

THE WESTERN BUTTON FACTORY MANORHAMILTON 1937-1972



Dominic Rooney

BUTTONS AND button-like objects, used as ornaments rather than fasteners, were found during excavations of ancient Bronze Age sites in Pakistan and India. However, buttons with button-holes for fastening or closing clothes only appeared in Europe for the first time during the 13th century. They soon became widespread with the rise of snug-fitting garments.

Early Button Manufacturing

By the 1700s manufacturers were covering metal buttons with a thin layer of gold leaf or silver. Later on they used other raw materials such as brass, ivory, shells, pearls, nuts, wood, bone, horn, hoof and even glass to make buttons.

This is the story of one of Leitrim's earliest industries. It had a German manager right throughout WWII and its ingenious employees devised and operated an alternative source of power to drive the factory machinery when diesel became no longer available in 1940.

Machines were introduced into the button trade during the 19th century and the reduced workforce from then on consisted mainly of women. Birmingham became the centre of the button-making industry in Britain. Yet, in 1908 several of its leading button enterprises were forced to amalgamate to form *Buttons Ltd, Birmingham* because of the increased competition from Continental button factories which had begun to utilize synthetic plastic raw

materials to supply the British market with cheap products. There was no button factory in Ireland at the time, with all buttons used here being imported.

Establishment of a Button Industry in Ireland

The Cumann na nGaedheal government of the 1920s continued to encourage the free trade policy between Ireland and Britain, which had existed before independence. This policy benefitted large



■ Some button factory workers in 1944 beside one of the large stacks of turf which stood in front of the factory. The turf was required for the steam engine which drove the factory machinery throughout the war.

(Photo courtesy of Pat Mitchell).
BACK ROW: Tessie McGowan, child visitor, child visitor, Ciss Somers, Celia McGuinness, Marty McLoughlin, Philomena Lee, Florrie Sharpe, child visitor, child visitor.
FRONT ROW: child visitor, child visitor, Bridget Leonard, Bridget McGovern, visitor, Agnes McSharry, Madge Farrell, Mary McGowan.



■ 1960 coloured postcard of the Button Factory & Our Lady's Hospital (published by G. Kiely, Ballyshannon)

farmers and big industrial companies such as Guinness, Jacobs, Fords and Carrolls, which wanted free access to the British market. Smaller businesses such as footwear and furniture makers, however, were unable to compete against the imports of huge UK operations.

The great depression resulted in a disastrous decline in the world economy during the early 1930s. The government had no solution to the collapse in trade, which followed in Ireland and the Fianna

Fail party swept to power in the general election of 1932, after having pledged to revive Irish industry and eliminate unemployment. It proposed to do this by substituting Irish production for imports. In the budgets of 1932 and 1933, Sean Lemass, minister for Industry and Commerce, imposed high tariffs on many industrial imports in order to make them more expensive. He also granted loans and tax breaks to Irish industrialists to help establish native industries. So when the new government imposed a 75% tariff on foreign button imports, two new Dublin companies – *The Irish Button Co Ltd* and *The*

National Button Corporation Ltd – established manufacturing plants in the capital.

The Western Button Company Ltd, Manorhamilton

In 1935 a group of Fianna Fail party members in Sligo-Leitrim led by Ben Maguire TD set about exploring the possibility of establishing a button factory somewhere in the constituency. The following year a group of businessmen in Manorhamilton agreed to form a company 'to manufacture buttons and combs of every description' in the town. The company was registered on 7th January 1937. The initial



subscriber shareholders were Hugh Dolan (hardware & provision merchant); George Wilson (draper), father of Gordon Wilson, senator and peace activist; Ben Maguire TD (originally from Glenfarne, but then living in Dromod); Patrick Dolan (hardware & provision merchant, Drumkeerin) and Stephen H. Derham, (solicitor, Sligo). Each of these men took 100 £1 fully paid-up shares in the new company and they were also appointed its first directors, with P L (Paddy) Coyle, businessman, who later became an independent county councillor and chairman of Leitrim County Council, as the company secretary. The public were then invited to subscribe for shares and within a very short time 20 more local individuals did so – mainly businessmen, but with a few professionals, farmers and civil servants among them – to bring the total cash invested in

the company by its 25 shareholders to £5,288. Much of the promotional work involved in establishing the company was carried out by P L Coyle, who had taken shares in the company and was soon co-opted onto the Board.

