

Crown Paint - Brushstrokes of History

With a story spanning three centuries, Crown Paints Limited, based in Darwen, near Blackburn, has a rich pedigree in 'decorative coatings', with its leading brands today including Crown, Sadolin, Sandtex, Macpherson and Berger. In 2008 a management buy out returned the business to British ownership and ensured its future independence.



With its headquarters in Darwen, Crown Paints has annual revenue in excess of £180 million across the UK and Ireland (with a further small export business). The company employs 1,500 people and

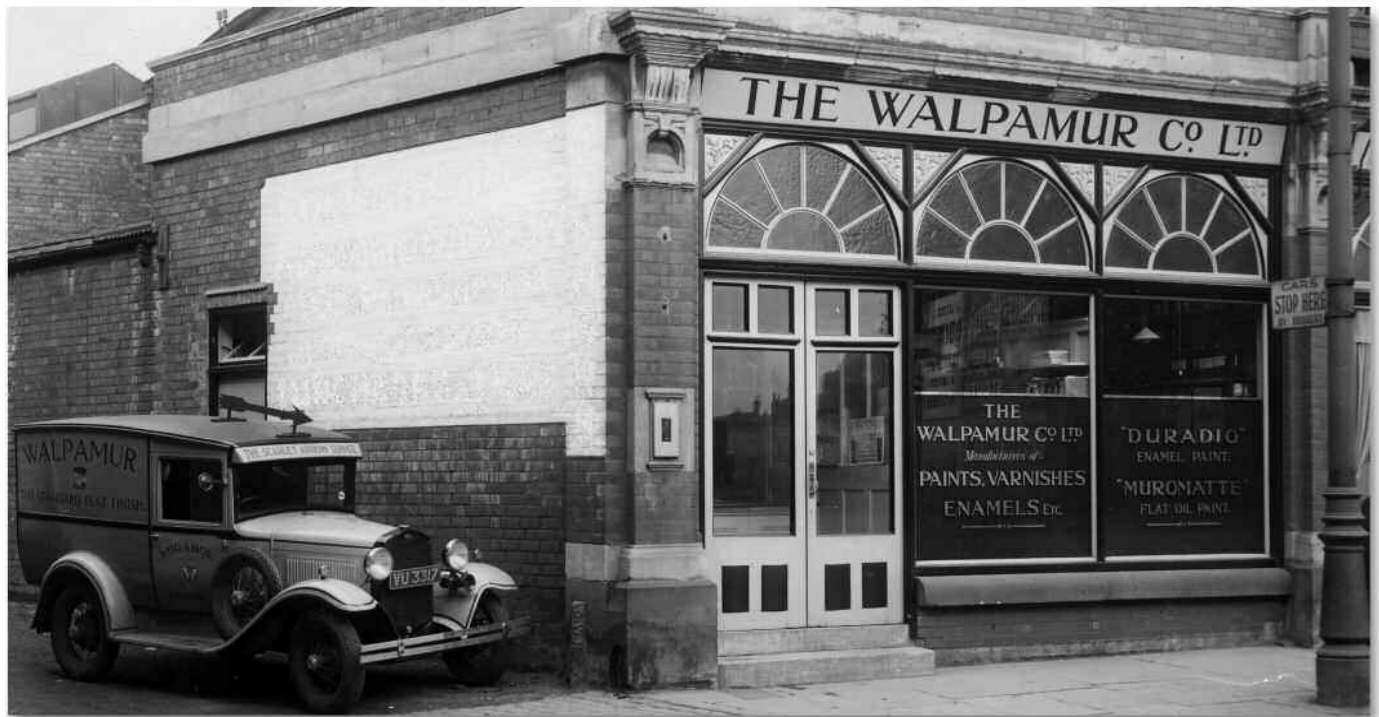
operates two manufacturing sites, one in Darwen and another in Hull, together with strategic warehouse depots located in Warrington, Dublin and Belfast. The business also has an extensive network of Crown Decorator Centres across the UK and Ireland.

The Crown Paints story began in Darwen in 1777 when one James Greenway came to the town from Oxfordshire. He built the Dob Meadows Print Shop for printing calico, situated at the bottom of Sunnyhurst Woods. There is still a Greenway Street as a reminder of his name.

The story then moves to the Potter family. John Potter was a businessman from Manchester (and the uncle of Beatrix Potter). He met Sarah Greenway, the daughter of James Greenway, fell in love, and moved to Darwen to marry her. They lived at Churchbank.



Above left: Early Walpamur water paint. **Above:** Queens Mill, a branch of the 'Potters' activities famous for manufacturing Anaglypta and Linerusta relief decorations. When Akzo Nobel sold relief to Crown Wallcoverings in 2001 production moved and Queens Mill was used as a paint warehouse. **Below:** Walpamur shop and van.



