

Thornton-Pickard Manufacturing Company

The Thornton-Pickard Company was one of the most important camera-making businesses in Manchester, being principally known for a new type of shutter which was used on many makes of camera. The Museum's photographic collections include examples of the company's shutters and cameras.

Edgar Pickard and John Edward Thornton formed the company in 1888. The two men had met for the first time in the previous year at the Royal Jubilee Exhibition in Manchester, where Thornton was exhibiting his first camera. Thornton had been designing cameras and shutters in partnership with Reginald Nixon under the name of the Thornton Manufacturing Company. They had a small office at 54, King Street and a tiny workshop at 10, St Mary's Street, Deansgate. They offered the Patent Jubilee camera, which was made for them by Billcliff. Their business was struggling and Thornton had taken out several patents (including the famous shutter) for which he had had to borrow the money. Pickard's family had a prosperous wholesale grocery and jam-making business in Mansfield, and Edward had worked as a supervisor in an engineering works. He was a keen photographer and corresponded with Thornton.



Pickard was able to convince his father that this was his golden business opportunity and bought out Nixon. The new company commenced operations, essentially concerned with the promotion of shutters. Three years later, it moved to purpose-built premises at Broadheath, in Altrincham, where it established a reputation for making high quality cameras, shutters and other photographic equipment, including the Ruby models and, by 1896, a cheaper version – the Amber. The Time & Instantaneous shutter was introduced in 1892, having a cord pull.

The working relationship between the two men seems to have been a stormy one, however, and was exacerbated by Pickard's bouts of illness, caused by a stomach ulcer. Violent argument ensued, mostly over money. Thornton was from a poor working class background and insisted that the partners' salaries should be little more than those of their skilled staff; Pickard came from an upper middle class background and did not see why he should live in poor circumstances. The company became limited in January 1897, which meant that Thornton's patents became the property of the shareholders, most of whom were the Pickard family. Pickard died in March from peritonitis due to a perforated ulcer, leaving his family in effective control of the company.

Despite their frequent arguments, Thornton was shocked by Pickard's sudden death. He had been a good snapshot photographer (several of his photos appearing in early catalogues), a natural draughtsman and a fair engineer. Thornton became ill from overwork and worry that his new co-director, Pickard's brother, would ruin the business and resigned. He was voted off the board and made to sever all connections with the running of the company. In 1899, he formed the Thornton Film Company with Charles Rothwell, a chemist interested in photography, at Oakfield Street in Altrincham. The Pickard family took out a successful court injunction which prevented him from making cameras in Britain. Having a wife, Edith May, and four children to support, he managed to keep his head above water until 1913. Totally disillusioned, he went to the United States where he patented a three-colour ciné film, which he allowed Eastman Kodak to produce under licence. George Eastman had previously tried to apply some of Thornton's photographic patents. By 1930, the ciné film patent was earning Thornton the sizeable sum of £3,000 per year.

The Thornton-Pickard Company continued to manufacture high-quality cameras and shutters, such as the Imperial Triple Extension camera introduced in 1913. This was one of their most popular lines and sold in the tens of thousands until the late 1930s. Despite this, the company went into a decline in the years leading up to the First World War. It turned to government work and produced aerial cameras such as the Mark III Hythe gun camera. In 1921, Gray Pickard had been appointed to the board of the Amalgamated Photographic Manufacturers Limited, the result of a merger between seven photographic equipment and plate companies. However, this did nothing to solve Thornton-Pickard's own problems. In the 1920s, the market for its products dropped away. Being unable to compete with mass market manufacturers such as Kodak, it went into liquidation in 1939. Although the name remained in use until around 1959, no more cameras were produced.

Thornton had come back from the United States and was living with his sister in Whitefield in 1940 when he died of a strangulated hernia. The Time & Instantaneous shutter sold until Thornton-Pickard went into liquidation and Thornton's Film Pack was bought by Rochester Optical and, later, by Eastman Kodak. He had patents for a variety of goods including electrical radiators, weaving looms, cine cameras.

For more information:

- Read* Channing, Norman & Mike Dunn. *British Camera Makers: an A-Z Guide to Companies and Products*. Esher, UK: Parkland Designs, 1996.
Rendell, Doug. *The Thornton-Pickard Story*. Prudhoe, UK: Photographic Collectors Club of Great Britain, 1992.
Pritchard, Michael. 'Thornton-Pickard: some documentary history'. *Photographica World*, 57, June 1991.
- Visit* The Museum's Collected Cameras Gallery.
The Thornton collection at Vernon Park Museum, Stockport.