

**April 2023**

**The Bainbridges: from Newcastle Department Store to Eshott Hall**

**Speaker: Eleanor George.**

Entrepreneurship and philanthropy: these qualities gave origin and rise to the retail business and well known department store in Newcastle which was taken over from the Bainbridge family in 1954, later becoming known as John Lewis.

The founding figure was Emerson Muschamp Bainbridge, born in 1817 at Craggside Farm, Eastgate, County Durham. His initial apprenticeship was at 'The Side', Newcastle, in 1830, from where he progressed to Regent Street in London. However in 1838 he returned to Newcastle, where he opened a retail drapery store called Albion House.

Newcastle had changed considerably from that of his younger years but being entrepreneurial he took advantage by stocking the latest London fashions with sales based on his ideals of fairness, inherent from his family's staunch Methodist faith (the family had many famed Wesleyan friends). In that era there was much haggling over costs and payments with stores becoming bankrupt owing to allowing payments of goods being on account and not always forthcoming: in contrast, he charged fixed prices and immediate payment.

Despite this his active management led to business expansion and opening a second store with 34 different departments. In subsequent years the business expanded further, developing into a vast enterprise to include French fashion, silks, furriers, hosiery, drapery, haberdashery, carpets and carpet cleaning and much more. He joined with a cousin in 1856, forming Bainbridge and Company. The Company became known for their improved working conditions for all staff – for example, closing times were established. He founded a Benevolent Society to support those in distress and initiated educational and recreational activities.

Emerson Bainbridge had married Annie Hudson (famed as a 'Fisher Girl' in a poignant painting by Henry Parker); over time their family grew to some 15 children (plus others who died). Their growing family necessitated a series of moves to ever larger houses (including Shielfield Park and Dissington Hall). Eventually three of their eldest sons, who were well liked, joined the business as Company Secretary and Directors and it became a Limited Company. It continued to grow and improve, with premises in Leeds for the manufacture of clothing, boots and shoes. In Newcastle they enjoyed a competitive liaison with the Fenwicks, while always attempting to cope with society's social problems well before the welfare state was initiated.

The Company was show-cased at both Queen Victoria's Jubilee Exhibition, held in 1887 on the 200-acre Town Moor site, and in the early C20th at the 'East Coast Exhibition' where it was promoted as "The Great Bainbridge Store – one of the sights of Newcastle" since by this time it occupied a vast array of impressive buildings.

In 1887 Emerson Bainbridge achieved his ambition to become a gentleman farmer, purchasing Eshott Hall with its 1000-acre estate. He added extensions to the hall and gradually re-possessed all tenanted farms to improve the estate. He built cottages and a Wesleyan Methodist chapel and took responsibility for the welfare of his tenants. He funded improvements to the local parish church in Felton. He died aged 75 and was buried in the family tomb at Jesmond Old Cemetery. His extensive estate was divided between his sons, his wife (who remained at Eshott Hall until her death) and several charities.

World War 1 had an impact with two officer sons being killed. Later, further family members – grandsons – branched into coal mining and ship building. World War 2 caused reduced staffing levels together with reduced trading, and finally the decision to sell came in 1952 – but only in 2002 was the name Bainbridges abandoned by John Lewis.

It was apparent that the speaker, Eleanor George, had undertaken a huge amount of research to present this well illustrated historical talk, including genealogy, and sociology – we could not help but be impressed by the sheer volume of information shared with us.

Rosemary Bell