

John Worley Baseley

A Moseley Designer and Craftsman

John Baseley was born in 1912 in Birmingham and spent his youth in Kings Heath and Moseley. His father was born in the village of Staverton in Northamptonshire, which he left at an early age to go to Birmingham where he married and worked for the L.M.S. (London Midland and Scottish) Railway Company, which made it possible for the children to enjoy trips to the seaside. John went to Tindal street Boys' School which was run by an old-fashioned headmaster, Mr Forrester, who always walked from his home in Trafalgar Road to the school in stately style, wearing a long black overcoat and a black hat. His large white beard gave him an imposing and awesome appearance. He always said that you had to be "as sharp as a tintack" to be at his school, and the Tindal Street boys were known as "tintacks".

John lived with his parents for many years in Ashfield Road; he and his sisters belonged to the "Kestrel Wheelers" Rambling club, and to the Friends' Institute Tennis club in Reddings Lane. Uffculme Park and Cannon Hill Park were their playgrounds. John's father and the whole family were associated with the Friends' Institute in Moseley Road where there were lecture rooms, a gymnasium, a large range of musical instruments and an organ, a brass band and an Institute Orchestra, all provided by members of the Cadbury family. John and his family took part in most of these activities.

Later, John became a student at the Vittoria Junior School of Arts and Crafts, his principal subjects being Industrial Design and Metal Work and was then apprenticed. Meanwhile he was fascinated by wireless and made his own first crystal set, using all sorts of home-made gadgets with tubes of cardboard, blocks of wood, cork, cotton-covered wire and a "cat's whisker" mounted in a cigar box. Neighbours came round to "listen in"; a pole in the garden provided the aerial.

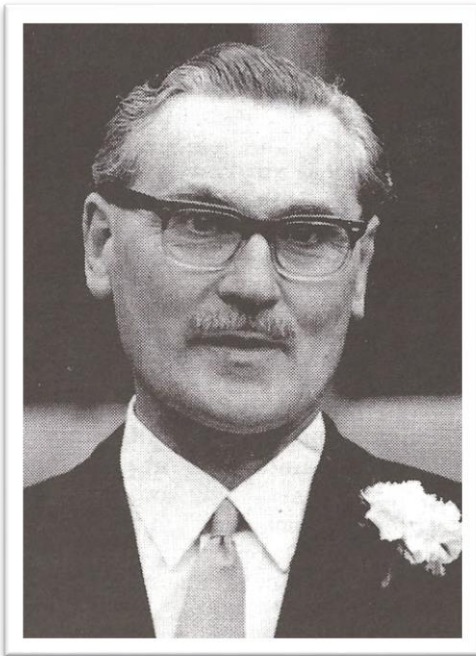


Figure 1 - John Worley Baseley

Some of the lectures which John attended were held at Margaret Street Central College of Art. Part of the practical side of training during his final year consisted in being sent to various firms to gain actual working experience. So he spent time at a firm of spinners, Messrs Redcliffe, and also several months at a silversmiths' and metal-workers' firm, Messrs D and L Spiers. When the schooling was finished the students were expected to make a choice of a particular section of the trade in which to settle as a career so as to ensure the replacement of retiring craftsmen.

John's apprenticeship for a term of five years was with Mudies Electrical Company, M.E.C., in Shaftmoor Lane. The wage was six shillings per week, later rising to twenty-one shillings. The owner of the business had a large white bushy moustache and a huge stomach; he waddled into the factory supervising his inventions. He was a brilliant man and developed the business from a small and decrepit factory near the city centre, making electric bells, switches, and such like, later converting switchgear

from 5,000 to 11,000 volts for Midlands Electricity Board. John had an excellent training there, ending up in the Drawing Office. He had changed from a boy apprentice to adulthood, and took an interest in motorbikes, three-wheeled cars and boats; he joined the tennis club and played percussion in various dance bands in the Midlands - which became a very lucrative hobby. John formed a trio with his two best friends, and they had many good bookings all over Worcestershire

and the Cotswolds.

His other hobby at that time was boating. He and a friend, having acquired a sailing boat, borrowed books on sailing and then decided to put this theoretical knowledge into practice, with some hilarious and dangerous results. Later they bought an old life-boat and rebuilt the boat's superstructure and reconditioned the engine, and had many happy times in it.

On completion of John's apprenticeship, around 1935, with Arts and Crafts School training in drawing and metalwork, as well as three evenings per week attendance at the Birmingham central Technical College behind him, coupled with his workshop experience, operating machines, fabrication of metals etc., and drawing-office experience, which consisted of design and prototype work, he was now able to look for a suitable job. John applied to F & C Osler Ltd of Broad Street, at the corner of Granville street. This was an old-established firm who specialised not only in architectural metalwork and glass but had also at one time (around 1850) made furniture of cut crystal for export, especially to India. These fantastic pieces, mainly in the form of crystal furniture, fountains, candelabra and cut crystal chandeliers, were a combination of high craftsmanship and artistic design. They are nowadays collector's items and very expensive.

