

GENTLE GIANT

GENTLE GIANT

AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF
JOHN THOMPSON & SONS LTD

Michael Faulkner



FEEDING INNOVATION

BLACKSTAFF PRESS

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Thompsons CEO Declan Billington

Foreword

I hope, like me, that you enjoy this book, with its fascinating insights into a shared history of industry and agriculture.

Established at the end of the nineteenth century, John Thompson & Sons came into being at a time when Northern Ireland was one of the industrial and economic powerhouses of Europe. Engineering innovations in textiles, shipbuilding and agriculture, driven by people with a passion for achievement, placed Northern Ireland at the forefront of European industrialisation. From the beginning, Thompsons was driven by that same desire for innovation and achievement and for over a century the company has developed pioneering changes in feed milling and animal nutrition, helping farmers to thrive and grow, often in challenging circumstances.

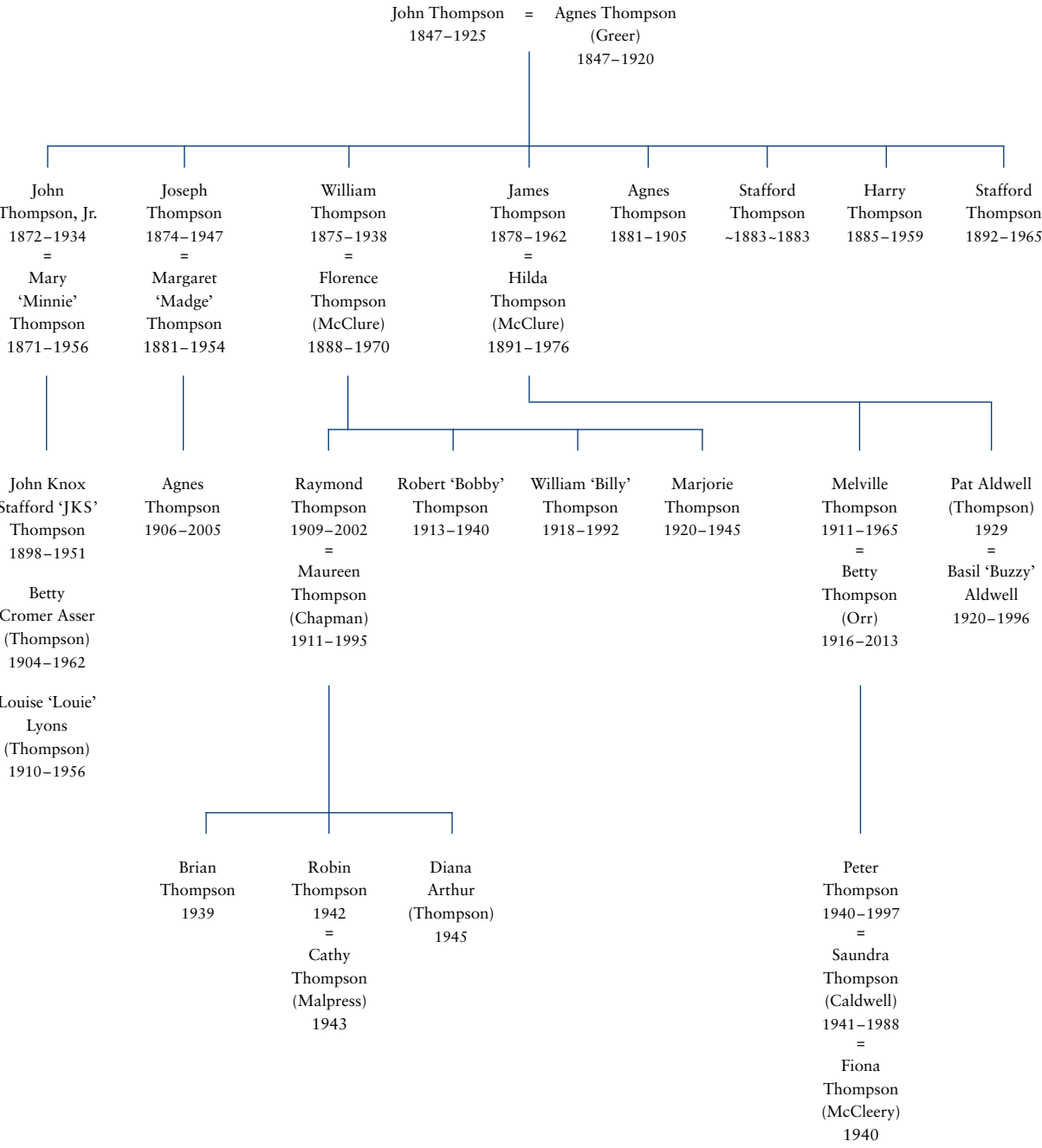
This book started out as an attempt to marry the rich photographic record held in long-forgotten filing cabinets, with the memories of the Thompson family and of Thompsons' employees – past and present – many of whom had worked all their lives for the company. Their fascinating stories – of family and colleagues, of friendships with customers (often spanning generations), and of the dogged determination, both of an industry and a company, to succeed despite the challenges thrown at them – filled me with admiration and a keen desire to preserve those memories and stories for posterity. It was with this in mind that I commissioned this book.