NOSTALGIC BLACKBURN WITH DARWEN



As a memorial John Charles Potter gave the Potters Lych Gate entry to Sunnyhurst Woods - a gift in memory of the time the Potters lived in Darwen. John Guy Potter stood unsuccessfully in parliamentary elections for the Liberal Party several times. He was the acquaintance of friends with some of the members of parliament in Manchester, and when Potters' workers required new housing it is likely that he had influence over the naming of the roads, giving rise to Cobden Street and Bright Street amongst others. The last family member with links to paint and wallpaper was J.J.G. Mellor, a great grandson of Charles Potter. Mellor was the director of Walpamur paints from 1922 to 1947.

John Potter became a partner in James Greenway's calico printing business which took over the Bury Fold Print Shop in 1821 where John worked until 1835. John and Sarah Potter had nine children including Charles, Harold and Edwin. John Potter was buried at Holy Trinity Church, later renamed St Peter's.

The story continued with John's son, Charles Potter, who was taken into partnership in his father's business. However, during the mid-1830s Charles was interested in the experiments taking place in Tamworth and Liverpool to see if wallpaper could be printed mechanically onto calico. Charles was well placed to try his hand at this new innovation with paper making being a major part of industry in Darwen. Charles adapted a calico printing machine for printing paper and his brother Harold patented it in 1839. The earliest machine printed using only four colours; later ones had twenty. The design of the wallpaper was engraved on metal rollers.

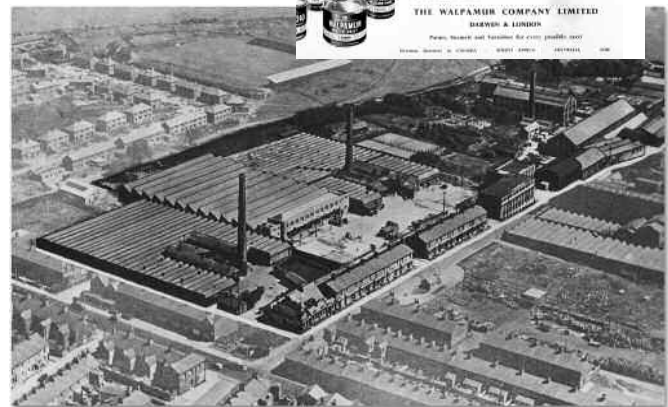
In order to make full use of the machine Charles Potter needed somewhere to work. Fortunately, his brother Edwin had built Belgrave Mill in 1836 and by 1840 they were commercially producing wallpaper at Belgrave, under the trade name C. H and E. Potter. They later bought Hiltons Paper Mill (subsequently Darwen Paper Mill) for paper production.

In 1880 New Livesey Mill was built behind Belgrave. It was burned down in 1920 and was rebuilt in 1922. Both Belgrave Mill and Livesey Mill would be rebuilt several times over the years.

The Potter family would stay in Darwen, as directors of Wallpaper until 1903. John Guy Potter, Charles' son, joined his father as a partner in 1849, and his son, John Charles Potter, in turn joined him as a partner in 1884. They lived in Earnsdale House on Earnsdale Road (below Dingle house, where bungalows would eventually be built).

To enable their business to flourish the Potters took on several outside partners, many of whom became well known figures around Darwen. For example the Market Hall bears the name of one of the partners a William Snape. Who originally started at Potters wallpaper as a designer in 1846, eventually becoming a full partner in the business.

Above: research and new product development has been the lifeblood of Crown paints since 1904 when Hollins Distemper water based paints were developed. Left and below: A newspaper article (left) and artists impression (below) of the proposed building of Crown House. Bottom: A 1950s aerial of the current Darwen site prior to the building of Crown House HQ Administration building in 1958.



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Following his retirement William Snape took a leading role in creating the Municipal Borough of Darwen and was elected its first Mayor in 1878, a position he held for three years. During this time he commissioned the building of the Market Hall, culverted the River Darwen to bring it out at Shorey Bank and then built the Technical College. Snape lived at Lynwood House and is recalled in the name Snape Road. He died in 1888 at Grange over Sands.

Often whole families worked with the Potters. Walmsley Preston, who lived at Falcon House (later the Liberal Club) was a partner of the Potters in the nineteenth century. His nephew, Walmsley Preston Kay, worked at Potters for 37 years and is remembered as the Mayor of Darwen who was responsible for commissioning the Tudor Kiosk in Sunnyside Woods.