If the new company was going to be successful it needed to hire without delay an experienced works manager. This was easier said than done due to the lack of a button-making tradition in Ireland. As things turned out the directors were fortunate to hear about a German button expert named Ernst Krause who happened to be in Belfast at the time in connection with the establishment of a button factory in the Northern capital. When this project failed to materialise, Krause was persuaded, with various incentives, to take on the role of manager and technical advisor at the new factory in Manorhamilton. The

■ **Button Factory Dance in McGloin's Hall, Manorhamilton in November 1951**

(photo by Sunday Independent photographer).

BACK ROW: *McHugh, Packie Feeney, unknown, Mary Coyle, Packie McKenna, Coyle, unknown, unknown.*

THIRD ROW: *Mannix Slevin, Eileen Coleman, Mrs Murray, Patricia Doherty, Nan Thornton, Michael Lonegan.*

SECOND ROW: *Peter Gilhooly, Lena McGoldrick, unknown, Florence McManus, Jack Gilligan, Hugh Mitchell, John McGivern.*

FRONT ROW: *Sheila Clinton, Kathleen Clinton, unknown, unknown, unknown.*

41-year old German was highly qualified for his new job. Having grown up in Schmoellin, Thuringia, the centre of the button-making industry in Germany, he left his native land just before the outbreak of World War I and worked in button factories in Portugal, Spain and Hungary. He later acted as technical advisor in the setting up of new button factories in



■ **The Krause tombstone in Highland Cemetery, Casper, Wyoming, USA**
An English translation of the inscription reads: Even though you sleep in foreign soil, you are still at home in the Fatherland.



Norway and Sweden. He also spoke seven languages including English. Having obtained the sanction of the Department of Justice to employ Krause, the directors formally hired the German early in 1937.

The company's next concern was the building of a 4,000 sq. feet industrial premises on the outskirts of the town. A suitable site was procured on the New Line. The building contract was placed with Messrs Wm Haslette & Son, Manorhamilton and the steel structure with Messrs. Kennan & Sons, Dublin. The consulting engineer was Mr A J Bruty, Dublin. The factory was completed by the late spring of 1937. Machinery of the most up-to-date kind was then installed by a German firm, which had already equipped 60% of the button factories in Europe.

While the factory and the accompanying manager's residence

(which Ernst Krause had been allowed to design) were being built, Paddy Coyle concluded an agreement with Leitrim VEC whereby 30 prospective button factory employees would be trained over a period of three months by Mr. Krause in the Technical School in Manorhamilton in the making and dyeing of buttons. Once the new machines had been installed in the factory, instruction would continue in that building. When the first batch of trainees had been taken into employment a second group of 20 would begin instruction.

The new factory opened during the summer of 1937 and by the end of the year production had reached a satisfactory stage. A report in the Leitrim Observer stated that 'the factory was likely to be successful to an extent hardly hoped for by its promoters'. The company had already captured a good slice of the Irish market and also received national recognition when the Minister for Industry and Commerce appointed Paddy Coyle to be a member of the Button-making Trade Board. This had been set up in 1936 to regulate wages and working

conditions in the button industry.

Raw Materials, Factory Operations & Working Conditions

In 1937 the principal raw material used in the button factory was Corozo or Brazilian nuts. The Corozo Palm tree is found in the tropical forests of South America. The core of the nut is white, light, easily shaped and can be dyed in a variety of shades. When World War II broke out, however, it was no longer possible to import Corozo nuts. These were then replaced as a raw material by a synthetic resin called casein. This was a by-product of skim milk, which could be treated and transformed into sheets of casein plastic. The sheets could then be cut, drilled and dyed without difficulty. The product was produced in Ireland at the time by North Cork Co-op Creameries in Kanturk, Co. Cork, which continued to supply the Western Button Factory throughout the war years.

The factory was driven by a powerful diesel engine, which turned an overhead shaft. From the shaft a web of belts powered numerous manually operated machines, which were positioned on several long benches. These machines cut, shaped, holed and polished buttons of all sizes. Buttons were then dyed a variety of colours in large drums. They were later sewn on to cards or packed in boxes ready for dispatch.

The new factory was clean and spacious. Large wall windows and translucent sheets of perspex in the roof let in plenty of natural light. The machinery was modern and relatively easy to manipulate. Nevertheless discipline was strict. The factory began production at



■ **Button Factory Christmas party, c.1960**

BACK ROW: (on the right): Patricia Mitchell, Bernadette McGowan, Margaret Clancy & Pat Mitchell.

