

STRACHAN & Co.

Lodgemore and Fromehall Mills

- ★ Only the Best
- ★ When King Charles ordered Canvas
- ★ Four Disastrous Fires

SUPERB quality is the key to the success of Messrs. Strachan and Co., owners of two of the oldest cloth mills in the Stroud Valley. Seventy per cent of their output is exported, and a fifth goes to Canada where "Strachan Coats" have a national reputation. Other markets include the Middle and Far East, while in Europe Germany is the biggest customer. A substantial trade with Russia is being gradually developed.

At home Strachan's cloth is used for naval officers' uniforms, and, of course, Strachan's produce the scarlet worn at the "Trooping of the Colour" ceremony by the Queen and the 3,000 guardsmen. Last year Strachan's arranged for six of their oldest employees, all with over 40 years' service, to go up to London to see the famous ceremony.

SKILL OF GENERATIONS

Only the best wool is good enough for Strachans, who buy in Australia and South Africa. But it is by the finishing processes at Lodgemore and Frome Hall Mills where craftsmen use the skill of generations that the famous Strachan cloth is given its superior quality. Ordinary cloth is only examined once so that knots and faults can be removed, but Strachan's cloth is examined twice. The cloth is milled, a process over 500 years old, and then scoured. Finally, it is dressed and for this modern science had been able to find nothing better than the traditional teazle, of which Strachan's obtain their supplies from Somerset and parts of France. But in finishing there is no set formula, every piece of cloth must be treated separately, and it is in finishing that the skill of generations is so important.

Production has increased during the past two years by 18 per cent, and further increases are expected with gradual modernisation of the plant. Strachans have their own superannuation scheme and an apprenticeship scheme has just been started with all young people receiving training at the textile department of Stroud Technical College.

Even today there is important difference between the two mills, Lodgemore and Frome Hall. Frome Hall is a "white" mill, that is the wool is woven in its natural colour and dyed afterwards; this is essential for such cloth as guards' scarlet and billiards cloth where the cloth must be 100 per cent pure in colour and free from any extraneous coloured fibres. At Lodgemore the wool is dyed before it is woven.

PROBLEMS

One of Strachan's biggest problems is that they are remote from the public, and they have to keep their pro-

duced the dyers to produce brighter colours. Now the chief advantage of the Frome is that it provides enough water for the important finishing processes and these consume huge quantities daily. For dyeing and scouring, however, much of the water has to be "softened."

But it is the craftsmen that are Strachan's biggest asset. Mr. Charles Smith, of Randwick, has been with the company 51 years, there are 20 employees with over 40 years' service, and 40 with over 30 years.

The Personnel Manager, Mrs. Weaver, has helped to create a fine atmosphere in the mills and the team spirit that means so much in industry as in any field of sport, is largely due to the help that is readily available. Young people are interviewed sympathetically and advised on their future either as operatives or apprentices. Trade union relations represented by Mr. J. Miles are excellent and all are fervent supporters of joint consultation from which many constructive suggestions are forthcoming.

The fascinating story of Strachan was told to a "Stroud News" representative in an interview with the Managing Director, Mr. D. Carter, and another director, Mr. T. L. Jones, who is also the company secretary.

TWO MILLS

The business of Strachan and Co. is today carried on in two mills, Lodgemore and Fromehall. Lodgemore was originally known as Higher Lademoor (Lademoor being the ancient name of the valley of the Frome at this point); and Fromehall was known as Nether Lademoor Mill.

In the Middle Ages both mills belonged to the manor of Minchinhampton, part of the English property of the Abbey of Caen. The land on which Lodgemore and Fromehall stand belonged to some of the most important tenants on the manor, the Spillmans. The history of this family can be traced from 1218, when John Spileman I had a grant of land from the Abbess, in which he is described as "our beloved sergeant," that is to say, he held his lands by serjeantry. It was his duty to guard the Abbess of Caen's seneschal (steward) on the journey from Minchinhampton to Southampton when he returned with the profits of the manor to the Abbey in Normandy.

Through the fortunate survival of the 13th century custumal (records) of the manor we get an accurate picture of the economic life of the manor. It is clear that by the 13th century cloth-making was being carried on extensively. In the pages of the Court Rolls we meet Robert le Wyffer (the

quality of the man II went there in 1287 for three years.

CONFLICT

By the 16th century fulling mills and grist mills had been built every few hundred years or so along the course of the stream, and conflict between mill owners was by no means uncommon. The mills were still, and remained until the early years of the 19th century, finishing mills only. The wool would be prepared, sorted, scoured, rinsed and made ready for spinning in the clothier's own homes before being handed out to the women and children to be carded and spun, and then given to the men to be woven. It was then returned to the mill for the finishing processes: first fulled by being placed in pits under great wooden hammers with heavy heads which rose and fell, thickening the ground of the cloth and making it more firm and compact. The cloth was then cleaned with fuller's earth, and dressed by gig. The long nap raised by the teazles had to be shorn off with hand shears, one of the most skilled operations of the trade, for these shears might be anything up to 30 pounds in weight. Finally the cloth would be dyed and put on to tenter racks in the fields to dry.

