

Joseph and Harry Lucas

Joseph Lucas was born in Camden Street, Hockley, Birmingham in 1834. His father was described on the birth certificate as a 'plater'. As electroplating had not been invented this would indicate what is now known as close plating, floating a coating of silver on to base metal with a soldering iron, a highly skilled operation.

Joseph had no formal education, in common with more than 50% of children born at that time. He attended the Sunday School run by George Dawson at the Graham Street Chapel. Here he was taught basic reading and writing skills, and he later attributed his progress and prosperity entirely to George Dawson.

He was apprenticed to Elkingtons in Newhall Street; the building which later became the site of Birmingham's Science Museum. He became a journeyman brazier and plater like his father, and went to work for a firm making carriage lamps. At the age of twenty he married Emily Stephens. Hard times and shortage of work caused him and his wife to drink heavily, until he realised that this would get him nowhere. He determined to start his own business. Unfortunately, Emily became hooked on drink, and this led to his championship of the cause of temperance later in life.

He began work with a basket carriage, from which he sold paraffin from door to door. His popularity with his customers and his flair for business led him on quickly to the sale of buckets, shovels and other ironmongery. He was soon able to move to a larger house in Great King Street, Hockley, which had a workshop. From there he commenced the manufacture of domestic tinware in 1870.

Of his six children, the eldest, Harry, was the most useful in the business. It was a contact for ship's lamps which really got the firm going. They were marketed as the Tom Bowling Ship's Lamp. But the great breakthrough came with the introduction of the King of the Road bicycle lamp about 1880, which they developed in the early days of the cycling boom.

The family moved to The Firs in Stoney Lane, and then by 1885 they were installed at Denmark House, Trafalgar Road, Moseley. It was about this time that Joseph's wife Emily died. He re-married in the same year to his cousin Mary Tyzack.

Harry was now a partner and the driving force in the business. The Tom Bowling Works, a five-storey factory, was built in Great King Street and Joseph Lucas Limited was formed in 1898. The family's old house at the corner of Great King Street and New John Street formed the nucleus of this factory which eventually grew to cover some twelve acres. Father and son were both gluttons for work, but were enlightened employers who treated the workforce with every consideration. They were pioneers in factory welfare. They had little time for any hobbies but both were fond of music, and concerts at the factory and elsewhere were encouraged.

Joseph's second wife, Mary, died in 1900. By this time Harry had enough money to build the house of his dreams. A two-acre site in St. Agnes' Road was secured. He helped to design the Tudor-style family home and laid out the large gardens himself. An interesting feature of the house was the small pulpit halfway up the stairs from which he conducted family prayers. The house was named Hilver after his children Hilda and Oliver.

Joseph, leaving the business largely in the hands of his son, devoted a good deal of his time to philanthropy. He helped to found the Temperance Hall in Temple Street, and enjoyed giving lectures there condemning waste, gambling and drink. He re-married in 1902 and took a combined holiday and business trip to the Mediterranean with his new wife, Mary Anne Owen. Maintaining his strict abstinence from alcohol, he refused to drink wine in Naples where typhoid was endemic. He contracted the fever and died there at the age of 68. It was said that, true to his dislike to waste to the last, his remains were brought home in a King of the Road packing case. He was interred in Moseley Parish churchyard.

Under Harry's direction business prospered. The large factory at Great King Street was built, but he still kept in touch with the workers, touring the factory twice a day. Unfortunately, he became very deaf, and was glad of the help of his son Oliver, who entered the business straight from King Edward's School. Oliver and his sister Hilda were popular with the workpeople for their musical performances at the works concerts.

Harry retired from management in 1919, dying at Hilver in 1929 at the age of 83. Oliver became Managing Director of the huge company, and died abroad in 1948.

Fred Price from Some Moseley Personalities Volume I, 1991