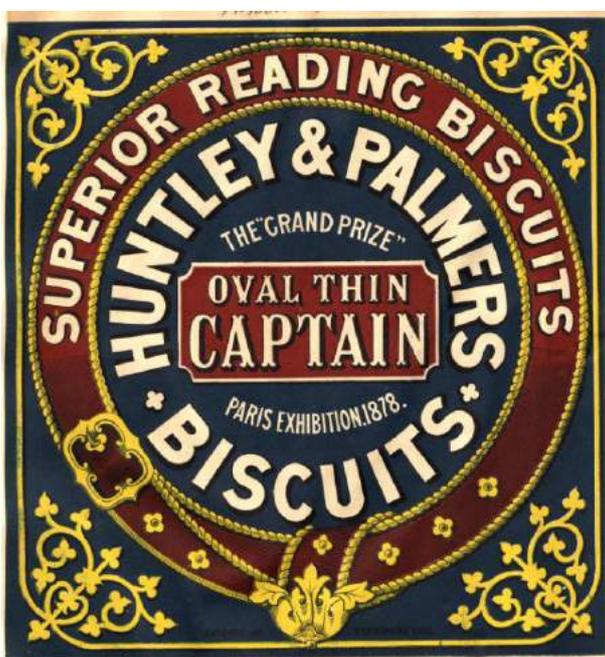


Huntley & Palmers

Special Collections featured item for August 2009 by Verity Andrews, Archives Assistant.

Records of Huntley & Palmers

MS 1490. Collection held at the University of Reading Special Collections Services.

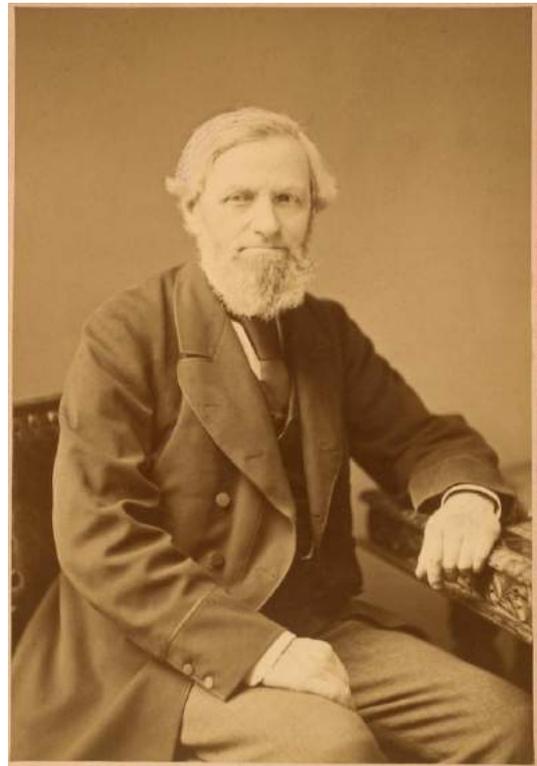
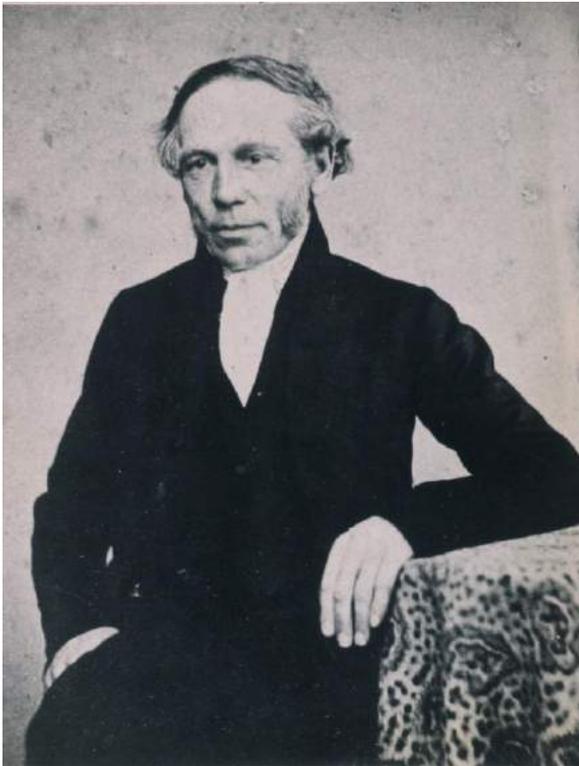