My thanks to all who helped in the writing of *Gentle Giant*, in particular to David Best and Andy McClurg, for pointing the author Michael Faulkner in the right direction. Most of all my thanks to Michael for opening a rich treasure chest of memories and making the record of our history such a riveting read.

Declan Billington

Family tree

Descendants of John Thompson



Timeline

1847	Birth of the founder, John Thompson	1964	W&R Barnett, R&H Hall and Isaac Andrews purchase the family's shareholding to become joint owners, in equal shares, of John Thompson & Sons Ltd.
1870/71	North End Corn Mill is established on Beresford Street, Belfast, along with the slogan 'Pioneers of Better Feeding Stuffs'.	1965	Death of Melville Thompson, the last family member to sit as chairman
1896	Founding of W&R Barnett, grain importers	1960s	Another revolutionary change – bags to bulk. By 1966 a quarter of all production (1,000 tons from a weekly output of 4,000) is in bulk.
1890s	John Thompson's sons Joseph (Joe) and William join the mill.	1966	Denationalisation of road transport in Northern Ireland means a proliferation of independent hauliers – a major change in terms of efficiency for the mill, which hitherto had operated its own fleet.
1901/2	Thompson's youngest son James (MD 1925–1962) joins the business.	1974	During the Ulster Workers' Strike, Thompsons manages, with the help of the hauliers and some adroit negotiation, to maintain distribution almost without interruption.
1905	Thompsons relocates to purpose-built premises at Donegall Quay.	1986	Acquisition of the York Road mill of BOCM (owned by Unilever). As part of the arrangement, Andrews relinquishes its one third share of Thompsons to BOCM, which in turn agrees to sell its holding after five years to Barnetts and Halls, making them joint owners of Thompsons in equal shares.
1906	The business is incorporated to become 'John Thompson & Sons Ltd'. An early first is Thompsons' Cotton Seed Cake for cattle, manufactured using purpose-built presses.	1988	By early 1988 all tonnage is transferred to York Road and the Donegall Quay mill is closed.
1911	Thompsons installs the first cubing machine in Europe and becomes the first true compounder in Ireland.	1990	The mill is first in the UK to receive the coveted ISO 9001 for quality control.
1925	Thompsons becomes the first mill in Ireland to build a dedicated in-mill laboratory.	1994	Installation of the CHP (Combined Heat and Power) plant. Waste gas from the plant is used to generate steam – a saving of 1.5 megawatts – and in 2000 filtered water from the Milewater River is diverted to provide a self-sustaining system for the supply of steam.
1925	Death of founder John Thompson; appointment of James Thompson as MD	1997	Acquisition of Australian-owned Dalgety's Belfast mill
1930	The company is first in Ireland to invest in an experimental farm – Downshire Farm, near Bangor – for field-testing products before they go on the market. Later, the adjoining farms of Brookmount and Cherryfield are added to cover all sectors: ruminant, pig and poultry.	1998	The new biosecure mill at York Road, unique around the world, is commissioned.
1931	First appearance of the white horse logo, commissioned by Joseph Thompson	2002	With the acquisition of James Clow and the transfer of the mill's tonnage to York Road, Thompsons becomes the largest multi-species feed mill in Europe, producing 450,000 tonnes annually.
1932	Thompsons commissions its own permanent art deco building at Balmoral, Stand 399.	2008	The acquisition of Bibby's ABN mill in Lisburn consolidates Thompsons' position in the Irish feed market.
1937	The company is first with a machine for the semi-automatic closing and stitching of bags.	2009	A new blending plant is commissioned (capacity 45 tonnes per hour), to produce specialist blends for the ruminant sector.
1941	The Donegall Quay mill is virtually destroyed in the Blitz of Easter Tuesday. Under James's supervision rebuilding starts immediately and full production is resumed by 1945.	2013	Volume for 2012/13 exceeds 850,000 tonnes.
1950s	Revolutionary changes in terms of efficiency on the mill floor. By 1958, for example, manual mixing and packing of bagged feeds has been superseded by automated high-speed mixers.		
1953	The end of wartime rationing brings a proliferation in the range of feeds on offer and the return of flagship products like Fedol, which had been discontinued while raw materials were in short supply.		
1962	Death of James Thompson, 'genius formulator' and MD since 1925		



Introduction

Ask the man in the street whether he has heard of John Thompson & Sons. In Enniskillen, or Coleraine, or indeed anywhere outside a twenty-mile radius of Belfast, you may have to add mention of the big white horse on the blue background.

