

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE COMPANY GIVEN BY
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Before going into the history of the company it is of course most important to get a feel for the way of life back in 1932. Of course it must have been very very different from today. With this in mind we went over to the local library and had a look at the local newspapers. In the Welwyn Times issue of 23rd June, 1932 there were two main stories. Firstly the serious national situation with regard to unemployment. Secondly, the Welwyn Garden City Company Limited (which was the founding body of Welwyn Garden City) and the local elected District Council were in heavy conflict with the Herts County Council over boundary definitions.

Other points of general interest in the Welwyn Times:

Locally vandalism was rife as demonstrated by the following advertisement which appeared in that weeks' issue:

It was headed "£1 reward will be paid to ANY person giving information leading to the prosecution of any individual causing damage in the grounds of Digswell Park."

The advertisement had been placed by the Secretary of the Estate Office Welwyn Garden City Company.

Oh well perhaps things were not so different in 1932.

However one thing that was certainly very different, was prices. For example:-

Eating out - you could dine at Guessens Court with full lunch for 1/6d or a dinner for 2s.0d.

House prices - a luxury Architect planned house, with four bedrooms, two reception rooms, kitchen, bathroom and garage was advertised at the high price of £1,100 with other three bedroom properties available from £550.

A day out to Eastbourne by the London and North Eastern Railway Company was advertised on a full inclusive return fare basis of 7/6d.

Clothes - you could buy a boys grey flannel suit from 4/11d, mens shirts from 2/11d, and last but not least ladies knickers in heavy quality locknit for 2/0d per pair.

Let us now turn to the Lead Business. In June 1932 Lead LME's were quoted at £9.3s.9d per tonne, with a premium over this for lead sheet of £2.2s.6d.

British Lead Mills Ltd., was incorporated on 23rd June, 1932 and the Directors held their first formal meeting on 27th day of June, 1932. The meeting was attended by the Directors, Mr. Phillip Blenkinsop and Mr. Fred Gardner Martin, with Mr. Peter Anderson acting as Secretary. The first meeting was mainly concerned with detailed matters of administration, settling the articles of association of the company, appointing Messrs. Finney Ross Welsh & Co. as Auditors at an annual fee of £42, and arranging for a bank account to be opened with the Midland Bank Limited. The company's registered office was established as being at Dashwood House, Broad Street, London EC2. A draft agreement was examined at this meeting to be made between Welwyn Commercial Buildings Ltd., and British Lead Mills Ltd., for a lease of a property at Welwyn Garden City. It was resolved that this be approved. A little later in August 1932 they all met again and approved the appointment of the company's first Works Manager a Mr. Charles Sandell Farmer. Also at this meeting full discussions took place with regard to the progress of works buildings and other business. In December of that year a bit of high drama. As recorded in minutes of the meeting of Directors held in December 1932, correspondence and subsequent meetings had been held with Associated Lead Manufactureres Ltd., ALM, concerning their proposal to acquire the company's business. We are very glad to say the chairman rejected the offer. This offer incidently consisted of the sum equivalent to the net total expenditure by the Company at that date plus

£1000 per year thereafter. It is interesting to note at this point that the Directors were obviously well advised to have rejected the offer because only four years later in 1936 offers from other sources were being made to purchase the company for amounts in excess of £100,000. These offers were also rejected.

On 2nd October 1934, at a meeting of the directors, a certain Mr. R.S.H. Shepherd was appointed as an employee of the company and later that year in November was elected to the Board as a Director. This was a most significant appointment because Dick Shepherd stayed with the company from 1934 until 1972 and was very instrumental in its growth and success. Unfortunately Mr. Shepherd is unable to be with us tonight as he is abroad. However we do of course have a number of guests with us this evening who will remember him well.

In November 1936 for some strange reason British Lead Mills decided to change from a private closed company to a public company with stock exchange quotation.

It is obvious from reading the reports of the Directors and accounts, that the company continued to trade successfully but of course it had its commercial problems. For example throughout 1937/38 imports of lead sheet and pipe from the continent seemed to cause much consternation and various combative measures were thoroughly explored by the Directors including representations to the Board of Trade and retaliatory exports. In 1939 another BLM namely Birmingham Lead Mills approached British Lead Mills with a view to taking a financial interest. Although there was considerable discussion at the time this eventually came to nothing.

In October 1941 Mr. Singleton the Technical and Works Director laid before the Board full details of how to recover lead from scrap arisings. At that meeting the Board approved the plan in its entirety which called for a capital investment in plant of £850 (it was felt that the Company had suffered

through being entirely dependent on other lead manufacturers for supplies of refined product). 1941 must have been a fairly active year for BLM in spite of the war because it was decided to set up a branch in Leeds (but this was subsequently closed). Contacts with other members of the lead industry were extensive but, reading between the lines, on occasions these must have been somewhat tart. For example in December 1941 it was reported that a meeting had been held with Mr. Trebucq of H.J. Enthoven regarding a scheme for collaboration. After some discussion the Board agreed that H.J. Enthoven were not putting forward any constructive proposals and it was difficult to see what advantages would accrue to either side under any such scheme and the Board resolved that Mr. Hayward should inform H.J. Enthoven accordingly.

During the war British Lead Mills factory continued to operate but its activities were very much directed towards the war effort with high production of lead rod for bullet manufacture etc. At the end of the war things got back to normal with sheet production again being geared up to high level. In January 1945 Brightside, manufacturers of the existing mill who incidently were taken over by Loewy Robertson the suppliers of the new mill, were requested to inspect and report on the Mill and see what parts needed replacing; they were also asked to quote for a new mill.