The name Huntley & Palmers is inextricably linked with Reading, as for a large part of the 19th, and then well into the 20th century, it was the largest biscuit manufacturer in the world. The town is lucky enough to have retained a large archive of material, and the University of Reading holds the majority of the paper records that survive. Associated Biscuits, which owned the company in the 1960s, donated its archives to the town and the University with the result that, as a general rule, Reading Museum now keeps

the three dimensional items, such as the wonderful collection of decorative biscuit tins, while the University of Reading Special Collections Services keep the majority of the paper records. The Berkshire Record Office also has some related material which can be found in their online catalogue.

Through the Huntley & Palmers archive the history of the company can be traced – from the notebooks listing the debts owed to the company in 1841 to the Huntley & Palmers Development Programme of 1982. The Quaker business, from which the firm of Huntley & Palmers developed, was founded in 1822 by Thomas Huntley [shown below left] when he opened a shop at 72 London Street, from where he sold biscuits to the coach travellers on

their journeys between London and Bath. By the late 1830s the firm was selling about twenty different kinds of biscuit, but due to non-payment of debts the company was in some difficulty. George Palmer [shown below right] and his family moved to Reading in 1841, and went into partnership with the Huntley family, having recognised the potential of the business, resulting in the establishment of the new company of Huntley & Palmers.



Both the Huntley and Palmer families, who were themselves related, belonged to the Quaker Society of Friends, the philosophy of which significantly affected the way the company conducted its business. The Quaker system of discipline included instructions on how members should behave in the conduct of trade - 'maintain strict integrity in all your transactions in trade, and in your outward concerns, remembering that you will have to account for the mode of acquiring, and the manner of using, your possessions'. The Quaker conscience did not allow them to sell, or use as ingredients, any but the best goods so the consuming public came to trust the quality of their foodstuffs.

As an engineer it was obvious that George Palmer, being fit and energetic in contrast with his partner, would manage the manufacturing department, and he had effective control of the business. He engaged commission agents in different parts of the country to collect both orders and unpaid accounts, and as turnover steadily increased so did the profits. As a result the Kings Road factory opened in 1846, and when Thomas Huntley died in 1857, the Palmer brothers George, Samuel and William bought out his share ensuring that the firm of

Huntley & Palmers was very much in Palmer control for the foreseeable future. By their combination of managerial and entrepreneurial talent the company flourished.

The eating habits of the middle classes were changing, and by the late 1860s it was fashionable to take afternoon tea. This provided the perfect market for biscuits, by which time Huntley & Palmers were producing about one hundred varieties, of which the Ginger Nut, Gem and Nic Nac were especially popular.



Plate from an early Huntley & Palmers biscuit catalogue

By 1860 there were 500 employees producing 3,200 tons of biscuits per year which were valued at £180,000, and by 1873 the company rightly claimed to be the largest biscuit producer in the world. The brothers endeavoured to send Huntley & Palmers biscuits to all corners of the globe, sending some to the King of Madagascar on the occasion of his coronation in 1862. Henry Stanley also took a supply on his expeditions in Central Africa, as did Captain Scott when he went to the Antarctic in 1911. In the 1860s a tin had been found in Mongolia, and in 1904 tins were found in Tibet before the first white man had reached the country.



Photograph of the north Huntley & Palmers factory floor

One reason for the extraordinarily long distances travelled by these biscuits was due to the revolutionary packaging. The biscuits were packed in strong tins, made by the local firm of Huntley, Boorne and Stevens. They were soldered shut, and remained largely unaffected by the conditions outside and could remain edible for long periods. One rather fanciful and charming series of advertising cards [see examples shown below] shows the distinctive tins being transported to a variety of distant and exotic destinations.



