**GEORGE SALTER**

**West Bromwich Innovators**  by Mike Fenton

Over the centuries the Black Country has given birth to many unique characters and companies, all of whom have contributed to the daily life of its inhabitants. Some appear and fade into near oblivion; others make their mark, their memory soon forgotten in the whirl of history that surrounds them. There are however those whose innovation, steadfastness and originality leave an imprint on the fabric of society, reverberating through the decades, its legacy seemingly in a state of perpetuity. ***George Salter & Co*** is one of these, their story firmly embedded in the local community, the 2 historically and irrefutably linked.

For generations the Black Country was home to inventors, scientists and a plethora of others whose determination and foresightedness gave the region a name synonymous with radicalism, independence and perhaps even a sheer bloody-mindedness. By 1760, the Salters were living in Bilston; one of them George was known at this time to be an Inn keeper whilst another, William, is mentioned in his Will as a manufacturer of ‘pocket steelyards’, an apparatus akin to small weighing devices; another Richard was believed to be the first to manufacturer springs for which the company is globally famed and for which West Bromwich and the name Salter is forever and inextricably associated.

Richard eventually helped the performance of these steelyards with the simple addition of a spring, an innovation to become the forerunner of the many weighing mechanisms we have today. Around 1780 Richard moved to West Bromwich where not only did the manufacture of springs continue, but along with his nephews John and George, bayonet production also progressed, principally because bayonet steel was the most suitable material for making light springs. Richard died in 1791, his pioneering legacy to continue, as will be witnessed in the unfolding story.

1825 saw the first use of the name ‘***George Salter & Company***’ and by 1849 ‘Old’ George Salter had died, another family member being passed the mantle of responsibility – this was the latter George’s nephew John who had married into the Bache family of Hagley, a significant name in the future history of the company. John died in 1852, his young sons George and Thomas taking on an active role in the company, however they were disadvantaged by their extreme youth, a person of more commercial experience being required – John Silvester was this man. The Silvesters were a West Bromwich concern involved in the manufacture of ***sad irons*** and had already at this time been amalgamated with Salters. These sad or flat irons were manufactured with the Salter’s world famous logo, the ***Staffordshire Knot*** above which was stamped ***‘Silvesters Patent’***.

In 1862 a later Thomas [Salter](file:///%5C%5C%5C%5C%5Csalter) was at the helm, a man perceived more of a local philanthropist than of the typical 19th century employer of stern repute. He promoted recreational facilities for his employees and actively organised local flower shows. His most important social advancement was his introduction of the Sick and Burial club, an enormous boon to his workers at a time when insurance to cover absence from work simply did not exist; such grim and truly Dickensian conditions would surely have been alleviated by this revolutionary introduction. Thomas Salter and his sons were avid devotees of cricket, a sporting link travelling down the ages bridging the 19th century with a name synonymous today with sporting prowess – ***West Bromwich Albion.*** Seven employees of the team worked at Salters which in 1888 won the FA Cup. With the cricket season over members of the team looked for alternative recreation; ostensibly it was this that led them to form a football team and thus the embryo of today’s Premiership Club began. Thomas steered the company through fierce competition, progressing from the simple products of its very early days to the myriad of spring balances and other devices such asroasting jacks, steam pressure gauges, musket bayonets and domestic weighing machines. In 1887 Thomas passed away, the share of the firm equally split between his sons George and Thomas; it was George who now bore the onus of cementing the future success of the company. In 1895 George announced the development of an item that was to become ubiquitous throughout the land – the **British Empire Typewriter** was born. George and his brother paid homage to their father by continuing the social advances previously alluded to, playing active roles in the community; George became an Alderman for West Bromwich in 1888 and town’s mayor on several occasions.

The Bache side of the family steadily grew, 1893 witnessing the arrival of 16-year old **Ernest William** **Bache,** a move that proved to be momentous as he later became Works Manager and eventually Managing Director. Ernest worked at Salters during one of the world’s most pivotal points in history. Events gathered pace on the European continent, the odious smell of war on the near horizon. War compelled Salters to switch to the manufacture of anything it could to assist the war effort e.g. springs for guns and for rifles. These years saw many changes in the factory’s history, one of which was the death of the former Director George, dying in 1917; he was the last of the Salter dynasty, the Baches now took centre stage.

