

EMPIRE PAPER MILLS

An interview with former Production Manager, from 1955-1996, Tony Thorley of Empire Paper Mills, Greenhithe, Kent

Up to the 1990s, the stretch of the Thames from Thurrock to Tilbury on the north side and Dartford to Gravesend on the south side were lined with factories connected to cement mining, papermaking and printing. The factories covered vast areas of land and employed hundreds of workers in each one. Similar, or even greater numbers, were engaged in the secondary industries surrounding these factories, providing services from engineers to sandwich-makers.

TONY THORLEY

Tony Thorley began an apprenticeship at the Empire Paper Mills (EPM) in Greenhithe in 1955, aged 15. By 1996, when the mill closed, Tony was Production Manager and in charge of the entire papermaking process. Born in Northfleet, Gravesend, on Christmas Day, 1940, Tony attended St Joseph's Primary and St John's secondary schools.

He went directly from school to work for EPM, owned by the international corporation Reed Paper, as a mill-boy before being selected to join the apprenticeship scheme.

HISTORICAL PROCESS

The basic process of making paper has been around for thousands of years. "The process involves a suspension of vegetable fibres in water that have been beaten into a pulp, which allows the fibres to be exposed. These multifilament fibres are made up of many mini fibres. They are drained through a mesh and pressed to remove water before drying. This basic model is still in use today and was the same used by the Chinese centuries ago!"

ABUNDANT TIMES

The 1950s was a period of abundant employment with labour shortages for certain types of work. Graduates from universities and grammar school leavers were not interested in the type of manual work offered by the mills. This resulted in employers needing to focus on training workers with less formal education but malleable minds and the ability to adapt to certain working practices.

The paper industry was relatively well-paid and offered routes to advancement and a better life. The mills also kept a number of 'indentured' apprentices, who had signed up for training that could take up to seven years before offering good career opportunities.



Initially allowed day release to Gravesend Tech, Tony soon moved to Reed's in-house college based at the Aylesford Paper Mill site. "Reed's view was that if they wanted a pool of labour to work in the most effective way, then they had to do it themselves as they felt the education system was not up to providing the right skills. Building a college dedicated to company employees was viewed as pretty forward-thinking. Most of the mills had their training schemes, Reed though was the only business to construct its own training facilities." Being within a travelling radius of the mills provided those with limited education the opportunity to advance their schooling and life prospects, providing they could secure employment.

Tony had a series of promotions, eventually becoming the production manager of EPM. His job role involved being responsible for the production output and the workers. Tony did 'have challenging times, although generally found life and work fairly balanced.'