But in Belfast the answer will almost certainly be yes. Thompsons has been based in the city for a hundred and forty years, and for a generation the mill has been a signal feature of the city's dockland skyline, standing not far from another landmark – or pair of landmarks – known affectionately as Samson and Goliath. They stand on the other side of Belfast harbour; but something altogether more telling sets the mill apart from those twin symbols of another age, another industry: while the muscles of the shipyard's giant gantry cranes have flexed less often in recent years, the presses of Europe's largest multi-species feedstuffs mill, over on the north shore, have never worked so hard.

If the annual volume (850,000 tonnes, and rising) of animal feeds manufactured by Thompsons was packed into 25kg bags, and the bags laid end to end, the line would stretch from Belfast to Beijing. And back. Or, take the up-and-down journey – elevator up, gravity down – of a batch of raw materials as it makes its way from the main intake, along the press lines and into a waiting lorry. Such is the nature of compound feed manufacture that the raw materials will make the trip from top to bottom of the mill as many as six times and will rack up, in the process, a cumulative vertical climb equivalent to half the height of the Empire State Building.

It's a big operation, and undoubtedly much of Thompsons' success is down to its investment, over the years, in scale and technology – since the company's birth in 1870, it has refused to stand still; always innovating, always growing. But the real secrets of the company's longevity lie in less tangible areas. First, there runs through the workforce a deep vein of loyalty which is fierce to the point of evangelism – long-serving employees used to be referred to as 'blue-blooded' Thompsons' people. Second, and even more important, the company sees no contradiction between broad ambition and narrow focus, consistently using the benefits of its investment in scale to better meet the needs of the most important person in the agri-food chain: the farmer. And it manages *that* because its own roots are in the fertile soils of rural Ireland; specifically, in County Antrim and the townland of Craignageeragh, Ahoghill . . .



Agnes and John Thompson

From farmer to miller

‘Boys from the country preferred’

John Thompson was born in 1847 to John and Sarah Thompson on the family farm at Heanystown, in the townland of Craignageeragh, County Antrim.

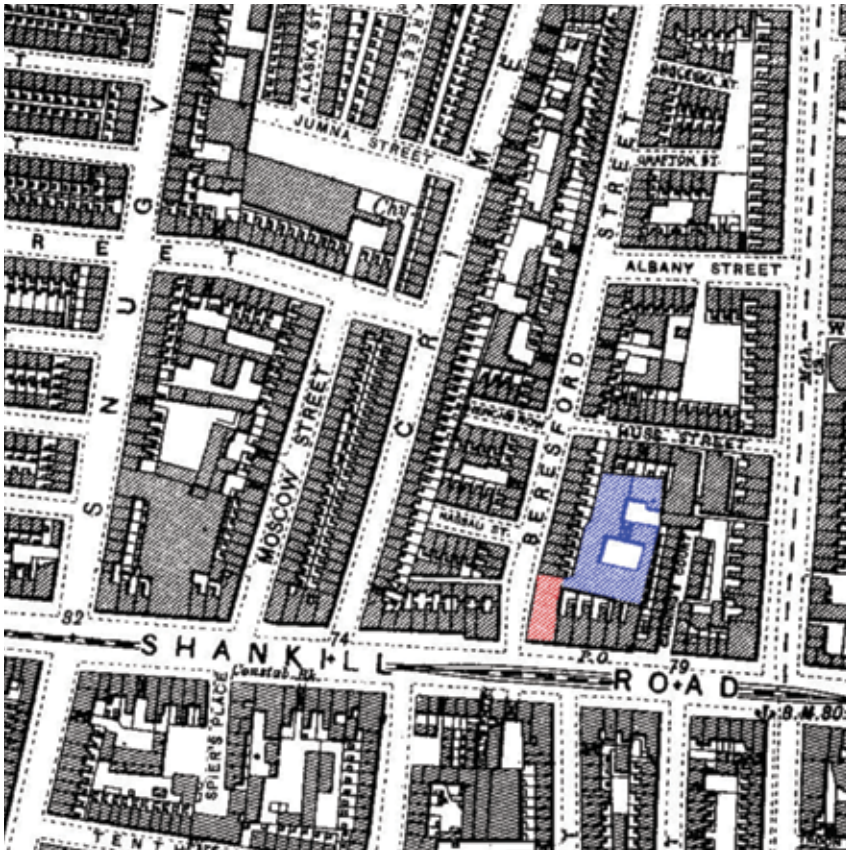
He was one of seven or eight: there were three older sisters, a younger sister and at least two younger brothers. Almost uniquely in that townland, the farmhouse (which stood until 1995) was deemed important enough to be described in the Irish censuses of 1901 and 1911 as ‘first class’ – a reference to the total number of roofs, walls, rooms and windows in the building.¹

