

## Thomas Armstrong & Brother

Thomas Armstrong & Brother was an important Manchester firm of scientific instrument makers specialising in optical equipment. The Museum's collections include a selection of scientific instruments and spectacles made by the company.



In 1825, Joseph Armstrong set up a business at 261 Deansgate as a jeweller and silversmith. He married Sarah Booth in 1828 and had three sons: Thomas, George and Alfred. This shop, known locally as the old Deanery, was later renumbered as 88. Joseph brought his elder sons into the business. By the time he died in 1851, Thomas had already been managing the firm for some years. Thomas, who had presumably been apprenticed to an optician, expanded the business to include the manufacture of spectacles and optical instruments. In 1848, he made a donation of

10 guineas to the Manchester Eye Hospital, thereby becoming a life trustee and establishing a relationship with the Hospital that was to bear fruit later. In 1868, Thomas took his brother, George Booth, into partnership and changed the company's name to Thomas Armstrong & Brother.

The company was officially appointed as Opticians to the Royal Eye Hospital in 1877. In 1885, Thomas Armstrong & Brother extended its Deansgate premises to meet the needs of the expanding scientific and optical sides of the business. By this time, Thomas Armstrong had a reputation for running an innovative, go-ahead company. He was responsible for the first exhibition of 'animated pictures' in Manchester and introduced compressed oxygen and hydrogen gases for scientific and demonstrative purposes. The firm also helped in the fitting out of meteorological stations in Salford and at Alexandra Park in Oldham. Armstrong exhibited at the Industrial Exhibition of 1887, by which time the company employed 15 people. Thomas and George's younger brother Alfred came into the firm, probably to manage a separate shop on St Mary Street which the company retained until the late 1890s. In 1891, the firm's reputation was such that it won a contract to supply scientific instruments to the War Office, the Admiralty, the Board of Trade, the India Office and the G.P.O. Thomas disappears from the records shortly afterwards, so may have died. His son, Frank, came into the business in the late 1890s. An optical branch was opened in Liverpool in 1904 at 112 Bold Street. Around the same time, the firm moved its Manchester shop to larger premises at 78 Deansgate. George died and Frank moved to live over the shop.

By 1900, the arrangement with the Eye Hospital required patients to be examined at the Hospital and then take their prescriptions to Armstrong's to be made up. If patients found that they could not afford to pay for the spectacles, they had to return to the Hospital to obtain a voucher. Armstrong's covered the cost of spectacles supplied by voucher. However, in 1907, a new system was introduced whereby assistants from Armstrong's went to the Hospital's Oxford Road and St John's Street sites with fitting appliances and a full stock of spectacle frames. The Hospital provided a room where the assistants could fit frames to patients. Patients could then either call for their finished spectacles at Armstrong's or have them sent by post. The company had a fixed scale of charges for all spectacles so that patients would know in advance what their glasses would cost.

During the First World War, Thomas Armstrong & Brother supplied the War Department with gun sights and elevation equipment as well as surveying equipment. The company also supplied the naval services with clocks, watches and submarine detectors. In 1920, the business was sold to Leonard Douglas Kidson, an accountant, for the sum of £56,000. Frank Armstrong's services were retained under a 10-year contract. The firm also had branches at Bold Street in Liverpool and New Cavendish Street in London, and a shed and land at the Manchester docks.

By the time of its centenary in 1925, the firm traded in a large range of optical and scientific goods, as well as jewellery and timepieces. Spectacles were an important side of the business, with horn and tortoiseshell frames a speciality. The company sold scientific instruments including microscopes, telescopes, laboratory equipment, nautical and meteorological instruments. It sold timepieces for all uses and offered a clock-winding service on a yearly contract. In order to meet this demand, the company employed 125 people.

The Eye Hospital appointment came up for renewal again in 1937, but, by this time, the Medical Board was unhappy with its opticians. By now, the opticians were testing sight as well as making spectacles. The Hospital followed the British Medical Association's view that opticians did not 'have sufficient knowledge of diseases and disabilities to enable them to prescribe glasses with safety'. The Hospital asked Armstrong's to abandon sight testing completely and pay an increased rental of £2,000 per annum. However, the company felt that it no longer had sufficient business to justify this level of payment and the long-standing association ended, although it did continue to make special arrangements for Eye Hospital patients.

At this time, the company occupied 80 Deansgate and let out 76/78. The business was taken over by Harrisons Opticians in 1965. By this time, the firm had branches in Manchester on Oxford Street and Nelson Street (next to the Eye Hospital), on the Downs in Altrincham and on Bold Street in Liverpool. The Harrison group was taken over by Dollond & Aitchison in 1968.

*For more information:*

*Read* Thomas Armstrong & Brother Ltd, *Since The Days Of Miss - 1825: a hundred years of progress from 1825 to 1925*. Manchester, UK: Thomas Armstrong & Brother Ltd, 1925.

Wetton, Jenny. 'Scientific Instrument Making in Manchester, 1870-1940', in *Scientific Instrument Society Bulletin* 52 (March 1997).

*Visit:* The Collections Centre.