The post-war years saw the company winning back lost markets and orders lost during the 1914-18 conflict, their versatility and diverse range of products helping them pull through. The early 1930s witnessed the terrible hardships of the Great Depression, Salters facing yet more challenges to survive; but survive it did and it is testament to their resolve that by 1936 they were able to build a new 5-storeyfactory – at the time the tallest building in West Bromwich - unromantically titled *‘North Building A’;* by summer, 2013 this particular edifice had fallen victim to demolition, another housing development encroaching upon the heritage of the town, its social history swallowed up in a 21st century rush of residential urbanisation.

As 1939 loomed the spectre of war once more cast its ominous shadow. World War Two saw the return of Salter’s involvement in the production of munitions, and produce they did, manufacturing more than 750 million springs; it also provided parts for some of the world’s most iconic companies such as [De Havilland and its Mosquito](http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/De_Havilland_Aircraft%3A_DH_98_Mosquito%3A_Suppliers) Aircraft.

In 1943 Ernest ‘Bill’ Bache died***,*** leaving behind a business which despite years of austerity held firm its position in the market, so much so that by the close of the 1940s it boasted a workforce in excess of 2,500. A decade on the growing strength of the company was observed when in 1954 it exhibited a spring balance that could weigh anything up to 200 tons, at the time the world’s largest.

By 1961 Salters owned 27 retail shops in West Bromwich, their products growing ever diverse. Springs for instance were widely used in the motor, aviation and railway industries. At home they found their way into prams, beds and bicycles. Guns, coffee roasters, gramophones, clocks, rat traps and numerous other everyday items possessed the Salter fingerprint. Their durability cannot be questioned, many still in existence today.

During my research I stumbled upon a personal family connection to the afore-mentioned Ernest ‘Bill’ Bache, one I had never expected to find in a proverbial month of Sundays.

Before my father died in 2010, he recalled how his Grandfather, John Fenton, a Salters worker was locally known as ‘Black Jack’***.*** At the time I attached little significance to this, however when I found myself overwhelmed by information I had unearthed, my father had already succumbed to dementia, memories becoming increasingly unreliable. Details then surfaced, absolutely confirming the existence of ‘Black Jack’. It transpired that anyone who met him never forgot the encounter. Despite his generally amiable countenance he was known to be inherently obstinate, a company outing to Blackpool exposing these traits in great measure. On their return from their seaside escapades, the Salter workers were journeying back to their train for the trip back home; however, ‘Black Jack’ had different ideas. He placed himself in the centre of a narrow pathway, offering to fight anyone crossing his path! When time was growing ever short, Ernest ‘Bill’ Bache made his timely appearance. On doing so he calmly said, “You wouldn’t fight me, would you?” Jack replied, “That’s right, me old friend Bill!” Peace had been brokered and the train and passengers commenced their journey.

What makes the social aspect of the story ever personal is that recently I was fortunate enough to purchase 2 Salter ironmongery catalogues; one dating from 1931 and the other from 1924. The 1924 catalogue however has special significance, as on the front cover are the initials E.W.B.; at the time I heeded little attention to this. However on the inside front cover, in glorious sepia coloured ink was the signature of one E. W. Bache. How could I check its authenticity? I recalled that the 1911 Census is personally signed by the head of the household. At great speed I opened up the relevant census document and there to my joy and relief was the unmistakable signature of ‘Bill’ Bache. I now had in my possession the personal catalogue of one of Salter’s most significant characters, a man who appears to have had several encounters with my Great Grandfather. Further investigation told me E. W. Bache’s address was Nicholls Street, West Bromwich, which bordered the road where ‘Black Jack’ resided. It seemed my Great Grandfather must have crossed paths (and quite literally so!) with his ‘gaffer’ on several occasions. Conjecture allows me to speculate about the conversations the Salter’s Chairman and my family ancestors may have had as they perhaps walked together early in the morning en route to their respective work and departments at the factory. Other stories portrayed Black Jack’s short temper but as my Great Grandfather isn’t here anymore to defend himself, I’ll let history make its own judgement.

Despite Black Jack’s tomfoolery Salters evidently survived and by 1961 employed in excess of 1600 workers; its future path was however already taking new directions. By 1973 it was bought by the American company [Staveley Industries](http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Staveley_Industries), various divisions split into separate subsidiaries. In 1998 the weighing business was bought out becoming the Weigh-Tronix Corporation. The 21st century saw a management buyout of Salter Housewares and by 2004 the company was subjected to another sale, this time to the U.S. based HoMedics Company.

Operating still today but as a more fractured concern, the legacy of George Salters remains intact albeit far from home from its roots in West Bromwich. From the primitive and early devices of over 200 years ago, to those mechanisms of today able to detect even the stroke of a pen on paper, those Black Country men and women can be duly saluted for their centuries of commitment – innovators in every sense of the word.