It was a 10.8 acre farm: tiny by today’s standards but average for the day (in 1901 the biggest farm in the townland was only 26 acres). Typically for the time, the farm was mixed. There were cow, calf and fowl houses; a piggery, coach house, barn, potato house and shed. Less typically, but important to the story, the farmhouse had a grocery store attached. Most of the store’s trade must have come from the village of Ahoghill, population 878 in 1881, which lay less than a mile away to the west, and from farmers’ wives from townlands nearby; access being by way of a good track (now muddy and rutted) running from Craignageeragh Road, through Heanystown, to the Old Portglenone Road. For at least some of his childhood and early youth, then, John Thompson will have been exposed, without leaving home, to the world of commerce.

And if the young John Thompson’s entrepreneurial instincts were stirred by the comings and goings at his father’s grocery business, his imagination will surely have been fired by the existence, not four hundred yards away on a neighbouring farm, of a horse mill which was used to grind grain for pig feed (it was still in operation towards the turn of the century).² It is not hard to imagine a thoughtful young man watching the horse as it paced an unending twenty-foot circle, drawing the shaft that engaged the gears that turned the drive that drove the grinding wheel that crushed the grain – and thinking to himself: there must be a better way.



The Thompson family farm at Heanystown – all but the stone shed to the right was demolished in 1995.



The site of John Thompson's first mill, off Shankill Road. The blue shading approximately indicates the mill and the red shading one of the grocery stores that he later opened. Agnes Street, unmarked on this map, runs north-south, on the right. From the Ordnance Survey (Dublin) map of Belfast (Shankill), 1901.

In his late teens or early twenties, John left the family home and moved to Peter's Hill, Belfast. In 1870 he married Agnes Greer, whom he may well have known since childhood – her father had a farm in the townland of Drumraw, which marched with Craignageeragh – and in the same year, or the following, he set up a corn mill and feed business between Beresford Street and Agnes Street, off Shankill Road.

The mill must have done well, because he soon diversified. By 1877 he had opened two grocery stores – a pair of shops at 130 and 132 Falls Road, and another two units at 185 and 187 Rutland Terrace (Shankill Road), on the corner with Beresford Street and immediately beside the mill.³ By then John and Agnes had three children – John, Joe and William – and a fourth was on the way. Meantime, John's younger brother Joseph had also moved to Belfast, while another brother James stayed on in Heanystown to run the farm and the grocery business with his father. James, indeed, was to live out his days there, eventually being buried beside his parents in the graveyard at Brookside Presbyterian Church, Ahoghill.



John and Agnes Thompson with daughter-in-law Mary (John's wife) and chauffeur

Through the 1870s and '80s, John Thompson ran – and evidently grew – the businesses, living with his family above the Shankill Road premises. It seems likely that he concentrated on the Shankill operation and that Agnes's brother William Greer was given management of the Falls Road business, because by 1887 John had either sold or transferred the Falls property to William: his own attention had probably turned to business opportunities elsewhere.

Newspaper reports of the period give glimpses of the man himself which suggest, if not a forbidding, then at least a formidable character, who saw things in black and white, did not suffer fools gladly and was of the strict-but-fair school, demanding total honesty from his employees. In 1875 he had Mary Knox, an employee in the house on Shankill Road, charged with stealing bacon worth 9d; she appeared in court the following day, but 'the complainant not wishing to press the charge against the prisoner, Mr O'Donnell [the magistrate] dismissed her'.⁴ It also seems, perhaps typically for a man of his background, that John preferred hiring from outside the city. In 1879 he placed this advertisement:

**WANTED, THREE SMART, INTELLIGENT BOYS
AS APPRENTICES TO THE GENERAL GROCERY
AND PROVISION BUSINESS; WILL BOARD
AND LODGE ON THE PREMISES;
BOYS FROM THE COUNTRY PREFERRED.⁵**

There was a natural synergy between milling and the grocery trade. Like most grocers of the day, Thompson would have kept a stack of jute sacks containing crushed grain at the back of the shop, for collection by farmers on their homeward journey, by horse and cart, from the Belfast markets. The difference, in his case, was that the grain was crushed in his own plant and effectively on-site, giving him control of all three phases of operation: production, wholesale and retail.

