

Teesdale u3a

Chris Lloyd, the February u3a speaker, asked the audience if they had ever been employed by Paton and Baldwins in Darlington. Although the factory ceased production in 1980, several members of the audience had fond memories of their time there. One member could even remember having a job application turned down.

Paton and Baldwins was established as two companies in the 1770s by John Paton and James Baldwin. The companies merged in 1920 and by the mid 1930s had several factories in Northern England, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In 1951, the manufacturing business moved to a 140 acre site on the outskirts of Darlington, the Lingfield site, and became the biggest wool factory in the world. In its prime, the factory employed 4,500 personnel and recruited 30% of local school leavers. 50 buses were hired daily to transport employees from across County Durham and Darlington's first computer was in the factory. There were extensive sports and recreation facilities for the staff and a dining room which could accommodate 1400 people. 60% of the wool manufactured on the site was exported to countries all over the world.

Many in the audience remembered the Paton knitting patterns, including some for swimwear, the products leaving little to the imagination when wet. Roger Moore was one of Payton's fashion models and he apparently earned the nickname, 'The Big Knit'.

In the 1960s and 1970s the demand for wool from the factory diminished. Cheap wool was being imported from overseas and artificial fibres eg nylon and terylene were becoming available. Also, fashions were changing rapidly and by 1966, the price of wool had dropped by 40%. Production on the site ceased in 1980.

Chris displayed a photo of the trademark Bakelite beehive (busy bees) which knitters used to stop their wool from getting tangled. Some of these are still to be seen in charity and antique shops.

Chris included the story of the brave RAF pilot, William McMullen who, in 1945, deliberately navigated his damaged bomber, away from the town, the crew having bailed out, and crashed it on the then vacant Lingfield site, killing himself but saving many lives in the process. McMullen Road is named after him.

This was a fascinating talk, full of local interest and delivered by Chris in his usual enthusiastic and tongue in cheek style.

The next meeting is on Thursday 28th March, when Neil Hanson will be speaking on his experiences running the Tan Hill Inn, Britain's highest Inn.

Ian Reid  
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