

## W. Aronsberg & Co.

W. Aronsberg & Co. was an important Manchester firm of opticians, and mathematical and nautical instrument manufacturers. The Museum's collections contain examples of scientific instruments made by the company.

Wolf ('William') Aronsberg was born in 1833 in Kurland, now part of Latvia. Nothing is known of his early life there, but, as Jews, his family may have suffered persecution from the anti-Semitic Tsarist regime. The Aronsbergs came to Britain in about 1850 and, after several years, moved to Glasgow. There, William and his brother Maurice set up a business as glass merchants and glaziers. This only operated for a couple of years and, in about 1858, the family moved south to Liverpool. William met and married Ernestine, the eldest daughter of the Reverend Jacob Prag. Their first son, Aaron, was born two years later and their second son, Ralph, in 1862.



Maurice set up a successful business in Liverpool as an optician and nautical instrument maker. William does not seem to have been such a good businessman. He was declared bankrupt and had to spend the next year or two as a travelling salesman to pay off his debts. He moved to Manchester, possibly to make a fresh start. In 1864, he opened a business as an optician opposite the Infirmary at 3 Lever Street, off Piccadilly. Four years later, he moved to 12 Victoria Street. Aronsberg made and sold the full range of scientific instruments. The firm's main trade seems to have been in spectacles, but it also made and sold precision astronomical, nautical and surveying instruments, microscopes, barometers, and mathematical and drawing instruments.

William also became a well-known philanthropist. He was a generous supporter of medical charities and educational institutions. In 1872, he gave nearly 300 pairs of spectacles to the Manchester Blind Asylum. Thereafter he gave large numbers of spectacles for distribution among the poor and gave mathematical instruments to Board schools and orphanages as prizes. He also made several gifts to Manchester's art galleries, and even gave a 'solid gold' barometer to the Sultan of Zanzibar on his visit to Manchester. In recognition of his generosity to charity, William received a testimonial from the Mayor of Manchester in November 1876. In the following year he became a Justice of the Peace. Within the Jewish community, William gave prominent support to Manchester's Eastern European Jews. This led to the founding of the New Synagogue on Cheetham Hill Road in 1889.

In 1890, William's son Aaron became a partner. Aaron would probably have spent several years working for his father whilst learning the trade. However, this partnership was dissolved two years later. After the death of his wife, William was involved in a breach of promise case, which he lost. The case cost him around £700 and may have led to the bankruptcy of his business in 1893. He went into voluntary exile in Corfu and only returned to Manchester shortly before his death 15 years later. While in Corfu, he was knighted and presented with the Grand Cross of the Saviour by the King of Greece. Aaron took over the business in 1896, under his own name, possibly having taken over his father's debts. William's second son, Ralph, was also an optician and may have worked for Aaron. The business continued successfully until Aaron's retirement in 1923, when it was taken over by the opticians, A. Franks & Co. Ltd.

*For more information:*

*Read* Williams, Bill. *The Making of Manchester Jewry*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1985.

*Visit* The Museum's Collections Centre  
The Manchester Jewish Museum