Sometime around 1887 or '88, he must have decided that the mill presented the better business opportunity. He sold – or transferred – the grocery business on Shankill Road to his brother Joseph (thus observing, for the second time, an unwritten Thompson imperative which would persist for three generations: 'Keep it in the family'), and moved into feedstuffs full-time, trading variously during the years following as Shankill Corn Mill, North End Corn Mill and North End Roller Corn Mill.

By 1890, the career of the forty-three-year-old John Thompson had fallen into a kind of pattern. With hands-on experience of both farming and farm supply, he had turned his attention to the next logical link in the agri-food chain and the one that would help to make him 'for a very long period a prominent figure in Belfast commercial circles...'⁶ and indeed a wealthy man: milling and manufacturing feed for animals.

Keeping it in the family

*'You'll be all right – but don't let the horse
see the docket!'*

Good access to the flourishing port of Belfast and grain from around the world meant that in the late nineteenth century there were dozens of grinding mills in County Antrim alone, more than in any other county in Ireland.

They served a thriving, livestock-based rural economy the driving force of which, then as now, was peculiar to Ireland and would ensure a steady and enduring market: owner occupation.

Belfast was in its industrial heyday. The Ropeworks' Bloomfield factory, covering 40 acres; the Henry Street mill of York Street Flax Spinning Company; Gallaher's adjacent tobacco factory – each was the biggest, and busiest, in the world within its field. The jewel in Belfast's industrial crown, Harland and Wolff, had just launched the *Teutonic* and *Majestic* liners for the White Star Line, both almost 10,000 tons and capable of carrying 1,300 passengers. The city fairly throbbed to a cacophony of heavy machinery, much of it built by local engineering works famous around the world, like Mackies (whose Springfield site, astonishingly, covered 132 acres), Coates, and Combe Barbour, and the skyline was punctuated by red brick chimney stacks, from the shores of Belfast Lough to the slopes of Cave Hill.

Not much is known about the details of the Beresford Street mill as it was laid out in 1870, but the evolution of the trading name during the first twenty years of business, from Shankill Corn Mill, to North End Corn Mill; then North End Roller Corn Mill and finally, North End Steam Corn Mill, suggests that John Thompson embraced technology from the start and was not afraid to invest. Using rollers to crush grain was relatively new: the first automated rollers in the British Isles had been installed in a flour mill in Dublin as recently as 1878.¹ Where there was no natural watercourse to drive a conventional mill wheel, steam power had been in use for over a century, and indeed a static steam engine



Castle Place,
Belfast, 1800s
© Hulton-Deutsch
Collection/CORBIS

is likely to have powered the plant at Beresford Street, as elsewhere.² But the reference to steam in the trading name is more likely to be about process than power. It's entirely possible that Thompson was among the first millers to 'cook' his raw materials using steam, and to use the new technology of counter-rotating rollers to produce flaked maize, a livestock feed which still appears in the product lists of feed mills today. To manufacture flaked maize, the raw material was cracked, and the resulting pieces steam-heated, passed between rollers, cooled and dried before being packed into bags for resale.

In contrast to the smaller country mills – which often sourced their raw materials from local farmers, to whom cereals would later be returned in the form of dry meal – most raw materials (mainly wheat, maize and oats) for mills closer to Belfast were imported. And coincidentally – but with great significance for the future of both firms – the 1890s saw the birth of another, related, business in Belfast: grain importers, W&R Barnett.³ It was inevitable that John Thompson and William Barnett would meet, and the two families went on to form an enduring friendship which was never unduly tested in the years to



Joe and
William
Thompson

come, thanks to an unwritten rule informing the business side of the relationship – that all dealings must be at arm's length.

So, North End Steam Corn Mill bought many of its raw materials from Barnetts,⁴ collecting bagged cereals direct from the hold or from the company's dockside warehouses for transport to the mill by horse and dray, two-and-a-half tons per load. (This method of transportation, along with rail, persisted until after the Second World War, and the story goes that if the carter, on occasion, should point out that he had three tons on the dray he would be told, 'You'll be all right – but don't let the horse see the docket ...')⁵

Beresford Street itself no longer exists, but behind Rutland Terrace, obscured by some very twentieth-century corrugated cladding, some of the brickwork of the original nineteenth-century structure can still be seen. Although the size of the buildings suggests a modest enough scale of operation, in the context of grain milling's known history, which goes back to ancient Egypt, the North End Steam Corn Mill was state of the art.