It is interesting to note that the original mill purchased from Brightside, and still in use, cost £6578. The new mill to be supplied by Loewy Robertson will cost in the region of 1½ million pounds. Between 1945 and 1981 the possibility of getting a new mill was discussed several times. At a meeting of the Directors in October 1945, the possible acquisition of Holman Michell was discussed. The recorded minute is somewhat blunt. "The price asked by the vendors was considered fantastic and the Company were not interested in purchasing Holman Michell at that price."

The late 1940's saw some significant developments for British

Lead Mills external to the Welwyn Garden City activities. Over the years British Lead Mills had been used as the vehicle for acquiring, on the basis of diversification, a number of other companies and in February 1948 reports were carried in The Times and Daily Telegraph of British Lead Mills' AGM. Mr. Dick Shepherd addressed the meeting and two points were of particular interest in his statement.

1. the demand for British Lead Mills products from the building/chemical industries, considerably exceeded supply.
2. that negotiations were in progress to acquire an old established business which would materially widen the scope of British Lead Mills interests.

Later that year the details of this became apparent when British Lead Mills acquired the Firth Company Ltd. A company engaged in Steel Wire and Rope activities. You will get some feel for this wide diversification from Sir Charles Hayward the Chairman's address to the shareholders at the Annual General Meeting of British Lead Mills Ltd. held in February 1950. Commenting on the various products he said "I make no excuse therefore for pointing out that your Company's products are lead sheet and pipe for the building trades, chemical and antimonial lead sheet and pipe for the chemical and allied industries, lead sleeves, solder and other lead alloys, carbon spring wire, upholsterers spring wire and mattress spring wire for the bedding and seating industry, wires for rope manufacturers for use in collieries, ships cables and an infinite variety of types of wire including galvanized strand fencing, barbed wire, wire for cable armouring and fabricated fencing, rivets, chains, curtain rods, paper clips, woven steel gauge, electrodes and for a multitude of other purposes." He then went on to say "dealing with our lead interests at Welwyn Garden City I can tell you the trading profits were not quite as high as in previous years. However the factory extension for the treatment of secondary

metals which began to operate at the beginning of last year has made a most satisfactory contribution to our revenue. In the near future we may well decide to add to this plant."

It is now a matter of history that this broad programme of diversification undertaken by British Lead Mills went from strength to strength. In October 1950 the British Lead Mills Ltd. public company operation changed its name to Firth Cleveland and the name British Lead Mills Ltd was used to restart as a private company, its activities being solely devoted to Lead manufacture again as a wholly owned subsidiary within the new Firth Cleveland Group. In the early 50's we had the rather peculiar situation of documents appearing thus: British Lead Mills Ltd., a Subsidiary of Firth Cleveland Ltd (Formerly British Lead Mills Ltd), all very confusing. Even stranger, in 1953 the Firth Cleveland Board met and resolved to change its name to Firland Metals Ltd. So now I suppose history should read Firland Metals Ltd. formerly Firth Cleveland formerly British Lead Mills Ltd. Lets get back to the lead industry.

It was mentioned earlier that in lead British Lead Mills had extended its activities from not only fabricating refined lead to sheet and pipes but had added a secondary lead recovery plant. In August 1951 a further important decision was taken by the Board and that was to sanction expenditure of £1000 to purchase a Morgan Crucible Rotary Furnace so that lead drosses arising from melting and refining operations could be recovered. This decision in essence completed the operations as we would recognise them in Welwyn Garden City today. Namely refining, smelting, milling, extruding of lead, but of course since those days the technology of the various plants and equipment to carry out these operations increased considerably in sophistication.

During the latter part of the 1950's early 1960's Firth Cleveland added to its lead interests. Some of the names you will still recognise today.

In February 1955 R.E. Roberts was acquired for the sum of £75000 and the Directors minutes record that this was a "highly desirable acquisition". In October 1958 the Board approved acquisition of Brunton & Co., for £210000 "subject to guarantees being received". Finally the firm Quirk Barton and Burns of St Helens in Lancashire was acquired in December 1960 and Holman Michell was purchased from Delta in February 1962. The other more recent history will of course be well known to you all.

In 1972 GKN acquired Firth Cleveland. The lead companies at that time managed through Firland Metals namely British Lead Mills, Brunton & Co., Holman Michell and R.E. Roberts formed the sum total of GKN lead interests which after several negotiations, were acquired by our present Group Billiton in 1977, a group totally devoted to Non Ferrous metals. Billiton UK's lead interests now comprises the following companies:-

- a) H.J. Enthoven in Derbyshire, a very large secondary refining and smelting operation.
- b) EGM at Mitcham involved in all aspects of manufacturing and marketing of solder products.
- c) British Lead Mills, R.E. Roberts, Holman Michell and Girdler Brunton each of which are engaged in similar activities to BLM.

The company's current longest serving employee is Jim Crooks who joined the Company in 1949. Other current employees with long service records are John Williams - Purchasing - 32 years, Arthur Dietzman - Refinery Supervisor - 27 years. Brian Cameron - first appointment as Assistant Company Secretary in October 1961.

Ex employees now retired who are with us this evening include:-
Gordon Liley - Sales Director for many years, Bill Evans -

an engineer who helped with the installation of the original mill, Charlie Cartwright - Mill Production Manager for many years, and Ernest Stephenson better known to most of us as "Stevie".

We hope that this short resume of 50 years of BLM history has been of interest to you; some things have changed and some things have stayed the same. I am sure we all look forward to the next 50 years with confidence, particularly in view of the current high investment programme.