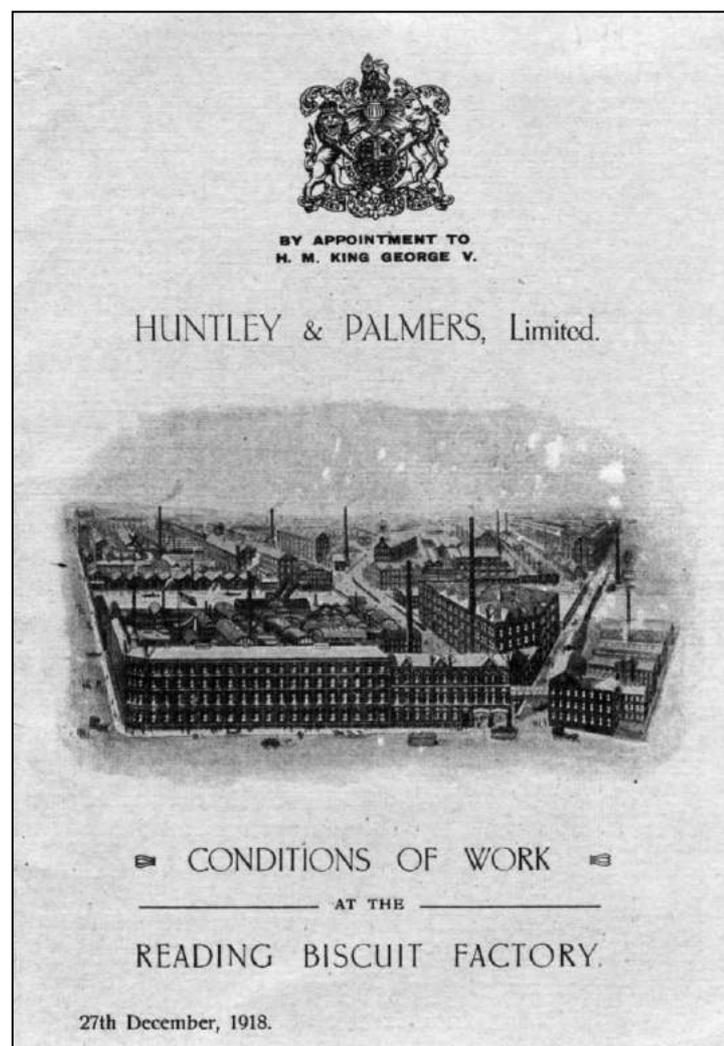


The firm's foreign representatives, particularly Joseph Leete in Europe and Edward Valpy in America, increased the firm's exports enormously. By 1902 Huntley & Palmers was making over 400 varieties of biscuit, and many cakes. However, the rest of the world was changing fast and competition at home was growing while the brothers' attention was directed abroad. The methods of manufacture had remained the same while demand was changing, so they were producing too many varieties for efficiency and at the same time finding it difficult to produce sufficient quantities of the popular varieties, like the Breakfast Biscuit. To compound these problems the Palmer family drew too heavily on the profits, and instead of re-investing in the company they took them in the form of dividends and paid themselves generously. From the dividend book shown below it is evident that in July 1900 George and Alfred Palmer paid themselves dividends of £21,275 for the half year.