We may assume that raw materials arrived by horse and dray from the docks – or occasionally from local farms – in 112 or 140cwt (50 or 60kg) jute sacks. The sacks were hoisted by pulley, two or three at a time, to a timber intake platform built onto an outside wall at the highest point in the mill (in Beresford Street, probably the third floor), and stacked by hand. To produce dry feed the sacks were lifted to openings in the floor, ripped open and their contents tipped through, to be gravity-fed into belt- or shaft-driven crushers running on the floors below. At ground level, packers received the resulting meal into empty sacks from chutes below the crushers, weighing the filled sacks

and stitching the tops closed, before building them into stacks for onward dispatch. The overwhelming features of this work for the men on the mill floor must have been noise, dust and extreme physical effort, and indeed these aspects of the milling business remained largely unchanged for another sixty years.

Around 1890, when Thompson transferred the Shankill grocery business (and the house above) to his brother Joseph, he moved to the more substantial Woodvale House, Ballygomartin Street, less than a mile away. The location was sufficiently rural – or his farming roots sufficiently deep – that he kept a cow at Woodvale House (at an annual cost of £6–10) so that the family could enjoy fresh milk every day.⁶ Also living in the house in 1901 were John and Agnes’s children Joe (26), William (25), James (22), Agnes or ‘Aggie’ (19), Harry (15) and Stafford (9), Agnes’s sister Eliza and a servant called Minnie Graham.⁷

Joe and William were already working with their father and are listed in the census of 1901 as ‘corn mill clerk’ and ‘corn mill manager’ respectively. Not much, perhaps, can be inferred from this except that John Thompson evidently made appointments, even within the family, on the basis of aptitude: the younger son had the senior position. And Thompson’s meritocratic tendency was put beyond doubt a year or two later, when the third son, James, came on the scene.

Around 1896, on leaving school, James had gone to work in Edenderry Flax Spinning Mill on Crumlin Road, where he had shown sufficient talent to be appointed acting under-manager at eighteen and manager at twenty-two, a considerable achievement.⁸ He suffered, though, from chest problems, which his doctor put down to inhaling the airborne fibres associated with linen manufacture. The doctor’s advice was to move, and James approached his father about a position in the feed mill. The response provides another glimpse of the founder’s character and attitudes, and indeed his sense of humour. According to James, he was told by his father, ‘I have two half-wits already. I might as well make it three!’

James quickly made his presence felt, leapfrogging his older brothers to establish himself as second-in-command. Given his management experience, albeit in milling of a different kind, this is unsurprising, and indeed there is a strong sense that, in business at least, James was cut from a different cloth. William was affable, gregarious and sporty – he made time for his golf – and Joe was the creative one in the family, a musician, and a painter of some ability. James, on the other hand, while generous, trusting and loyal to a fault (his future daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, would describe him years later as ‘a good, good man’), was perhaps the natural businessman of the three – sober, studious and focused. He enjoyed ballroom dancing but was otherwise an undemonstrative, rather shy man, not given to displays of emotion: having done a kindness, he would be mortified by offers of thanks. In this respect and others, he appears to have been like his father. It was said of his father when he died, that ‘his generosity ... to all charitable objects was most liberal, although he was quite unostentatious in that respect’.⁹



Joe Thompson



James Thompson

The coal face

‘James was an intuitive formulator.

It was a form of genius...’

James came into the business at a time of great change. The mill had prospered during the final years of the nineteenth century, and his father had decided to expand.

That he could afford to build from scratch, albeit with the assistance of an overdraft from the Ulster Bank, says much about the mill’s profitability by 1900, and the status of the proprietor.

Trading profits for the previous year were around £1,500 (about £130,000 today) – a respectable figure for a small and relatively young mill. The asset ledger for December 1899 shows ‘machinery’, ‘kiln’, ‘silo’ and other equipment worth £1,800 (about £160,000). Because Thompson was still a sole trader, some personal assets were included also: the Woodvale cow is listed at £14, and the house itself is valued at £1,341 – rather less than the value placed on the machinery: we can assume that machinery included boiler and steam engine, grinder (or grinders) and roller. The ‘kiln’ was the furnace used to produce steam for the cooking process.

