Stainless Cutlery and the History of Portland Works in Sheffield

By Geoffrey Tweedale

Introduction

In 2013, Sheffield celebrated an important centenary – the discovery of stainless steel for cutlery. The anniversary was duly marked by various events, exhibitions, and publications. It was an opportunity to reflect on the individuals and companies involved in this revolutionary breakthrough.

The steel and cutlery firms that shaped the introduction of stainless steel a hundred years ago have long since disappeared. Indeed – although one hardly dare whisper it – Sheffield no longer manufactures forged table-knife blades (though a handful of firms, it is true, continue to market cutlery). However, factory buildings last longer than people. One of them is Portland Works. It is situated in a suburb on the outskirts of the city known as Little Sheffield, which was once a thriving centre of cutlery manufacture and light engineering. It is quieter today, but a century ago Portland Works was home to R.F. Mosley Ltd, a company which played a key role in the manufacture of the first stainless knives.

R.F. Mosley’s Early Career

Most cutlery manufacturers were Sheffield born and bred. Robert Fead Mosley was unusual in that respect. He was born in 1841 in London. He was the eldest son of Cornelius Lewis Mosley, a prosperous jeweller and steel pen manufacturer in Hatton Garden – a well-known London jewellery thoroughfare.
Robert Mosley arrived in Sheffield as a teenager in 1856. Presumably, Cornelius had contacts there. Robert was soon lodging at the house of George Oates, who was a leading scissors manufacturer. It seems likely that Robert acquired his business experience as a clerk in Oates’s office. After Oates’s death in 1861, Mosley (aged 20) launched his own enterprise in Sheffield as a manufacturer of scissors and table cutlery. The next important event in his life, though, took place in London. In 1865 at Highbury Wesleyan Chapel, he married Martha Ann Hobson. She was the eldest daughter of Henry Hobson, a Sheffield cutlery retailer, who was very active in the capital city. Robert and Martha moved into Rutland Lodge in Collegiate Crescent, Sheffield. This was a sign that Mosley was doing well, as that Crescent was one of the better-class roads in Sheffield. By 1874, he had purchased Croft House in Brincliffe, which was an even more salubrious suburb.

Mosley’s business was soon on the move, too. In 1870, he relocated first to West Street at Beehive Wheel (later known as Portland Works) in the town centre. By 1876, Mosley was ready for a major move from West Street to Little Sheffield. Mosley’s newly-built factory in Randall Street – on the corner with Hill Street – covered about three-quarters of an acre on the usual Sheffield plan: two to three stories of offices and workshops around a central courtyard with a tall chimney. Mosley named the building Portland Works.

In 1881, Mosley apparently employed 240 workers (200 men, 20 boys, and 20 girls). This made Portland Works one of the larger cutlery enterprises in Sheffield. A vanity publication, Industries of Sheffield: Business Review (1888), provided an engraving of the factory and noted:

A valuable feature of their business, and one which has been made a speciality by them, is the manufacture of case goods on an exceedingly artistic and extensive scale. These cases are fitted up with satin and velvet linings, etc., for the reception of cutlery of the best and highly finished kinds, also for silver dessert and table spoons, forks, fish knives, etc., mounted in pearl, ivory, silver, metal, and other choice mountings.

Mosley had recognised the importance of the burgeoning market for silver and electro-plated goods. In 1883, he registered a silver mark in Sheffield under his own name. Further silver marks followed in 1886, 1890, 1894, and 1907. In 1897, Mosley’s became a limited company, with a capital of £35,000 (£24,170 paid up). Most of the shares were held by R.F. Mosley and his eldest son, Henry Hobson Mosley (1867-1928).

The Alexander Clark Connection

Mosley had made his mark in Sheffield, but he was not a public figure. He took no part in local politics. He apparently never became a freeman of the local craft guild, the Company of Cutlers, and never held the office of Master Cutler (the nominal head of that body). Unusually, he never adopted a trade mark in the nineteenth century and his name is surprisingly scarce (given the size of his factory) on cutlery. This may have reflected a personal dislike of politics and publicity. However, it also reflected the fact that Mosley’s chief outlet for table cutlery and silverware was in London.
By 1890, Mosley had developed links with The Alexander Clark Manufacturing Co in London. This silverware retailer had been launched by Alexander Clark (1857-1938), who had acquired prominent showrooms in Fenchurch Street and Oxford Street. Robert F. Mosley and his second son, Robert Frederick Mosley (1870-1926), became partners in Clark’s. By 1901, Robert Frederick was living and working in Market Place, off Oxford Street, where one of Clark’s showrooms was located. Intriguingly, directories stated that Clark had a Sheffield office and factory at Welbeck Works in Randall Street. Hence Clark’s trade mark: ‘WELBECK, SHEFFIELD’.

