

Bowyers Trowbridge Factory

Background

Originally set up in 1808 by Abraham Bowyer, Bowyers started as a grocers shop in Trowbridge and eventually began to specialise in meat products. As the company grew, factories were opened all over the country and Bowyers became a household name in meat products such as sausages and black pudding.

The Bowyers factory in Trowbridge was a major provider for employment in the area, and many people from the black community found jobs in their various departments. One employee remembered how she arrived in the UK on a Sunday morning and was able to get a job in the Bowyers sausage department the next morning.

Another remembers working full time at Bowyers and earning over £100 a week. She still had opportunities to work overtime or on holidays at an increased rate if she wanted to make more money. 'You could have had better pay, you know, but you had to work overtime to get better money' She said, 'I didn't work Sundays, which was good money then, you know there were people who could come home with £300 when I was coming home with £100 ... but I want to be with my family, I want to be with the church so I just accept what I have'

Managing Director John Rogers claimed that 'the structure of this company is built around people rather than the other way around' and generally, when remembering their time at Bowyers, the memory is a positive one. 'Bowyers was lovely, I used to love it', recalled one employee. Bowyers had a reputation for being an understanding company when it came to the treatment of their employees. As one employee recalls that 'one of the things that I appreciate Bowyers for is if you have problems like you have to go to the doctors or take the children, they would sympathise with you, and they'd give you the time to do what you have to do, and I heard with other firms you weren't that free.'

Relations between black and white employees/Training New Employees

Bowyers employed a large number of people from the black community, and when remembering their relations with their white colleagues there are mixed reactions depending on the department you worked in. When working in the factory processing departments, many employees remember a cheerful and friendly environment, 'We were working class so colours don't come into it, you get to know each other, you become friends, for life maybe.' 'The people was ever so nice in Bowyers. Everybody there was just like one big family', and when it came to racism, it was never seen as an issue to her at Bowyers. 'When we were at Bowyers we calls each other names ... like fun. You know just for fun ... Nothing just laugh and joke over it. They used to call me Blacky ... we call them Whitey or something else like that ... yeah but you know just jokes'.

In the late 1960s, John Rogers commented that at Bowyers, 'the training system is informal'. Current employees would supervise and train new staff until they were able to do their job unsupervised. One employee worked at Bowyers as a baker, and was asked by his employers to train new recruits. At first he said that his older colleague would be better suited for the job, but his boss insisted that

he was 'the man were looking for' because he was respected and liked by the rest of the staff. He trained new employees for 14 years in return for an extra £13 a week in wages, telling them all company procedures such as fire safety and wage information as well as teaching them how to do their main job. However, during these 14 years he sometimes found that the colour of his skin was an issue to some of the people he trained. He remembers 'a chap came there once, and when he came for the job I was at the smoke room ... and he came up and he pushed the door to come in and he didn't realise I was there because he thought I'd be white'. Other times he found that 'some people were reluctant for me to tell them anything, because they said I was black, the colour made a lot of difference ... but I didn't care because I knew I was getting £13 extra on top of my wage'. He didn't let reluctant trainees discourage him as he knew that he had been given his job because of his own merit. 'I didn't ask for the job, it was given to me by people above me'.

When working at Bowyers one employee wanted to transfer to the bakery department because he liked the idea of working somewhere warm for a change, but when he first asked about transferring there was a group of white men who worked the ovens who thought no one else would be able to do the job because it was difficult. He remembers how 'the manager and supervisor, he said no you can't do it, because it's hard'. But he kept asking for months and months to let him have a go to see if he could do the job, and eventually they agreed. After a week of training he was left to operate the ovens by himself and he was a natural. 'They were really surprised ... there were other black men there before me and they wouldn't get a chance to do it'. After three years of working in the ovens he was asked to train new employees. At first he was reluctant, 'I said to him, I can't train them, I can't train the white people because they won't listen to me' but his supervisor was adamant that he should do the job, 'he said you will do it and if any problems come and see me'. So he did and he then went on to train new recruits for 6 years.

Long Service Rewards

When staff had served at the company for 25 years they would be rewarded with a gold watch to commemorate their achievement. Other awards which were offered by the company included Salesman of the Year and Supervisor of the Year. When staff received these awards, or retired, they would often attend a luncheon with a presentation at the Bowyers Social Club.

Life at Bowyers outside of work

A female employee remembers the staff discount shop where employees would be able to purchase overflow products or products which did not meet the quality standards. 'There was then a workers shop ...you could get things to buy at a discount price' When she worked there, she would always look out for the products which had originally been made for Marks and Spencer, 'We always liked to buy them because we know they're the best quality'. She recalls how employees would be hand chosen to work on the Marks and Spencer's goods, as they would only buy the top quality products. So when too many had been made, or some had come out misshapen, she would always keep an eye out for those products in the workers shop!

Bowyers would try to create a fun and relaxing environment for employees, and would play 'Music While You Work' to keep employee moral high, as well as provided them with a good canteen and a staff room with entertainment. 'There used to be a juke box in there, records ... you could go get a free cup of tea and a bacon roll and listen to music and go back down. It wasn't like work, it was fun'

Bowyers had several company sports teams for men and women, ranging from football, to darts, to skittles, and the successes of the teams would often be published in the company staff magazine. Other events that the company hosted would also be reported on in the magazine, including the annual 'Miss Scott Bowyers' Beauty Competition where each factory would hold their own beauty competition and the winners from each section would go on to compete in a grand final. Bowyers also hosted several charity events such as their 'Charity Slim' hosted by the company Slimming Club , and the 'Pubathlon' which was held in 1981, where pubs would compete against each other in a series of pub games including arm wrestling skittles, darts, and several others. At events like these, and other open days or fairs, Bowyers and the 'Bowyers Pie Girls' - who were familiar faces at such events - would provide free samples of their products and offer hampers as part of competition prizes, as well as selling products from the main company stalls.

Closure

The Bowyers factory in Trowbridge closed in 2007 with a loss of 400 jobs. Investment moved to the Nottinghamshire plant which complied with the European Union ruling that Melton Mowbray pork pies be produced within a defined distance of that town. Whilst the factory had closed, many of its previous employees remained friends.

"They were good, because most of them were, a few white people, but we are working class so colours don't come into it, you get to know each other and become friends, for life maybe. So I see them now, they're older and I see them now. Some of them people, is for life!"