The figures do not show, however, that for some years, milling had not been the founder’s only line of business. During the 1880s and ’90s he went into property, presumably with the assistance of the Ulster Bank. As well as the Beresford Street premises, he owned a run of properties in Rutland Terrace (numbers 177 to 189, 185–187 being the grocery store), and there is a report in the *Belfast News Letter* from 22 May 1895 that he took to court one Joseph Duncan, bricklayer, for the sum of £14-7s damages ‘sustained by the plaintiff by reason of the defendant having contracted to do the brickwork of eight houses in Leopold Street for the sum of £8, yet the defendant failed to complete said agreement’. The court awarded Thompson £8-8s, the amount he had to pay for the work to be completed. Elsewhere in the paper, Leopold Street is described as being in ‘one of the best letting districts in the city’, presumably on account of its proximity to the numerous linen mills in the Crumlin Road area.

So John Thompson, while not yet an especially wealthy man, had done well: the mill had no borrowing and profits were healthy, and rising. With increasing turnover,

30th June 1901

12

Assets & Property					
Sundry Debtors	395			3899	10
Cash on Hands				531	7
Stock do				2594	3 2
Mill Premises & C	97	4628	7		
House Property No 2	98	1104	2		
do No 3	99	602	8 4		
New Stone	200	92	8 7		
Sped	200	14			
Silo	208	116			
Kiln	201	50	3 1		
Shop Fittings	203	30			
Machinery	102	1409	8 6		
Horses & Vans	202	150			
Cow		14			
Land in Bldg Socy	181	117			

Detail from a Thompsons ledger, 1901

larger premises had become an operational necessity. In 1900 he acquired a 1.8-acre site on Donegall Quay, which was ideally placed for the docks, between Tomb Street and Gamble Street on the Lagan’s north shore, and continued to trade from Beresford Street while building operations progressed. He can little have imagined that ninety years later, a site five times larger again would be required to accommodate the mill.

In 1905, when the new mill was commissioned and operations ceased at Beresford Street, there were around a dozen sizeable mills operating in Belfast, including some which would become household names, like Isaac Andrews, and White, Tomkins & Courage. Thompsons, with the additional capacity afforded by state-of-the-art, electrically powered milling machinery, was similar, in terms of capacity, to the biggest of them. But early in the life of the new mill – from the time, in fact, that the family business came of age by incorporating (the firm became a limited company in 1906, with a share capital of £20,000) – the management team of father and sons (with James already his father’s putative understudy for the role of managing director, and William and Joe in personnel and sales respectively) began to make innovations.

An early first, in 1906, was ‘Thompson’s Cotton Seed Meal Cake’ for cattle. Meal was formed by hydraulic presses into blocks of 22x12 inches, which were found to be less wasteful and easier for animals to digest than the much harder imported seed cake which was the only alternative at the time.

James, who read everything he could find on the subject of milling and animal feeds, is credited with transforming the company from provender to compound feed

mill. Hitherto, milling operations everywhere had concentrated on rendering cereals into a form which was more readily digested by livestock, normally by crushing to separate the husk from the kernel. A good deal of engineering know-how and much finesse, but only a modest degree of actual manufacture, were involved in provender milling. A compounding mill, on the other hand, creates its own feedstuffs by targeted blending and cooking of raw materials. Thompsons was the first true compounding mill in Ireland, from 1911 marketing its cooked, flaked maize under the trade name Maisol, and a blend of cooked and flaked maize and beans which became a flagship product – the ubiquitous Fedol.

Just as a farmer will pick up a handful of blended feed, smell it, roll it between finger and thumb and even taste it, so James would experiment with texture, and then with formulation, to develop the range and the quality of the product. He was fascinated by the nutritional potential of the finished article, and had a talent for getting it right. Today, the company employs many full-time nutritionists, but James Thompson himself was their earliest progenitor, working decades before the advent of calculated, and then computer, analysis. He was an intuitive formulator, and Robert Barnett has described his talent as ‘a form of genius’.¹

In 1911, two years after James married Hilda McClure (the sister, it so happens, of his brother William’s wife Florence), there was a double first. The couple had their first child, Melville, and the company became the first in Europe, second in the world, to invest in machinery for cubing feeds – a major advance which has evolved, with continuous refinement, into the standard method of compound feed provision worldwide. It is impossible to overstate the impact of cubing on the milling industry. The process involves using an extruder to force steam-heated mixed feeds, together with nutritionally valuable binders like molasses or cod liver oil, though small holes in a die or drum; the die in constant rotation relative to a fixed or moving knife or set of knives, which cut the extruded meal into short lengths or cubes. These cubes are then dried and cooled. The main advantage of the finished product, in comparison with a loose meal in which the ingredients tend to separate, is that a considerable variety of key components, like trace minerals, vitamins and amino acids, can be evenly distributed through the feed, and the rate of uptake by the fed animal kept consistent at farm level. In addition, there is little dust or waste, most livestock find cubed feed more palatable than meal, and the tendency to bolt is greatly reduced, thus aiding digestion.

