

NOSTALGIA

Furniture business was a family affair

By Mike Dewey

THIS week we resume our series of articles about the history of Wycombe's iconic chair and furniture manufacturers, and take a look at the company Nicholls & Janes (N&J).

N&J were one of the oldest chair-makers in High Wycombe, the founders being Allan Janes and his father-in-law Charles Nicholls. Allan was born in 1843 in Penn, the son of Martin and Eliza Janes. His father was a chair-turner, colloquially known as a bodger. He is known to have also been a "bodging business operator", implying that he was managing other bodgers. He was also a part-time public house landlord.

Wanting his son Allan to improve himself, Martin sent him to London to learn to make chairs. After returning home Allan was induced in about 1866 to teach men employed in the factory of William Birch to make chairs for passenger steamers and liners.

Around that time Allan met Ellen Nicholls, a daughter of Charles Nicholls, himself a chair-maker. In 1868 Allan and Charles decided to go into business together as Nicholls & Janes, with a small workshop behind the Golden Fleece public house in Water Lane. This was located approximately opposite what is now the Costa coffee house on the southern outskirts of Eden. On February 6, 1872 their partnership was cemented when Allan and Ellen married at All Saints parish church in High Wycombe.

The N&J entry in the 1877 edition of Kelly's Trade Directory listed their business as chair manufacturers in Newland Meadows. This was on the other side of Water Lane compared to the Golden Fleece, possibly indicating that they had moved a short distance to new premises.

The Census in 1881 lists Allan and Ellen as living in Newland Meadows with their five children. These were



St Mary Street, High Wycombe in c.1900, looking from the bottom of Marlow Hill towards the town centre, with the tower of All Saints parish church in the distance. The factory of Nicholls & Janes is about two thirds along the street on the right hand side

two sons, Ralph Allan born in 1873 and Maurice born in 1877, and three daughters. The couple later had another daughter and a son, Stewart, who was born in 1885. Interestingly none of their children were christened when young, but when they were at least teenagers. Ralph Allan for example was not christened until March 23, 1889 when he was 16, when his father Allan described himself as a Chairmaster. Maurice was not christened until he was 22, when he gave his occupation as (wood)-carver. Christenings when older normally indicates that a family were Baptists, but the christenings took place at All Saints parish church.

Allan Janes was a keen cricketer, as were his son and grandson who both represented Buckinghamshire. We know from the report of a cricket match played on August 2,

1873 between "Mr Janes' Firm and Messrs Edgerley's Firm" that Allan was proficient as both a bowler and batsman. The report also gives us the names of the team, being W Stallwood, W Sears, A Janes, R Hazell, G Sears, D Stevens, J Janes, W Mullett, J Westrup, J Collings and A Boreham. Presumably these were all employees of the firm. The Janes team won by nine wickets.

In December 1884 an advertisement appeared in the *Bucks Free Press* for the letting of manufacturing premises "situate in the Meadow, Newland, now in occupation of Messrs Nicholls & Janes, and can be entered on at Christmas". Just four months later in May 1885 another advertisement appeared for the sale of the factory of Nicholls & Janes in Newland Meadow, "close to Desborough Road" (in January 1884 the Municipal Council had decided

to rename Water Lane, so called because it was frequently flooded, to Desborough Road).

In July of that year, shortly before his thirteenth birthday, Ralph Allan started work at the factory, which had just moved to new premises in St Mary Street. This street ran from the bottom of Marlow Hill to Pauls Row and the Guildhall. N&J were to occupy these premises for over 70 years. Many years later in December 1947, when he was interviewed by a representative of the journal *The Cabinet Maker*, Ralph remembered: "The conditions under which we worked in those days makes me wonder what the modern workers would have done about them.

"We had no artificial lighting and, except for the heat from the drying stove, we had no warmth at all in winter, though the hard nature of our work soon warmed us on the

coldest day. We had no machinery except the sawmill, and this was only an upright horizontal affair, which was very crude compared with present-day machines."

To be continued

I am grateful to Rowland Janes who in March 2011 set up a website as a basis for ongoing research into the history of Nicholls & Janes, the furniture they made, and the people who made its reputation for quality products. Rowland has allowed me to quote extensively from the website, and in return I hope I have been able to contribute to the recorded history of the company.

If any reader has information or photographs about N&J I would be grateful if they would contact me on 01494 755070, email deweymik@d@aol.com; or contact Rowland by email on info@NandJ.org.uk

Annual Swan-Upping ceremony

FOLLOWING the mention of swan-apping in the Nostalgia last week several readers have been in touch to ask for more information about this ancient ceremony.

The Swan-Upping is a traditional and unique event that takes place along the Thames each July. Contrary to common belief, the Thames mute swans are not all owned by the Queen. Some belong to the Vintners and the Dyers, two livery companies of the City of London.

Swan-apping is the means by which the swans on the Thames are apportioned among the three proprietors. Its main practical purposes today are to conduct a census of swans and check their health. The event occurs annually during the third week of July. Over five days, the Queen's, Vintners' and the Dyers' respective swan-uppers row up the river in skiffs.

The flotilla consists of six ornately decorated boats, each

flying a standard – two for the Queen, two for the Dyers and two for the Vintners. The boatmen wear traditional scarlet uniforms and, as they pass Windsor Castle, their loyal toast echoes across the river – "Her Majesty, the Queen, Seigneur of the Swans". Swans caught by the Queen's swan-uppers under the direction of the Swan Marker are left unmarked, except for a ring linked to the database of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).

Those caught by the Dyers and Vintners are identified as theirs by means of a further ring on the other leg. Originally, rather than being ringed, the swans would be marked on the bill, a practice reflected in the pub name The Swan with Two Necks, a corruption of "The Swan with Two Nicks".

The current holder of the title of the Queen's Swan Master is David Barber, who was appointed in 1993. The Turk family, father and son Frederick and John, were the



The Queen's swan-uppers, c.1980

previous holders, Frederick from 1922 to 1963 and John from 1963 to 1993. The Turk family have been boat-builders on the Thames from as far back as 1195, with Frederick establishing his boatyard in

Cookham in 1911. One of the first Foremen of the yard was Charles East who died in November 1918 as a result of an illness which was aggravated by service in the Great War.

Gt War timeline

TO remind ourselves of the progress of the World War I, we are detailing the main events affecting Great Britain which took place each week. In the week up to March 23rd.

On March 17th German Navy destroyers made a short sortie into the North Sea area and sunk two British destroyers and a merchant ship before returning safely to port.

Lance Corporal Percival Cooke died at the Western Front on March 17th.

The next day March 18th German submarines sunk three American vessels, further drawing the US into the conflict.

On March 20th Private Sydney Rogers from Princes Risborough was killed in action at the Western Front.

Private Gilbert W Russell from High Wycombe died of wounds at the Western Front on March 21st.

Lieutenant Alfred P Long from High Wycombe was killed at the Western Front on March 23rd.