

Harry Payne

Harry Payne (1884 – 1980) was particularly known as a man who built up a large shoe repairing business in and around Birmingham, and as a philanthropist.

Harry Payne left school in Northampton at the age of eleven. In this boot and shoe manufacturing town he had already taught himself to repair boots when he went into the bootmaking trade.

He determined to open his own boot repairing shop, and decided it would be better not to open in Northampton, as so many men were working in the trade and would know how to repair their own boots and shoes. He thought Birmingham would be a good place for a shop and found a small house with shop in Longmore Street, Balsall Heath. He got married on 26th February, 1908, and on that same day moved to Birmingham and took up residence. Two days after moving in, he and his wife were able to open the shop for business, with a homemade bench and fittings. By very careful management they were able to make a success of the business, and the next year they were able to take on a “benchman”.

By 1914 the business was well established and there were three shops and several full-time employees. They now lived several doors away from the original shop and had three children, Annie, Margaret and Jack. The whole family attended Moseley Methodist Church.

Conscientious objectors were not organised at the time of the outbreak of the Great War and although Harry Payne at first supported the aims of going to war with Germany, he happened to see bayonet practice taking place in a public park and thought that it could not be Christian to do this even to a German. He went home and talked it over with his wife, and decided after much soul-searching, that whatever the consequences, he would never go into the Army. The time came when he was called up and in 1916 he went before a tribunal and declared that on Christian grounds he would not assist the war effort. His petition was rejected and he replied acknowledging that it was in their power to put him in the army, but it was beyond their power to make him fight. He was drafted and refused to obey orders, and he served his time in prison throughout the war, and was not free until January, 1919.

Harry had a great deal to think about in prison, and he decided he would try to run the business, when he could get it expanding again, on Christian lines. Meanwhile, Mrs. Payne had struggled to keep going, running the shops with great difficulty as some men had gone into the forces, as well as looking after the children, who incidentally were all sent to a dame school in Park Road, Moseley. Back at work, Harry started putting his ideas into practice, introducing profit-sharing and paid holidays. New shops were opened, and in 1924 the firm became a private limited company, Harry H. Payne Ltd. He now had a loyal staff who would not lightly give up their jobs. The employees worked hard in the interest of their company and there was no need for piecework rates or bonuses. All the family were now working in the business, the girls in the office, Jack in a supervisory role. He was later made Managing Director of the company and later, Chairman. Harry had now joined the Society of Friends, the rest of the family were loyal to Moseley Methodist Church, where they took an active part: Annie playing the piano for the Sunday School and Jack Payne and his Band, etc.

Annie Payne later married Harold Burnett, who was running the Boys Brigade at the Church, and Harold was eventually invited to join the Company and became a director. He helped to organise Paynes' charitable work and became secretary of the Harry Payne Trust.

The whole family enjoyed music and Harry Payne became a member of the committee of the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. In and around 1953 he made a series of donations to augment the orchestra, amounting to nearly £11,000.

Harry Payne was a natural businessman. He was able to give better service at lower cost than the opposition due to the loyalty of his profit-sharing staff. He was very good at figures and “could read a balance sheet like a book”. He enjoyed an argument, particularly on the subject of religion. His Christianity depended more upon sense and reason than on faith.

Harry Payne lived to the age of 96. By this time the business, which had been his life's work, had been sold to a competitor.