Trouble and disturbances in the cloth industry marked the 17th century when the years before the outbreak of the civil war brought depression to the trade and cloth remained unsold with workers unemployed. Then came the Civil War and the county was inevitably the scene of great military activity for Gloucester and Bristol were held for Parliament until 1642, while Charles garrisoned Beverston Castle so that he might overawe the wealthy clothiers of Stroudwater, Dursley and Wotton. Some obtained letters of protection, but these were little use against the marauding bands of soldiers by whom the Stroudwater clothiers were "utterly undone." More serious were the Royal commands given to Prince Rupert to buy up the great quantities of coarse canvas and cloth to clothe his troops. The original letter giving the order is preserved in the Board Room of Messrs. Strachan. Sent by King Charles I to his nephew Prince Rupert, the letter begins: "Most trusty and entirely beloved Nephew Wee greet you well Whereas we are credibly informed that at Cirencester, Stroud, Minchinhampton, Tetbury, Dursley, Wootton, Underedge and Chipping Sodbury great quantities of cloth canvass and Locherame are to be had for supplying ye great necessities Our Soldiers have of Suits."

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PROBLEMS

One of Strachan's biggest problems is that they are remote from the public, and they have to keep their promotion going constantly, particularly in foreign markets. A colour film has recently been made of Strachan's manufacturing processes for showing abroad. Representatives of the firm make regular trips to many parts of the world; last year Mr. W. R. Acklam, Production Director, "investigated" South Africa, and this year Rhodesia is being examined. In these foreign markets competition from other countries is growing, particularly Japan and Italy, but neither country is in the same quality market as Strachan's. Continual adjustments to market changes have to be made. In Canada, for example, they prefer brighter colours and the increase in car heaters and central heating of homes and factories has led to much lighter overcoats. But it is in the making of materials for coats and costumes that the market has to be constantly watched. Last year the popular shades were earthy browns and greens, and this year . . . nobody knows—yet. Even in men's clothing there are subtle but constant changes.

When foreign buyers visit this country Strachan's take full advantage of the beautiful country round Stroud for entertaining their guests, and it is an asset of great value.

In earlier days the limestone water of the River Frome en-

neither Lodgemore Mill.

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It was in this setting that the Spillman family prospered and by the 15th century there is the first direct evidence that they owned a fulling mill at Lodgemore. By 1287 they were wealthy enough to educate their son in Paris—John Spill-

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"LIKE A METEOR"

The growth of Lodgemore can be traced in detail from the middle of the 18th century and it was, always a rather larger concern than Fromehall, consisting as it did of two mills. During the 18th century Lodgemore had a succession of owners, most of whom seemed to get into financial difficulties very quickly. Among the run of mill owners, William Whitehead, who bought the mill on a £10,000 mortgage in 1825, stands out as an exotic and unusual figure. He came to Minchinhampton in 1824 and as local historian Playne puts it, he "flashed like a meteor across the quiet life of the town, and disappeared, and was heard of no more." His profession, at any rate, as described in the bankruptcy proceedings which ended this particular chapter of his career, was that of "Newspaper Vendor, Printer, dealer and Chapman in buying paper, ink and other materials for printing a certain newspaper called 'The Cheltenham Journal and Gloucester Fashionable Weekly Gazette'." He bought property recklessly, and would then mortgage it for as much as he could raise. Of a wild and extravagant nature, he gambled, raced, spent money at such a rate that he thought nothing of getting rid of £100,000 in a little more than 13 months. He leased Lodgemore to Nathaniel Samuel

Marling for £1,800 a year.

By 1830 Nathaniel Marling was in possession of both Lodgemore and Fromehall Mills, and it is no doubt partly due to him that both mills, after their somewhat chequered fortunes, should have survived the years that brought real challenge to the industry. The opening of the Stroudwater Canal in 1779, and the Thames and Severn in 1783, brought coal from the Forest of Dean and the Midland Coalfields within easy reach of the Stroud clothiers, making steam power available for those with sufficient capital to instal steam engines and power looms. Lodgemore mills suffered three serious fires early in the 19th century and the new mill was built in 1814.

More changes of ownership took place in the 19th century but in 1865 Josiah Greathhead Strachan bought the two mills for £30,000. The fourth and most disastrous fire of the century occurred at Lodgemore in 1871, when all the mill buildings were completely destroyed in two hours, and the damage was estimated at not less than £50,000. The re-buildings of the mill was begun in 1873, and when finished the red and blue brick building stood 50 feet high, with its tall chimney stack rising 150 feet

above the ground on which it stood.

A great tradition underlies the firm of Strachan and Company today. The history of the two mills, Lodgemore and Fromehall, is a story of skill and fine workmanship built up over the centuries, and flourishing in a valley where the rich natural resources have been exploited to the full. There is a strong tradition of royal service. When the late Queen Mary visited the mills in November, 1941, she saw the scarlet refine which is made for the Royal Household liveries at Windsor Castle, Buckingham Palace, and Sandringham. The naval uniform worn by His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh at his wedding was manufactured at Lodgemore, and he thus takes his place in the line of noble figures from the Abbess of Caen to King Charles, who have played their part in the history of Strachan and Company.

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