

JOHNSON & BARNES LTD.

At its height the Johnson & Barnes factory in Kibworth provided employment for over 400 people. In addition, the Company had substantial factories in Stapleford, Nottinghamshire, and Worsbrough, near Barnsley, Yorkshire. The Head Office of the operations was in Rutland Street, Leicester, together with warehousing, packing, and despatch. In total, over 1500 people were employed by the Company, manufacturing and selling hosiery not only in the UK but also in Canada, South Africa, and the Scandinavian countries.

The original business was started by John Thomas Johnson in a small shed in Kibworth. Johnson was born in 1863, in either Berrington, Warwickshire, or Birmingham (the former location given on the 1891 census and the latter on the 1911 census). As a young man, Johnson worked for R. Rowley, hosiery manufacturer, in Fleckney, but, seeking independence, and with the encouragement of his employer, he rented 2 knitting frames, installing them in a Kibworth shed, and began making stockings.



JOHN THOMAS JOHNSON

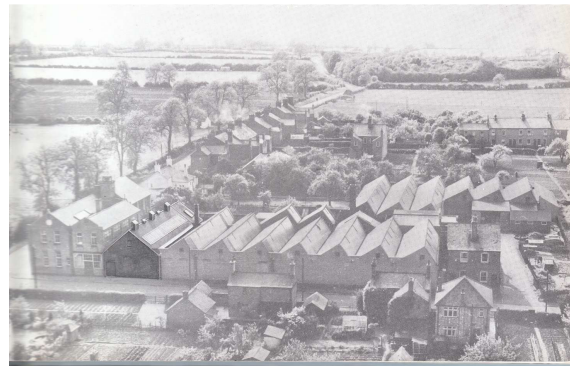
The business did reasonably well but was held back, to some degree, by a lack of capital and a succession of unfortunate

associations with prospective partners. Eventually, however, William Barnes, an expert warehouseman, born in Ullesthorpe, Leicestershire, about 1857, arrived on the scene, and, in 1901, the partnership of Johnson & Barnes was formed.



WILLIAM BARNES

A single-span building was erected in Dover Street, with six or so straight-bar knitting machines manufacturing fully fashioned hose.



The original single-span building.

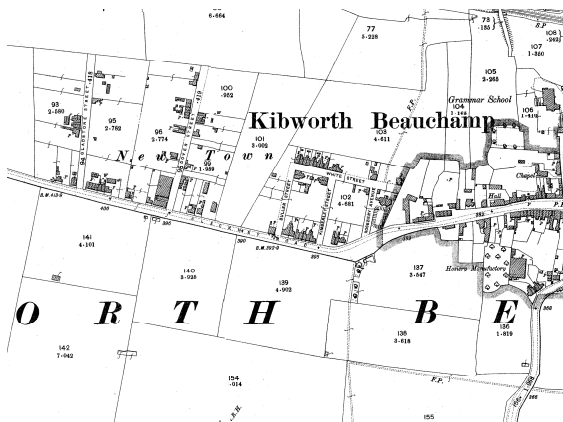
JOHNSON & BARNES expanded rapidly and, in order to gain additional labour, a factory was opened in Lutterworth in 1906. Around 1908 the decision to buy new machines, for Kibworth to make fully fashioned plain hose, was made. These machines proved highly successful and the original building in Dover Street was extended, but despite this expansion, the

demand for the product exceeded the combined capacity of Kibworth and Lutterworth plants.

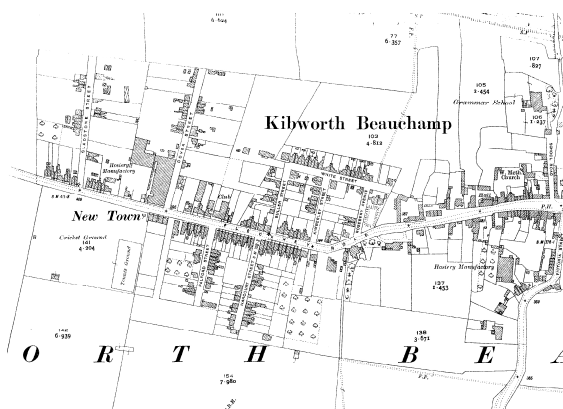


The extended factory, looking towards the village centre

JOHNSON & BARNES contributed greatly to the development of Kibworth Beauchamp, as the two maps below illustrate. The large number of people employed, with regular wages, needed more local housing. This was, no doubt, instrumental in Kibworth Land Society developing the housing on Fleckney Road.