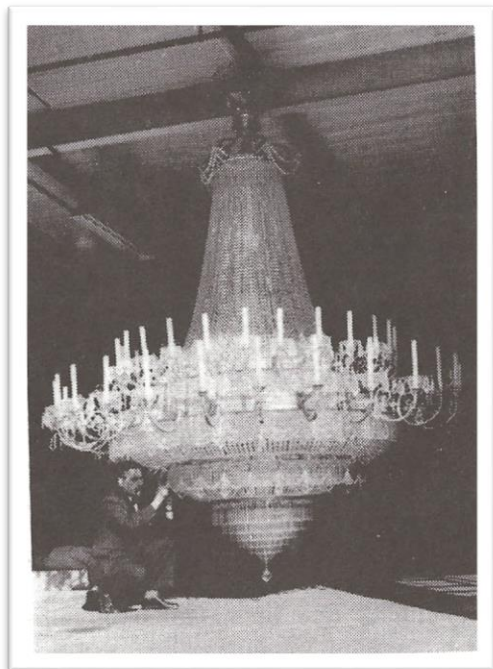
However, at a later time the main speciality of Oslers was the design and manufacture of chandeliers, architectural metal-work and decorative first-class light fittings of the highest standard and styles. The frontage of the building where the firm's work was done was an old mansion house, converted into offices; there was a beautiful curved staircase (the stairtreads being covered with plain linoleum); there were decorated - but decaying - ceilings, and a drawing office at the top of the building. At the rear were many workshops making a combined manufacturing factory which extended to the Tennant Street works entrance. Here John spent the best part of his working life, amongst individual highly skilled craftsmen - elderly maybe, but who had been without doubt the backbone of the company. Going to work with these men was a joy.

Orders were obtained through the London office and showroom, Osler & Faraday, in the days before the Second World War. There were special fittings required by Cunard, Cammel Laird and other shipping firms for their liners, the Mauritania, Queen Mary, Canberra, Queen Elizabeth, etc. At that time the administrative liaison between the London showroom and the Birmingham works was delegated to Peter A G Osler who had actively joined the company about 1932; he was appointed to the board in 1935 and became chairman in 1953. He died in September 1990. His uncle Julian Osler had been Chairman from 1923 to 1953 and had carried on the company's affairs during the difficult war period. It is worth noting that the Osler family had been very much involved with the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery for many years; records show that Birmingham's Big Ben clock and bells, suitable for the Council House tower, had been presented by them before the First World War.

John's main occupation in the drawing office was to provide structural full-size working drawings and to assist in designing special fittings. He was in direct contact with the workshops -which were tucked away in various corners of the old factory, and so got to know the individual craftsmen and their respective capabilities. Although remuneration was small, there was intense loyalty to the firm, sometimes through generations of the same family. The craftsmen were of a very high standard and the work was interesting, artistic and creative.

After the war the firm, under Julian Osler's chairmanship, re-started their original business. Peter Osler had returned from war service, and John was engaged as Chief Designer. During this time of shortage, the company progressed very well, providing specially designed products and replacing units which had become missing during the war-time years. There was work for the London Ministry of Works, various Inns of Court, Grocers' Hall, the cutlers' Hall in Sheffield, the Guildhall in Worcester, Temple Speech Room at Rugby School, the Ministry of Supply in Thailand, the Percy Gee building of Leicester University, the House of Commons and the Parliament building in Baghdad.

Sadly, on fulfilment of such contracts over the years, with other industrial changes happening, the demand for very expensive craft products fell away and orders were hard to get. Peter Osler had the unenviable task of closing down the company which his forebears in the past had made famous; this applied to the Broad street works and head office in 1960, and later to the London showroom of Osler and Faraday about 1965.



J W Baseley putting the finishing touches to a chandelier designed by him for the council chamber of the Parliament Buildings in Baghdad

John was now appointed a Director and he was made responsible for moving the work people and staff - machinery, patterns, drawings, plating and polishing shops, iron shop, brass workers and glass workers, to other premises in Aston. There they became a small part of a group of companies. They managed to exist for another ten years, but became less and less profitable, and eventually ceased trading. The reasons were stated to be the lack of orders, lack of interest and that their products were now unfashionable and not viable. This was about 1970. Luckily most of the old skilled craftsmen had managed to survive in employment until retirement and closure.

John was approximately sixty years old at that time, and with his wife retired to Cornwall, with memories of happier times when with his help beautiful pieces of work were manufactured and held in high esteem. He felt then, sadly, that this was the end of an important period in his life as there seemed to be no further interest in the beautiful objects which had been made in the past by the co-operation of such skilful men.

However, there is a postscript.

At a meeting in London where chandeliers were mentioned, an interested architect, who owns a holiday cottage in Cornwall near to where John now lives, mentioned that he knew an old chap who had in the past designed chandeliers for Oslers and had recently donated design and record books to the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; these books illustrated in detail many of the products made by Oslers around the 1850's, especially cut glass upholstered furniture, a cut glass grandfather clock, chandeliers and candelabra - a wealth of Birmingham's past manufacturing history. (Messrs Mallett's of New Bond street have recently produced a book written by their glass expert, John P. Smith, on Osler Crystal for Royalty and Rajahs.) As a result of this conversation the owner of a company "Chandelier Cleaning and Restoration Services Ltd" of London went to find John in Cornwall and paid him a visit. The company had been in existence for twenty-one years and was a successful business, dealing with chandeliers in Buckingham Palace, Clarence House, the Mansion House, etc., as well as huge contracts in overseas countries such as Kuwait. The owner of this company had been to the Birmingham Museum to gain further knowledge of the Osler business, and he now went to see John several times. They got on very well, and he found John with his intimate knowledge of the business very interesting and helpful; their conversation fired him with even greater enthusiasm so that he decided to form an associate company to be called "Classic English Chandeliers Ltd", manufacturing, servicing and repairing chandeliers. John is able to help by supplying working drawings of these fittings, executed in his garden studio in Cornwall, and it looks as if after all these years the pendulum has swung. Twenty years after leaving the manufacturing industry John, now in his eighties, feels wanted again, and his help and guidance are accepted with gratitude by a new industry arising from the old and he hopes to live long enough to see some of his quality

designed products again.

Hilde Smith

Sources of information:

A Journey Aged Ten to Seventy-five - The Auto-Biography of a Craftsman in the Department of Fine Art, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery;
Personal communication from J W Baseley.