

The Franks Family

Franks & Co was an important Manchester firm of opticians which expanded into the manufacture of optical and philosophical instruments during the nineteenth century. The Museum's collections include a variety of instruments by members of the family.

Isaac Franks

Isaac Franks was from a Dutch Jewish Family. He came to this country in the 1760s and probably made a living as a travelling hawker of lenses in Norfolk. There he met a Quaker woman and eloped with her to Dublin, where she converted to Judaism and became his wife. The couple settled in Liverpool and their eldest son, Jacob, was born a year later in 1782. Isaac was based in Liverpool, but would have travelled for part of the year, doing business in Manchester on the way. Seeing better opportunities there, the family moved to Manchester in 1798. By 1804, Isaac lived on Beswicks Row, Miller Street, in the old area to the north of the city centre which was the area of the first Jewish settlement in Manchester. Isaac died in about 1805 and his son Jacob took over the business.

Jacob Franks

Jacob was 12 years old when the family moved to Manchester and he probably joined his father's business to learn the trade. After a few years, he became a traveller for his father, selling spectacles to people across North West England. This was a pattern that Jacob continued with his own sons. After his father's death, Jacob took over the business. His first shop, which he had acquired by 1817, was at 283 Oldham Road and was identifiable by a sign in the form of spectacle frames. He moved twice nearer to the city's main shopping area and, in 1838, moved again to a larger shop at 114 Deansgate. Jacob had 11 sons of whom all but three became opticians in Manchester and elsewhere. Jacob died on a trip to Dublin in 1846 and the business was taken over by his wife, Amelia.

Abraham and Joseph Franks

The year after Jacob's death, Amelia brought her son Abraham into partnership. A year later, she took another son, Joseph, into the partnership so that the business could be extended to 44 Market Street. The premises consisted of a shop and two rooms on the top floor connected by a speaking tube and probably used as a workshop. Joseph lived there until his marriage and the firm became known as A. & J. Franks. The family business prospered still further and, in 1851, Amelia's son Henry came into the partnership to run a shop at 60 Cross Street.

A. & J. Franks soon became well known for high-quality spectacles. In fact, in 1854, the brothers even had to warn their customers that travelling opticians had been calling at houses in Manchester pretending to be connected with the Franks firm. Abraham gave illustrated lectures on the anatomy of the human eye and on the 'Use and Abuse of Spectacles'. He was highly respected for his expertise, and surgeons and doctors attended many of his lectures.

The firm's main business was the manufacture and supply of spectacles, but it also made a range of scientific instruments including telescopes, microscopes, compasses, opera glasses and barometers. Abraham died in 1868. By this time, Henry had already moved to establish a shop in Hull. The Deansgate premises were sold, and Joseph continued the business on his own at Market Street until his death 20 years later. The firm was then taken over by his son Aubrey.

A. Franks Ltd



Aubrey Franks set up his business as an optician and fine art dealer in King Street in about 1878. For several years, the specialty of the business was spectacles, but Aubrey soon began to make and sell other optical instruments, such as microscopes, telescopes and magic lanterns. In about 1881, the company acquired additional premises which gave it a commanding position at the corner of King Street and Deansgate. Seven years later, Aubrey took over his father Joseph's business on Market Street. Aubrey's business prospered and, by the 1890s, sold all kinds of optical and

mathematical instruments, photographic and electrical equipment. One of his products, the Presto camera, was a very simple, fairly cheap camera, which was quite successful: Aubrey had sold more than 28,000 in 10 years, some of which were sold in Europe. In 1897, the firm gave the first demonstration of Edison's cinematograph in the north of England.

In about 1917, the business was taken over by Aubrey's son-in-law, Maurice Saffer, who kept the company's name, A. Franks Ltd. He was an astute and enterprising businessman who expanded the business considerably. Under his management, Franks Ltd became the first firm to bring radio and television to the Manchester area. During the 1920s, the firm's main premises remained at King Street/Deansgate, but there were also branches on Oxford Street, Victoria Street and Market Street, a wholesale department on South King Street and a branch at Bradshaw Gate in Bolton. The Victoria Street branch had been taken over from the optician Aaron Aronsberg.

In 1927, Manchester's first television picture was received 'by wireless' at the Market Street shop. Three years later, televisions were being offered for sale at Market Street and Deansgate. At the time, a television set cost twenty-five guineas. The firm continued to prosper and was managed by Maurice Saffer until his death in 1947. As he had no children, his secretary managed the business for three years and then sold it to the opticians Dollond & Aitchison in 1950.

For more information:

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

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