Fleckney Road 1904 OS map

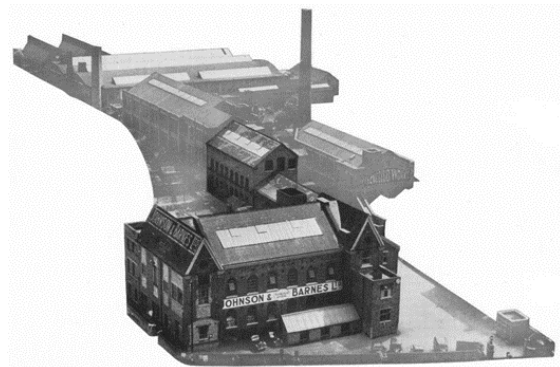


Fleckney Road 1928 OS map

In 1910, premises in Rutland Street, Leicester, were purchased, and these eventually became offices, showrooms, and warehousing. About this time, JOHNSON & BARNES introduced the trade name 'Excello' for the business's hosiery. JOHNSON & BARNES ceased to be a respected but hard-to-find village factory and became one of the leaders in the hosiery capital of the country.

The growth continued and, in 1912, the partnership of Johnson & Barnes became Johnson & Barnes Ltd, with a share capital of £45,000.

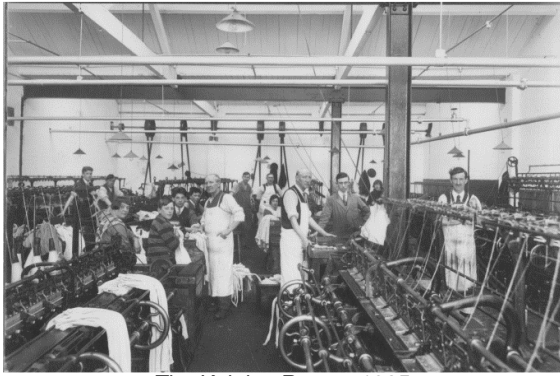
In 1915, a former lace-making factory in Stapleford, Nottinghamshire, was acquired, giving JOHNSON & BARNES access to an abundant supply of female workers who had previously worked in the Nottinghamshire lace trade.



The original factory at Stapleford, high-lighted, and later extensions



Inspection and Mending Room c1925



The Knitting Room c1925

John Thomas Johnson died in October 1917, and is buried in Kibworth Cemetery.



During the war years the factory at Lutterworth had struggled to find sufficient and adequate labour, and with Stapleford growing in production, was closed in 1918.



This photograph was taken in 1929 at the time of the construction of Charles Street. New frontages were added at a later date, enclosing the warehouse in the background.

The years immediately after WWI saw a significant shortening of skirts, leading to a demand for longer stockings, and JOHNSON & BARNES reacted quickly to this demand by installing new machines capable of producing longer, and wider, stockings. Two more trade names were added, 'Punch & Judy', for childrens'wear, and 'Flexcello' for the new, longer, stockings. Additional property was acquired in Rutland Street and Charles Street, Leicester, and the head office was moved there from Kibworth.

From the early days JOHNSON & BARNES was keen to promote sports and social activities, was instrumental in the founding of the Kibworth Bowls, and supporting in-house football teams at each of the sites.





The Grand opening of Kibworth Bowls Club in 1928.
Mr W Gamble (Treasurer), Mrs W Barnes, Mr J Brown
(Secretary), Mr E V Iliffe (Captain) and Miss Eileen
Iliffe.

William Barnes was president of the Cricket, Football, and Bowls Clubs in Kibworth.



Kibworth Bowls Club vs Johnson & Barnes 1936

Share capital in the Company was increased to £120,000 in 1920 and to £200,000 in 1924, in order to fund the development of the business. In 1928 JOHNSON & BARNES Ltd became a Public Company with a further increase in share capital to £375,000.

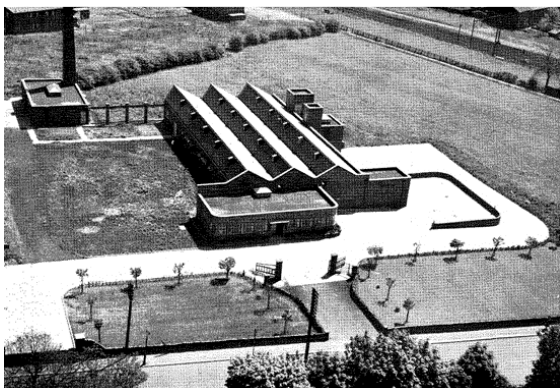
William Barnes died in December 1932 and, he too, is buried in Kibworth Cemetery.



