Gravesend. As the mills started shutting down during the late 1980s through to the 1990s, all the towns saw their local economies decline. The economic impact of the mill closures was magnified by other large firms based locally also going out of business. The cement works, pharmaceutical and engineering factories in Dartford and Maidstone, and the demise of the large employer, J&E Hall, in Dartford, all had devastating effects.

PLASTICS VS PAPER

As Tony observes, “The 1990s paperless office has not arrived!” He continued, ‘Paper is an adaptable material and will always have a purpose as far as I am concerned. For a while, plastics replaced paper in packaging, but which way is that going now? Paper will probably come to replace plastics again.’”

INCREMENTAL IMPROVEMENT

A paper-making machine is a good analogy for how many new technologies have a multitude of purposes. “One machine has for years been able to do many grades of paper, from wrapping paper to printing paper. As technology improves, so will come improved efficiency with new methods and systems. Despite the mechanical innovations, the basic process is unlikely to change. I cannot foresee the end of paper or it being replaced.”

MATERIAL OPPORTUNITY

The interview with Tony captures how things can remain almost unchanged, the process of making paper, yet still be central to innovation and cutting edge. The machinery and human expertise required to make paper is ever evolving. But as is made clear here, innovation in engineering is not enough. For industries to be successful in the long-term, social and workplace innovation, investment, early schooling and life-long training are essential.

As the world wakes to the potential of AI, machine learning, augmented technologies and other advances, papermaking provides an example of how basic human needs and materials will remain pretty much the same. They will just be made or met with more efficiency.

At the core of the Fourth Portal is a belief there are no obsolete materials and that the next wave of business and innovation will come from adapting old processes using new technology, traditional methods and entrepreneurialism.

Interview, John McKiernan, October 2023.