Another prominent family were the Huntingtons. James Huntington, the eldest brother, came to work for Potters as a wallpaper designer. He was already well known in London, and his appointment was considered quite a coup at the time. In 1872 he bought Astley Bank – which would eventually become a hotel. The house was originally erected in the mid-1840s by the Kershaw-Smalley family. Both James, and his brother Charles Philip Huntington lived there. They extended both the land and the property. Nearby Huntington Road was named after the family. James Huntington died in 1878 and left funds for the workers in his will. In recognition of his influence and generosity a fountain known as the Huntington Fountain was built in Bold Venture Park. This was scrapped for its metal during the Second World War, though traces of it can still be seen.

The next brother, William Huntington, came to Darwen in 1874 as head of the commercial department. He lived at Orchard Bank (subsequently the Alexandra pub), which was built in 1855. In 1898 William set about forming the 'Wallpaper Manufacturers', which was a merger between all the wallpaper manufacturers in the area. Later William and his son Arthur encouraged the firm to go ahead with experiments in paint manufacturing. In 1878 William bought Woodlands (a house built by Thomas Ashton in 1864) which passed to Arthur on his death.

William Huntington was made a director of the Manchester and County Bank in 1895 and was the High Sheriff for Lancashire in 1898. He was the first Chairman of the old

***Above left:** It is hard to imagine a time before computers, yet here we see the girls in the general typing room in the 1950s*

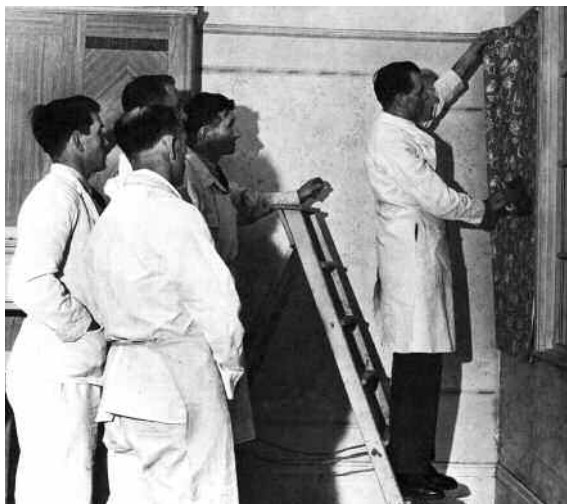


processing letters and documents using manual typewriters. This function would be mirrored within most companies at this time.

***Left:** Labelling, a labour of love, hand applying colour chips to the Walpamur water paints. **Below:** A corner of the packing department showing the labour intensive production process.*



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Technical School and laid the foundation stone of the Conservative Club. He died in 1911 leaving £2,000 in trust for regular public lectures; he also he left money to the workers of the Wallpaper Manufacturers, who as a tribute to him put up the Huntington Bridge in Sunnyhurst Woods in 1912.

Charles Huntington was made a Justice of the Peace in 1878, and in 1892 he became the MP for Darwen for the Liberal Party. He introduced electricity to the Potters factory in 1881. In 1898 he became Mayor of Darwen, and saw the erection of Darwen Tower. On June 28, 1906, he was made a Baronet, but lived only six months longer and died in January 1907.

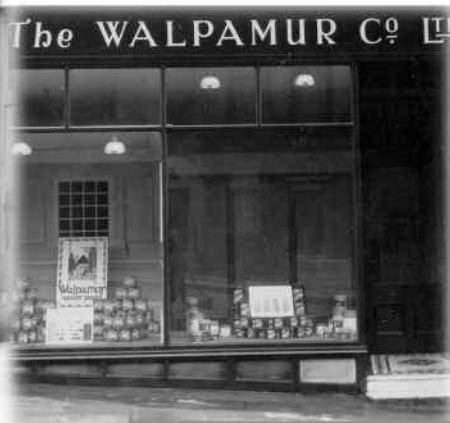
During these years the company showed remarkable growth. It built, bought and amalgamated with many of the mills around Darwen including Sunnybank Mill, bought by Potters in 1858, and Woodfold Mill built by William Snape in 1885 for his son Gerald to work as a cotton manufacturer. Livesey Fold Print Works were in turn owned by James Greenway, the Potters and William Snape; a product called 'sanitary paper' was produced here before production was moved to nearby Orchard Mill. The site was later occupied and extensively redeveloped by ICI but some of the original building can still be seen.

From early on, Potters focussed on developing distribution centres around the country, and indeed around the world. Within Darwen there were two official centres to buy Crown wallpaper and paint in the twentieth century. The first one, which was advertised in Barretts directory of

1898, was at 7 Church Street. A more recent one was Yates' on Duckworth Road, which was trading until the mid-1990s.

The original engraving works where the wallpaper printing rollers were embossed can be seen on Almond Street. Initially it was used simply to store rollers then, in 1946, it was taken over by Belgrave Mill to make the rollers. On Ashworth Street there can still be seen the Belgrave works fire station of 1908.