Randall Street was the also the location of Portland Works, which inevitably raises the question of the precise relationship between the two companies. This was considerably clarified after the author noticed that an antiquarian bookseller had an Alexander Clark trade catalogue for sale. Tantalisingly, the 496-page catalogue promised photographs of Clark’s Sheffield factory. When purchased, the catalogue was a revelation. Dated about 1908, it provided a revealing series of photographs of Portland Works – except that the factory signage proclaimed it as Welbeck Works. The caption beneath read: ‘The company’s Sheffield Works, where they employ over 500 hands: - The Dinner Hour’. The signage is obviously faked and the workroll is also exaggerated (about 120 workers appear in the frame and it is unlikely that Mosley’s workforce was more than 300). However, the catalogue does confirm what one might have suspected. Portland Works gave Clark’s a fictitious Sheffield factory and a guaranteed supply of cutlery and silverware. In turn, Clark’s premises gave Mosley a London shop window and a steady stream of orders. To supply these orders, Portland Works (if the photographs are accurate) had electro-plating tanks, which were ‘large enough to plate a lamp-post’; skilled silversmiths and polishers and burnishers (many of them women); and hand-forgers and blade grinders.
Stainless Table Cutlery

Mosley’s disguised link with Alexander Clark may account for his relatively low profile before 1914. That obscurity ended during the War. He and his company played a significant part in cutlery history, after metallurgist Harry Brearley (who worked for Firth’s, the Sheffield steel makers) turned to them in the summer of 1914 to make a trial with a new ‘rustless’ steel.

Even the best qualities of Mosley’s hand-forged shear steel – shown here in the Alexander Clark catalogue – inevitably tarnished and became rusty. Electro-plating helped prevent the tarnishing of flatware (such as spoons, forks, and fish knives), but the process was not suitable for steel products which needed a sharpened edge.

The manager of Mosley’s, Ernest Stuart, helped Brearley forge a dozen or so knife blades from the new material – a milestone in cutlery manufacture. Consequently, Mosley’s was the first firm to predict a future for stainless steel and the first to order supplies of the revolutionary alloy. In a later account of the discovery of stainless steel, Brearley heaped praise on Stuart and Mosley’s. According to Brearley, Mosley’s would have liked a monopoly on the product, but for various reasons supplies were limited. Intriguingly, when Mosley’s commercial blades appeared they were marked not ‘Firth-Brearley Stainless’ or ‘Firth Stainless’ – the most common markings on early stainless cutlery – but ‘RUSNORSTAIN’. Knives with this trade mark began appearing for sale in New South Wales in Australia as early as 1915 – an indication of how quickly Mosley commercialised the alloy (though Firth’s were already marketing it by the end of 1914). The war disrupted supplies of stainless steel, but once it ended, Mosley also began sending cutlery to New Zealand.

The credit for the discovery of stainless steel soon became a matter of dispute between Firth’s and Brearley. ‘RUSNORSTAIN’ adds another layer of mystery. According to one published account, ‘RUSNORSTAIN’ was patented and registered by a Detroit metallurgist. This was Carl B. Nehls (1886-1941), who arrived in Sheffield in about 1913 and became connected with Brearley. Nehls left for home at the end of 1916, taking with him an English wife (C. Kate Moorwood) – whom he had married in Sheffield in that year – and apparently Brearley’s ideas. But no Nehls patent has been traced.

The stainless breakthrough came late in R.F. Mosley’s life. He remained chairman after the war, but he died in Sheffield on 13 January 1921, aged 79. When he was buried at Fulwood cemetery about 400 attended the funeral, including many long-serving workers and Alexander Clark. He left a considerable estate of £52,966.

© G. Tweedale 28 January 2014
Depression and Decline

After Mosley’s death, his family’s fortunes were mixed. With the end of the Edwardian silver boom, the Clark connection became less important. Robert Frederick Mosley started a London jewellery business in Albemarle Street, London, in partnership with Arthur Samuel Flowers. But this was dissolved in 1921. On the other hand, the firm registered ‘RUSNORSTAIN’ as a trade mark in Sheffield in 1924. In the same year, the mark ‘RFM’ (in a rectangle) was registered in Canada. Mosley’s opened its own London showroom at Bath House, Holborn Viaduct, where it advertised cased sets of ‘RUSNORSTAIN’ cutlery. The boxed sets were branded as the ‘original stainless cutlery’. In the early 1920s, Mosley’s regularly advertised ‘RUSNORSTAIN’ in trade journals, where the company stressed that it was the ‘first maker’ of stainless cutlery steel.