FRONT ROW: Milo Travers, Eileen McGovern, P L Coyle, Florrie Sharpe, Paudge McTernan.

8.45 am and the manager was, in the words of one employee, ‘a stickler for time-keeping’. He would stand at the back door through which the workers entered and ring a bell at 8.45 sharp. Only those who were there on time were admitted. Late-comers were discouraged by being paid only a half-day’s wages.

Crises averted

Following the outbreak of the war in September 1939 it became difficult to import diesel oil into the country and stocks began to dry up. Only industries that were considered vital to the survival of the state were allowed to purchase the product. So if the button factory, which didn’t fall into this category, were to continue in production an alternative source of power would have to be found. The local hydro-electric station on the Carrick Road, which had

provided lighting for the town since 1904, was not powerful enough to drive the factory machinery. Somebody suggested that a steam engine in the form of a heavy threshing machine might be suitable. One of these was procured in Portlaoise and installed outside the factory at the hospital end. It then drove a belt, which entered the factory through a front window and was attached to the overhead shaft. The threshing machine was designed to use only

good quality coal. British coal was, however, rationed during the war and Arigna coal proved to be of inferior quality and only clogged up the firebox. So the only hope was well-dried black turf sourced within a reasonable radius of the town. Suitable bogs were identified at Fallacarra, Largy and Faughery. Local men were hired to cut the 50-60 lorry loads of turf a year, which were required to keep the threshing machine in operation. When the turf was dry it was lorry-loaded to the factory and built into five large stacks in front of the building. The stacks were then thatched and roped.

Another crisis threatened to disrupt factory production when at 10.00 p.m. on the night of 17th October 1942 the threshing machine caught fire. Thankfully the alarm was raised by a passerby and the fire was extinguished before any great damage was done.



A sample of some buttons which were made in the factory

With a regular power supply now assured the button factory went from strength to strength as the war progressed. The production line was expanded to include combs, buckles, bangles, shoe horns and emblems for the uniforms of the Local Defence Force throughout the country. At one stage there were 65 people—50 ladies and 15 men—employed in the factory, albeit in very cramped conditions.

The ESB came to Manorhamilton during the Spring of 1946 and undertook the re-electrification of the town. It brought a much stronger power supply than the local electric light company had been able to provide. The ESB became the new supplier of power to the button factory. The threshing machine was no longer needed and was driven back to Portlaoise – at a speed of 10 mph!

Social Club

During the late 1940s a social club was formed in the factory by two of its key employees – Eileen McGovern who worked in the office and Pat Mitchell who would later become the factory foreman. Their first project was to organise a dance in November 1949 in the spacious McGloin's Hall, which was situated at the rear of the present Granary Bar & Restaurant in Main Street. They booked one of the best bands in the country at the time – Stephen Garvey from Tuam in Co Galway – ran buses from Sligo, Bundoran, Blacklion and Drumshanbo and charged 10/= entry fee. The dance hall was packed for the occasion and the function was said to be the

highlight of the social calendar in the area. Successful dances were again held at the same venue in 1950 and 1951. However, the hall was condemned as a fire hazard in 1952 and the owner was no longer able to get a licence to hold dances there.

To replace the annual dance the social committee in the button factory organised a full day's outing for the staff and their friends every year from 1952 to 1968. These excursions to many destinations including Belfast, Dublin, Galway and Limerick were always eagerly looked forward to and greatly enjoyed.

Change in Management

Ernst Krause and his wife Eugenie applied for Irish citizenship during 1946 and this was granted on 30th December of that year. Shortly afterwards the couple were awarded guardianship of an eight year old German refugee girl, Karin Koslowski from Wuppertal near Cologne. This was part of a scheme called Operation Shamrock, which had been organised by the Irish Red Cross to bring 1,000 traumatised German children to be fostered in Ireland to help them recover from the nightmare of post-war Germany. Incidentally, as part of the same scheme, a young German boy – Werner Waul from Duisburg near Dusseldorf – was fostered by Manorhamilton station master, Jack Magee and his wife who owned the Manor Hotel in the town. By September 1949 most of the Shamrock children, including the two in Manorhamilton, had been returned to their families or relatives in Germany.