A large investment for Potters was the acquisition of Hollins Mill. This was originally Hollins Bleach works, built in 1832 by Robert Turner, a calico



Top left: Product training at the paper hanging school at Sandersons, Perivale. **Top right:** Hollins brushes being hand made in Darwen. Hollins brushes were famous world wide for their quality. **Left:** A selection of shop fronts from times past .

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maker (who used the river to provide power via a 22 ft waterwheel). It was sold in 1843 by William Turner (Robert's son) to Potters, who turned it into their main paper making site. By the 1870s it had four machines for making wallpaper base, newsprint and other papers. They put up Queens Mill in 1894 to produce Anaglypta, for which Potters had recently acquired the rights. The mill underwent major reconstruction in the late 1920s with the installation of new machinery and further rebuilding from 1950 - 54. It ceased to be used early this century and has since been knocked down.



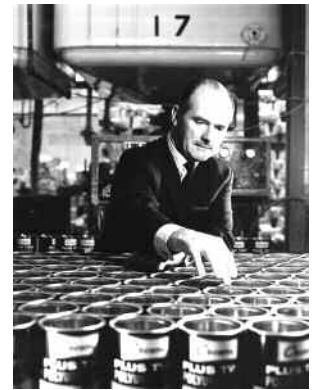
In 1904, in a shed adjoining Hollins paper mills, the first steps into water-based paint production began, and by 1906 Hollins Distemper was produced. Its success was such that by 1910 salesmen were being employed to sell the paint and the new company was named Walpamur (taking the initials from Wallpaper Manufacturers). Its first logo depicted Jubilee Tower,



India Mill, Hollins Paper Mill and St John's Church steeple in Darwen.

The Walpamur company grew throughout the 1920s and in the early 1930s it bought the

neighbouring textile mills, Cobden Mill and Peel Mill, which were built in 1905 and 1906 respectively by Robert Shorrock (another Mayor of Darwen, who is remembered in Sunnyhurst Woods on the Shorrock Bridge). The mills were converted to produce water-based paint, which they do to this day. They have both been extensively rebuilt but some stone walls, the loading bay and the date stone can still be seen.



During the First World War paint production at the site focused on providing varnish for bullets being sent to France, a necessary step to prolong their useful life. During the Second World War paint was produced for blackouts, reflective paint for the roads, and large quantities of paint was made for planes. Indeed all the planes taking part in the D-day landings had been painted with Walpamur, a fact commended by the Ministry of Defence. Slight changes to the printing machines also enabled the company to prepare fittings for the metal canisters used for carrying bomb fuses. Much of this work was carried out by women "whose deft fingers" (according to the book 'Wallpapers and War') "were just suited to do the work, and they entered into it with zest".



Top: The workers of Crown paints have always enjoyed a social side to their job. Here pensioners from Walpamur line up by the coaches ready for their day trip. **Above left:** Crowds gather outside to catch a glimpse of the Queen on her visit to Walpamur in 1968. **Left:** The Queen talking to Tom Graham, with (left) Fred Lewis, Sam Dix and Charles Alpe.

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After the Second World War business was going well at Walpamur. In 1949 the firm was granted a Royal Warrant as suppliers to King George VI, a warrant subsequently renewed by Queen Elizabeth II.



In 1958 Crown House, the administrative offices, was built; and in 1963 a private power station was erected above Hollins Mill, which was used until Darwen Paper Mill closed, making it uneconomical.

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II visited the Darwen Walpamur head office site off Hollins Road in 1968. This was a proud day for the company and helped put Darwen on the map.

By the time of the Queen's visit the company had been taken over by Reed International, and was linked by name with Crown



wallpaper. After this various company name changes took place; William Holdings in the 1980s, then Berger Paints which changed the name to Crown Berger. In 1990 it was taken over by Nobel Industries, which then joined with Akzo to become Akzo Nobel in 1994, a Dutch multi-national chemicals business.

The Belgrave site, which had been extensively rebuilt in the 1950s, closed in 2003 due to a decline in the wallpaper market after 157 years of business. In 2008 Akzo Nobel acquired ICI Worldwide and divested Crown Paint UK and Ireland jointly to its management team and the investment company Endless.

The Crown Management team made up of Joe Devitt (Retail Director) and Eric Mullholland (Finance Director) was joined by Warwick Ley, of Endless, and the new non-executive chairman Graham Hallworth.

Crown Paints Ltd now became once again a truly independent business.

Top left: Throughout the Crown Paints history training their staff and customers on the use of its products has been an important function. Pictured is John Prior, Trade Training Manager, advising a decorator on the virtues of Permoglaze gloss. **Left:** A selection of Crown Paints including Rovers Blue



made especially to celebrate the club sponsorship of Blackburn Rovers in 2008. **Bottom left:** The entrance to Crown House. **Left and below:** Interior and exterior views of a Crown Decorating Trade Centre.