About this time, Kibworth was producing fully fashioned plain hose in finest cashmere, whilst Stapleford was producing pure silk fully fashioned stockings in 45 and 48 gauge, and stockings made from the new material, rayon.

From 1939, the start of WWII, the factories were given over to production of half-hose for the A.T.S., W.A.A.F., and W.R.N.S. This was a difficult time for JOHNSON & BARNES as, in one day, at Stapleford, they lost 70 girls who were directed into essential munition work. This loss of labour, together with the growth of engineering during the war years, meant that planning for the future had to be revisited.

After the war the company continued to prosper and, on 23rd February 1948, a fine modern factory was opened in Worsbrough, near Barnsley, to relieve pressure on Stapleford, where the shortage of labour was proving to be problematic. Worsbrough benefitted from a significant willing source of young women, the daughters of local miners.



Worsborough when opened in 1948

JOHNSON & BARNES considered itself, and was considered by its workers, to be a family affair, and was known locally as Tommy's, after its founder. In some instances it gave employment to whole families, with many people working there for the whole of their working lives. Thriving sports and social activities have previously been mentioned.

For its Golden Jubilee in 1951 a special Dinner & Dance was held for employees who had worked there for 25 years and over. They were all presented with a watch and souvenir book.



Reverse of a watch presented to Donald Rowe for 25 years' service



It was a progressive Company, installing canteens in Stapleford, from where the BBC broadcast an edition of Workers' Playtime, and Worsborough (Kibworth did not have space for a canteen and workers were supplied by a mobile tea-lady), a pension scheme for male employees, and at Stapleford and Worsborough, a clinic, with a full-time, fully-trained nurse in constant attendance and a doctor on immediate call. Every employee could go up for regular medical overhaul there, and can receive prompt treatment, not only for minor injuries, but for the everyday run of sickness and ailment.

Kibworth's principal lines were fully-fashioned ladies stockings and boys' three-quarter hose. It knitted in wool, lisle and rayon, and its capacity was up to 3,500 dozen pairs a week. All packing and despatch, was handled centrally at Leicester.

The Leicester premises comprised offices, inspection and fine mending and countering rooms, boxing and despatch departments, showrooms, and loading bays for road vehicles, and ancillary

services including a printing works, where the labels, order books, instruction forms and general stationery and literature of the firm were produced.

Stapleford made ladies stockings in fine cashmere, lisle, rayon and nylon, 'Punch & Judy' socks for children, and men's half-hose.



Packing c1935

At the time of the Golden Jubilee nearly 150 present employees had served 25 years or more with the firm, including five with outstanding unbroken service to their credit: A. Smith 53 years; E. Smith 50 years; E. Arnold 50 years; Mrs. E. Cotton 55 years; Miss M. Iliffe 53 years.

The 50th Anniversary book published in 1951 ended with the following comment:

"If this personal relationship between management and employees is allowed to remain alive for the next fifty years, as it has been for the past fifty, the centenary of Johnson & Barnes Limited, Hosiery Manufacturers of Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire is likely to be as triumphant as its Jubilee".

Unfortunately this would not be the case. Immediately following the firm's Golden Jubilee came the years when Britain's hosiery trade was beginning to be threatened and undermined by overseas competition and cut prices. The importing of cheap stockings and socks began to be a serious matter, and around 1961

the decision was taken to close the Worsborough factory. The disposal was completed and the factory was re-opened by Corah on 1st May 1962. The 'swinging 60s' brought mini-skirts and a demand for tights instead of stockings, but by this time J&B could not afford the capital investment required to install new machinery to cope with the manufacture of tights.

In an attempt to halt the slide, J&B diversified into the knitwear garment trade. This gave a short respite but losses continued and the business was acquired by a financier living in Monte Carlo, Joel David Lerner, in 1970. The Leicester premises were sold and production concentrated on Kibworth and Stapleford.



Stapleford Old Factory, demolished 1973

Losses continued and Kibworth was finally closed around 1972 with the cash being re-invested in the Stapleford site. The old Stapleford factory was demolished and a fine one erected.

In 1976 a joint agreement to manufacture children's clothes of Azet Juniormode BV of Holland, was formed. Unfortunately this was not successful and JOHNSON & BARNES lost almost £250,000 when the Dutch company closed.

In 1977 the Company was acquired by Grand Central Investment Holdings Ltd, a company controlled by Sri Lankan investors.

Business continued to decline and losses increase and on 13th May 1981 Touche

Ross & Co were appointed Receiver. The Stapleford factory finally closed in September 1981. MacIntyre Hudson and Spicer & Pegler were appointed Joint Liquidators on 8th August 1983, and the Company was finally dissolved on 20th January 1987.