In 1953, after 17 years managing the button factory in Manorhamilton, Ernst Krause and his wife decided to leave Ireland and emigrate to the US. Their departure may have been linked to Eugenie's deteriorating health. The couple settled in Casper, Wyoming where Mrs. Krause passed away on 29th August 1955. Ernst then secured a job in a ranch outfitters store, which was owned by the son of a German man who hailed from Thuringia where Ernst himself had been born. Krause died in February 1964 and was buried beside his wife in Highland Cemetery Casper. He was aged 69.

Buttons Ltd., Birmingham had made a significant investment in the Manorhamilton company towards the end of Krause's tenure as manager. Their investment agreement had included (in addition to the issue of shares in the Irish company) the appointment of two representatives of the UK company onto the Board of Western Button Company Ltd, and when Krause resigned in 1953 it was the Birmingham company, which provided a replacement manager – Percy A Wade – for the Manorhamilton factory. The 42-year old Birmingham native and his wife Elizabeth took up residence in the manager's house adjoining the factory premises. Wade settled quickly into his new position. Under his guidance the range of products manufactured in the factory was increased to include alloy folding chairs, beds, and garden furniture. A large extension was added to the factory premises in 1957.

Percy Wade was also a talented

sportsman. A noted angler, he was a member of the Irish team, which competed at the Trout Fly Angling International at Lough Leven in Scotland in May 1955. He was also a gifted table tennis player on a Manorhamilton team, which twice defeated Sligo town in 1959. Two years earlier he had been appointed non-playing captain of the Connacht team for the interprovincial series. During the late 1950s he also filled the position of chairman of the Sligo and District table tennis league.

Final Years

Percy Wade fell ill and returned to England in 1966. Although it was hoped that *Buttons Ltd, Birmingham* would send over a replacement manager, this did not happen. Instead the Birmingham firm ceased its direct involvement with Manorhamilton and resigned its two directorships. The Western Button Company, however, resolved to keep the factory in production and succeeded in arranging for the foreman, Pat Mitchell, to receive some training at the Birmingham plant.

For the next six years the factory was jointly managed by Pat Mitchell and Eileen McGovern. Pat supervised the production line as well as acting as sales rep for the company during slack periods. Eileen, for her part, took charge of the administration end of things.

The day of reckoning came eventually on 1st September 1972 when the button factory closed with the loss of 18 jobs. The company blamed the scaling down of national protective tariffs and the intense competition from European manufacturers, as well as

imports from low-cost countries as reasons for the voluntary winding-up of its operations. Other factors, such as the decline in demand for buttons following the invention of the nylon zip, as well as the failure of the factory to introduce injection moulding machines, also played a part in its demise.

Former Employees

Perhaps as many as 100 employees worked in the factory over the course of its 36 year history. A significant number of these have passed on to their eternal reward, but some others are still hale and hearty. The names of the following workers come readily to mind: Anthony Farrell (assistant manager), Pat Mitchell (foreman), Milo Travers (packing area & dyeing room), Tom Coyle (office & sales), Eileen McGovern (office), Nan Gilgunn nee Munday (carding area), Peter & Barney Gilmurray (mechanics), Patti Coyle nee O'Hara, Kathleen O'Hara, Bernadette Banks nee McGowan, Rose Connolly nee McDermott, Josie Brennan nee O'Hagan, Margaret Brennan nee Clancy, Celia McDonald nee Monaghan, Mary Fox nee Lee, Philomena Dolan nee Lee, Teresa Gallagher nee Lee, Margaret McMorrow nee McSharry, Tessie & Bridie McGowan, Ciss, Mary & Kate Somers, Mary McGowan, Florrie Sharpe, Bridget Leonard, Bridget McGovern, Agnes McSharry, Myra McSharry, Madge Farrell, Austin McDonald, Campbell Moore, Paudge McTiernan, Nan McTiernan, Paudge McSharry, Marty McLoughlin, Bernie McMorrow, Breege Darcy, Kathleen

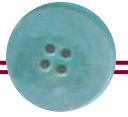
Rooney nee Reynolds, Bernie Stirrat nee Reynolds, Annie Gilmartin nee Gilmartin, Celia Fox nee McGuinness, Kathleen Rooney nee Farrell, Ann McGuihan, Lissie McPartland, Mary Kate Brady nee Rooney, Nora McGuinness nee McSharry, Bridie Meehan nee McSharry, Kathleen McGoldrick nee McGoldrick, Maura, Rita & Kathleen Cullen, Patricia Rooney, Josie & Lena Rooney, Teresa & Margaret Connolly and Bernadette Coleman.