Subsidiary
ORDINARY SHARES, DIVIDEND, at 5 per cent. per annum. No. 2. Payable December 31, 1899

| Number of Shares | NAME | ADDRESS | Number of Shares | Gross Amount of Dividend | Debit Income Tax | Net Amount of Dividend |
|--|----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| 1242 | Palmer. George William | Marlton Home near Newbury. | 1500 | 7200 0 0 | 308 6 8 | 6891 13 4 |
| 1243 | Palmer. Alfred | East Thorpe Reading. | 1500 | 7200 0 0 | 308 6 8 | 6891 13 4 |
| 1244 | Palmer. Samuel Ernest | 162 Fincham Street London E.C. | 1396 | 6980 0 0 | 282 13 4 | 6707 6 8 |
| 1245 | Palmer. Walter | Tropal. Sunninghill Road | 1240 | 6200 0 0 | 266 13 4 | 5933 6 8 |
| 1246 | Palmer. Charles Herbert | 162 Fincham Street London E.C. | 1396 | 6980 0 0 | 282 13 4 | 6707 6 8 |
| 1247 | Palmer. William Howard | Heathlands. Wokingham | 1318 | 6590 0 0 | 269 13 4 | 6320 6 8 |
| 1248 | Palmer. Albert John | St Marys Priory. Reading | 850 | 4250 0 0 | 174 13 4 | 4075 6 8 |
| 1249 | William. William Bullivant | St Peter's Hill. Cavendish. | 100 | 500 0 0 | 16 13 4 | 483 6 8 |
| | | | 10000 | 50000 0 0 | 2066 13 4 | 47933 6 8 |
| <u>Ordinary Shares. Final Dividend at 11 1/2 per cent (at 4)</u> | | | Payable July 1, 1900 | | | |
| 1258 | Palmer. George William | Marlton Home near Newbury. Berks | 1500 | 21275 0 0 | 709 3 4 | 20565 16 8 |
| 1259 | Palmer. Alfred | East Thorpe Reading. | 1500 | 21275 0 0 | 709 3 4 | 20565 16 8 |
| 1260 | Palmer. Samuel Ernest | 162 Fincham St London E.C. | 1396 | 15524 0 0 | 525 2 8 | 14998 17 4 |
| 1261 | Palmer. Walter | Tropal. Sunninghill Road | 1240 | 14260 0 0 | 474 6 8 | 13785 13 4 |
| 1262 | Palmer. Charles Herbert | 162 Fincham Street London E.C. | 1396 | 15524 0 0 | 525 2 8 | 14998 17 4 |
| 1263 | Palmer. William Howard | Heathlands Wokingham | 1318 | 14707 0 0 | 505 4 8 | 14201 15 4 |
| 1264 | Palmer. Albert J. | St Marys Priory Reading | 850 | 9775 0 0 | 325 16 8 | 9449 2 4 |
| 1265 | William. William Bullivant | St Peter's Hill. Cavendish. | 100 | 1150 0 0 | 38 6 8 | 1111 13 4 |
| | | | 10000 | 150000 0 0 | 5233 6 8 | 144766 13 4 |

Trade became increasingly difficult, and between 1903 and 1905 was depressed nationally partly due to poor harvests and high commodity prices. This affected the employees' salaries which were not raised between 1900 and 1912, while the price of food increased by about 10%. The company continued in business though its production was greatly affected by the Great War as it produced a large amount for the military and also transferred some of its production to making shell cases. In 1920 Peek Frean and Huntley & Palmers joined together to become the Associated Biscuit Manufacturers and they were joined by Jacobs in 1969 becoming Associated Biscuits Ltd. Production ceased at Reading in 1976 and the company was shortly taken over by Nabisco Brands.



The collection contains a great deal of material relating to the social conditions of the workforce, including Conditions of Work pamphlets [see example shown above] dating from 1918 to 1938 which give an insight into the working lives of the employees.



Huntley & Palmers biscuit packaging

In 1850 the working week for men was 58½ hours, but had been reduced to only 48 by 1918. In 1873 wages were finally paid for Christmas Day where previously a day's pay had been docked from the wages, and a few years later employees were allowed to take a few extra days off unpaid. The labour force, and its wages, changed over the years: in 1844 the company comprised 17 men and boys earning about 11/3 per week, and by 1900 there were 5,409 workers earning approximately 18/8 per week, which amounted to 10% of the whole Reading workforce. Employees could look forward to non-contributory pensions when they had completed 50 years of service with the company.



