

Personal thoughts on JF Morton

Contained within the 1958 Christmas edition of the Hovis McDougall magazine is a fitting tribute to my Great Uncle Jack*. I have also inserted in those pages (10 to 11) an obituary that appeared in the Daily Mail. Both pieces are an accurate reflection of the man written by those from outside the family. I have attempted below to shed a little more light on Uncle Jack* from the family perspective, mainly through conversations with my late father (Leighton) and his father, George, brother of John Figgins Morton.

Born on Feb 1st 1872 at Ivy Cottage, Prestbury near Macclesfield in Cheshire, John was the second eldest of nine children. The family was poor, his father, John Bradshaw Morton was not a successful man, and deemed somewhat of a failure in business, struggling to feed and clothe his children. He held his mother, Sarah Elizabeth Figgins in high regard; devoted to the family, instilling values of integrity and honesty in all her children. "Manners maketh man" would have been a favourite mantra in the household. Both parents were deeply religious, I think it fair to say the children which included John, grew up in something of a Puritanical environment.

John was educated at Macclesfield Grammar school and left aged 14 to work for Claye, Brown and Claye, printers for 6/- a week. He left 3 years later (1889) to join S. Fitton and Son, flour millers as a clerk. It was at this point he recognised his chance of moulding the future of the fledgling company, and changing his own impoverished Victorian upbringing.

John was not a technical miller, but really understood human nature, the commercial world and a bit about printing. The humane side of him undoubtedly came from his parents, most notably his mother. My father described that generation of children as gentle and kind. They were also well educated and clever – motivated by the ambition and values of their mother. John's younger brother George (my grandfather) was an academic and went on to study at Cambridge University and become a headmaster at a school in Leeds. As the eldest boy, John had felt compelled to enter the commercial world to help the family finances.

John's career is well documented in the various journals, but these formative years really shaped some of the ideas he was to put into practise, and drive the Hovis Bread Flour Company to great success.

The fact that Mr. Fitton spent much time away from the business gave John early responsibility and he learned by experience, no doubt making mistakes along the way. He would spend time with his business mentor in the evening, updating him on the day's events. He would not always agree with his boss' methods but listened astutely, always polite. Mr Fitton was a frugal gentleman, and my Great Uncle was apparently not afraid to speculate to accumulate. He was able to bring his knowledge of printing to bear with the investment of a printing works at the Macclesfield mill. In this respect he was a man of vision.

With Smiths patent germ flour, John knew he had something unique, although this was not recognised at the time by the public or the baking trade. In today's parlance John had a "USP". With a printing press at his disposal he was able to generate an inordinate amount of

literature and marketing information for the baking trade, including bespoke paper bread bags. He went on to set up a sign writing division to advertise Hovis on virtually every baker's shop in the country. He also used their delivery vehicles as mobile advertising hoardings. He set up prestigious baking competitions that the trade enjoyed.....Hovis, a brown bread with health giving properties, had become something that everyone aspired to eat. Whilst leaving the technical aspects of milling to the millers, John still understood the importance of quality and consistency and got involved with the production side if poor quality ever compromised the brand he was so keen to promote.

It was this innate understanding of the customer that set John apart, along with his sharp intellect and gentle, persuasive character. These traits also served him well as a leader of the business. The printing works was used to publish the 'in house' magazine that kept all staff informed of what was going on. My father described him as meticulous in every detail, he hated injustice and sought to make the business a benchmark for employee welfare. Through the various mergers and acquisitions that took place over the years it was the Hovis standard that was adopted by the newly enlarged company.

I hope you find a space for my Great Uncle Jack* in your "Dynamic force" archive.

Robert Morton

September 2020

(Jack* was the family name given to John Figgins Morton)