Aftermath

The button factory remained closed while the Western Button Company was being wound up. It was a members' voluntary winding-up, carried out under the control of the directors and shareholders, and not by a Bank or other creditors. A brother of Paddy Coyle—Tom Coyle—a former employee of the button factory, had left Manorhamilton many years earlier to establish his own company called Melvin Plastics Ltd in Dublin, but later relocated this enterprise to a site beside the button factory in his home town. He now bought the vacant button factory premises towards the end of the winding up process in 1972 and transferred his machinery and business into the building the following year.

Melvin Plastics Ltd manufactured plastic injection moulded and vacuum formed products. It specialised in a range of plastic containers for the food industry such as tubs for margarine, butter, ice-cream, yogurts, etc and disposable food containers for in-flight catering. Production





increased during the 1980s and a second factory extension was erected in 1984. The company was nominated IDA/Wang company of the month for May 1989 in recognition of its successful record of profitability and for its contribution to the local economy by its steady growth in employment, which had then risen to 26 employees.

Tom Coyle died in 1993 and his son Patrick then took over the business. The manufacturing process is now totally automated and has ten large injection moulding machines. It still produces plastic containers for food products, mainly for export to the UK, and currently employs 15 workers.



Postscript

The establishment of a button factory in Manorhamilton during the mid-1930s was no mean achievement. The consortium of local businessmen (and one business woman – Rosaleen Healy) who invested a substantial amount of money in the venture, succeeded in securing the factory for Manorhamilton rather than Sligo town or Tubbercurry, which were also competing for the plant. Theirs was an example of the civic leadership tradition in the town, which in later decades showed itself again in the establishment of other notable projects such as *Manor Hosiery* and St. Joseph's Secondary School.

The Western Button Factory was one of the first medium-sized

industries in Co. Leitrim. It is heartening to know that the premises is still successfully operating as a modern plastics factory some 80 years later, and is in fact still owned and managed by a nephew of the man – Paddy Coyle – who played a crucial role in bringing the consortium of original shareholders of the button factory together back in 1936.

Finally, I would like to thank the following people who provided information for this article: the late Pat Mitchell, Patti & Patrick Coyle, Nan Gilgunn, Philomena Dolan, Kevin Rooney, Jenny Dunne (National Archives) and Clodagh Doyle (National Museum of Ireland, Turlough, Castlebar, Co Mayo).

CORNASTAUK BRIDGE

Eddie McGurrin

*Countless times I have travelled upon it,
While underneath, ever flows the Bonet.
Cornastauk Bridge, too often you have been taken for granted-passed over,
By vehicle, cyclist, worker, walker or rover.
People in a hurry, as if of time there was a dearth,
While you quietly hold firm-down to earth.
Dealing with three way traffic, to and fro, rarely still,
With the Bonet going one way, meandering to Lough Gill.
Linking the town and the world, Dia agaibh agus slán,
To the emigrant, immigrant, tourist, traveller, worker, local and beyond..
You have been a silent witness no doubt to many moving events, and I wonder,
How much water since then has flowed under?
You and your older friend Benbo,
Watch over time and the river's onward flow.
Through the height of summer may be heard, the local cattle low,
Who in the depth of winter munch merrily on the bounty of the meadow
Betimes nearby along the river's banks and trees,
Anglers patiently await results by degrees.
I recall fondly, now that I am older,
Once, on my outward journey, resting on your sound shoulder.
Your graceful structure and ample curves are pleasing to behold,
Yes they created some good things in days of old.
I hope rolling progress does not impair your integrity,
So you will be preserved for posterity.
Thus concludes this tribute to, and reflection,
On a sound Manorhamilton connection.*

CORSETS

Mary Guckian

*Young girls were expected
to wear tight corsets
in the nineteen fifties.
Iron hooks fastened
the garments tightly
and steel stays prodded
our skins when material
burst open as cold metal
moved up and out of the
narrow folds, suddenly
appearing at our necklines.*

*Hanging suspenders held
our stockings and buttons
eventually shot off with
the pull of pedaling
on the gravelly road.
Impossible to find them,
a tiny round stone
replaced the button
until we arrived at school
with red marks on our skin.*