Photograph of a Huntley & Palmers packing room

Apart from the manufacturing and packing workers, there were tin washers and platers, box carpenters and coopers, fitters, smiths, pattern makers, painters, plumbers, bricklayers, as well as yardmen, engine drivers, shunters and oilmen for the railway sidings, all to service the small town that Huntley & Palmers had become.

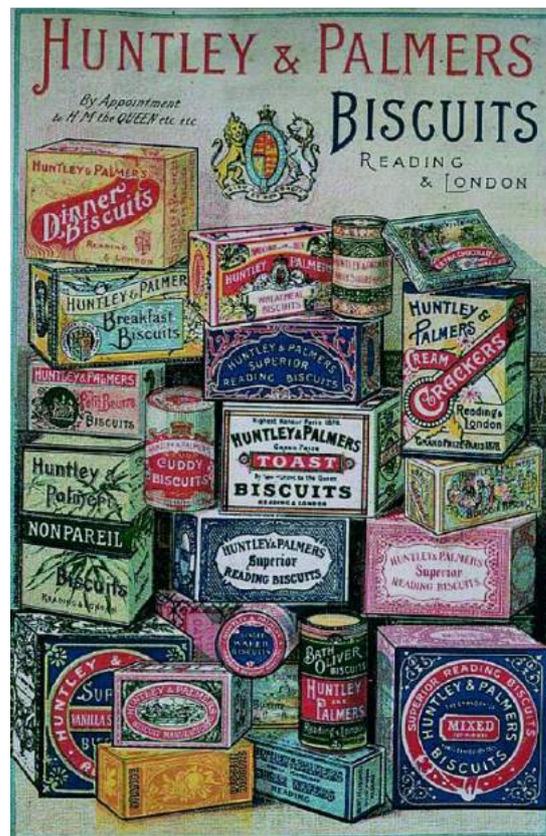


Photograph showing the view over the Huntley & Palmers factory

George Palmer set up a Sick Fund in 1849, to which adults initially contributed 6d per week and could benefit by 12/- if they were ill. All factory fines were given to the sick fund and it was only superseded in 1912 by the official National Health Insurance scheme.

A Mutual Improvement Society was set up in 1854 and for a contribution of 1d a week, workers could use the library and reading room. There was also a piano and Saturday evening entertainments were laid on, partly to keep workers out of the pubs. Excursions were arranged in the neighbourhood and from 1866 regular excursions went by rail to Hampton Court, Brighton, Portsmouth and Hastings. These were increasingly large affairs: at one time the participants numbered 7,000 and required up to 10 special trains.

In the 1860s the Cricket Club was set up, and Huntley & Palmers gave 12 acres of King's Meadow for a cricket ground. The archive collection includes many surviving scorebooks – they played on Sunday afternoons and there are records of matches, for example, between the Sugar Wafers and the Invoice Room, and the Assortment Department versus the Sample Room.



Huntley & Palmers advertisement featuring the famous biscuit tins

In 1898 the Recreation Club was founded by George Palmer who had bought 49 acres of land (now called Palmer Park) to provide sports facilities. The company provided all the equipment for cricket, football, hockey, quoits, bowls, tennis and athletics. This was all part of the paternalistic approach of the Palmer family and was very forward thinking. To look after the health of the workers to such an extent was unusual at the time. The partners also contributed to innumerable good causes including colliery disaster funds, orphans' homes and various educational beneficiaries. Funerals were paid for any hands dying in service and wedding cakes were provided for hands employed by the company.

A handlist of over 1000 items is available, and can be viewed on the University of Reading Special Collections website. The collection includes an impressive amount of packaging, ledgers and ephemera, as well as material relating to the social history of this extraordinary and pioneering biscuit company.

Additional reading

- Corley, T.A.B. *Quaker enterprise in biscuits : Huntley and Palmers of Reading, 1822-1972*. London : Hutchinson, 1972.



The Huntley & Palmers factory at Reading