However, Robert Frederick Mosley died on 19 January 1926 at Hotel Bedford, Beaulieu, in the south of France. He left only £2,850. Henry Hobson Mosley – who was the senior partner – died on 12 March 1928, leaving £4,830. After their deaths, R.F. Mosley’s never recaptured its dynamism. The Depression hit trade hard and in 1934 Mosley’s went into voluntary liquidation and sold its stock. It was, however, reconstituted with a capital of £30,000.

Portland Works subsequently provided work for about 200 people, with about half of them in Mosley’s employment and the rest independent craftsmen renting the remaining small workshops. After the Second World War, the managing director was Albert Oswald Mosley (R.F. Mosley’s youngest son). He had a colourful past. In 1907, he had been sued for breach of promise after a seaside affair with a young Sheffield artist’s model. Albert was married at the time. He defended the case successfully, but the judge declared that his conduct was ‘about as disgraceful as it was ever possible to hear of’. Albert died at his home in Fulwood Road on 18 December 1950, aged 71, and was buried in Fulwood cemetery. He left £5,116.

The last family member to be involved in the firm was Robert Clive Mosley (1905-1979), who was A.O. Mosley’s son. He was managing director at the start of the 1950s, when the firm was crippled by Australian import controls. Mosley felt that the restrictions were a ‘catastrophe’ for his firm and that he faced discharging most of the workforce. Mosley’s occupied Portland Works until 1968, when the company was wound up. The names ‘Mosley’ and ‘RUSNORSTAIN’ were then acquired by the Sipelia Group, a cutlery conglomerate which, in turn, was liquidated in the early 1970s.

Portland Works in the Millennium

One might expect that was the end of the manufacturing history of Portland Works. But even at the end of the twentieth century the premises provided workshops for cutlers, electroplaters, and other craftsmen who continued to trade in Sheffield.
One of the workshops is presently occupied by Stuart Mitchell. His parents were working cutlers (Stuart and Pat), who moved to Portland Works in 1980. They supplied leading firms with butchers’ and trade knives; and in 1968 began manufacturing hunting knives. Stuart Jun. continues their tradition at Portland Works as a custom knife maker. Stuart has developed into a specialist in fixed-blade hunters, bushcraft, and Bowie knives for collectors and outdoorsmen. He hand crafts these knives in various steels and distinctive handle materials. In 2013, he produced a limited edition stainless steel centenary knife – made appropriately at Portland Works.

Also occupying a workshop at the factory is an electro-plating firm (PML Ltd), which was established in 2009 by Peter Ledger. He started in the cutlery industry in 1978 and acquired an extensive knowledge of silver plating on metals such as copper, brass, nickel-silver, and stainless steel. When I visited recently, Peter showed me how he uses the same technique of electro-plating – suspending articles such as spoons and forks in tanks of cyanide, so that an electric current can deposit silver – that was used in Mosley’s day. He silver-plates cutlery for well-known silver firms, such as Chimo and Arthur Price.
In 2009, it looked as if the future for these craftsmen was uncertain. Plans were mooted for the conversion of Portland Works into apartments. But the factory and its past proved resilient. Sheffielders familiar with Portland Works recognised the historical importance of the building. They appreciated its architectural merits as a fine example of a 19th century multi-storey, courtyard-style cutlery factory. In 2013, a local group of volunteers raised over £250,000 through a community shareholding scheme to preserve Portland Works as low-cost accommodation for craftspeople and the creative industries.

Further information:

Portland Works has its own website with many details of the history of the factory and the progress of the community scheme:

http://www.portlandworks.co.uk/

A biography of R.F. Mosely has been written by Anna de Lange, Robert Fead Mosley: First Manufacturer of Stainless Knives, Entrepreneur, Visionary, Innovator and Founder of Portland Works (Sheffield, 2013). An ‘Addendum’ to this work can be downloaded from the Portland Works website.

An account that is particularly illuminating on Mosley’s early life is by Jeff Warner, ‘A Short History of R.F. Mosley’ (2013). It can be downloaded from the website of the Hawley Collection, Kelham Island Museum, Sheffield:

http://www.hawleytoolcollection.com
**Author’s note:**

Geoffrey Tweedale has been researching the history of the Sheffield cutlery industry for over thirty years. This article was specially written for Wiktor Kuc, but it draws on the research and photography for *Tweedale’s Directory of Sheffield Cutlery Manufacturers 1740-2013* (2014), pp. 740. Besides the companies and individuals featured here, this illustrated volume contains histories of about 1,600 cutlery manufacturers. It is available from http://www.lulu.com