In short, cubing turned out to be the ideal delivery mechanism for increasingly sophisticated compounding of cereals and additives in the context of a changing rural economy. The developed world was moving from a cereal- to a protein-based diet, and if the livestock sector was to meet the challenges of that change, the key words would be productivity and yield – so, better feeding stuffs.

To stay ahead in a competitive environment, Thompsons was living up to the founder’s slogan: ‘Pioneers of Better Feeding Stuff’s’.



Commemorative plaque in
Woodvale Presbyterian Church


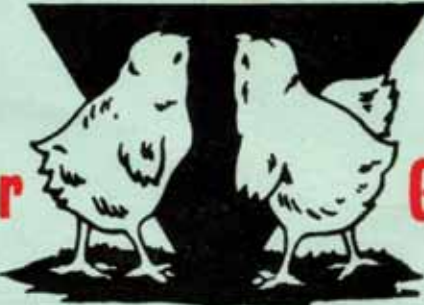
Pioneers of better feeding stuffs

‘His word was his bond.’

John Thompson’s wife Agnes died of cancer in 1920, at the age of seventy-three; and in her memory, John donated a new organ, with commemorative plaque, to Woodvale Presbyterian Church, where the pair had attended service thrice every Sunday (in earlier years, with the whole family in tow – James, apparently, was less than enthusiastic about that particular family tradition) before they moved to Bangor in 1905.¹ It was in fact a double commemoration, the inscription reading, ‘In memory of his wife and only daughter’, because in 1905 Thompson had lost his daughter Aggie at only twenty-three: tragically, Aggie died after emergency surgery for appendicitis at the family home in Bangor.

For some years John had given James day-to-day responsibility for the running of the family business while he took time to travel – he crossed the Atlantic five times, visiting his sons in Vancouver as late as 1924 – and to pursue his one indulgence: motoring.² He seems to have travelled all over Ireland, and his 4HP Renault was among the personal possessions deemed worthy of individual mention in his will.

James and his brother Joe travelled the country in the early 1920s for a very different reason. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the company had invested a good deal of effort in selling throughout the island of Ireland. A network of reps was charged with finding new accounts, orders from which were fulfilled by rail. With partition in 1921, three-quarters of that trade evaporated. Thompsons’ red and blue livery, often printed on creamy white cotton bags, drew unwanted attention, and there were stories of consignments being burned on station platforms. In an exercise in damage limitation, the brothers visited each of the reps, getting to know them, trying to win back lost business. Inevitably, there were confrontations with reluctant accounts – one rep said, ‘You know, Mr James, a spoonful of honey goes a lot further than a glass of vinegar!’ But they did manage to recover most of the accounts, which remained on the

	<p>oil 3.5% protein 19% fibre 5.5%</p>
<h1>Thompson's</h1>	
<h2>Chick Mash</h2> <div data-bbox="378 1029 1073 1342">  <p>Super Grade</p> </div>	
<p>John Thompson & Sons Ltd.</p>	

Super Grade Chick Mash

books until the atrophy of the rail network across Ireland and the proliferation of mills in the South combined to make business uneconomical outwith a certain radius of Belfast.

While James's father may have been happy to step back from mill operations, it is inconceivable that strategic decisions would not have had the benefit of his patriarchal input. One such – and another first for the company – was the addition in 1925 of a dedicated laboratory within the mill, for random testing of incoming grain and other raw materials, and for testing products against specification when they left the mill. James, as you would expect, came to spend a good deal of time in the lab, and some of the company's signature products of the interwar years were developed in the period immediately following its inauguration. One of its most successful ever in terms of both take-up and staying power was Thompson's Chick Mash – a product which instantly calls up, for long-serving Thompson employees, the smell of cod liver oil. Chick Mash was in fact a pelletised and 'crumbled' feed aimed at the growing egg (and to a lesser extent poultry) market. The advantages of pelletising from the farmer's point of view were extolled in the company's advertising throughout the 1930s, and a Thompson-produced booklet from the early 1950s proclaimed, with admirable solemnity: 'Thompson feeding saves waste – makes birds eat correctly.'

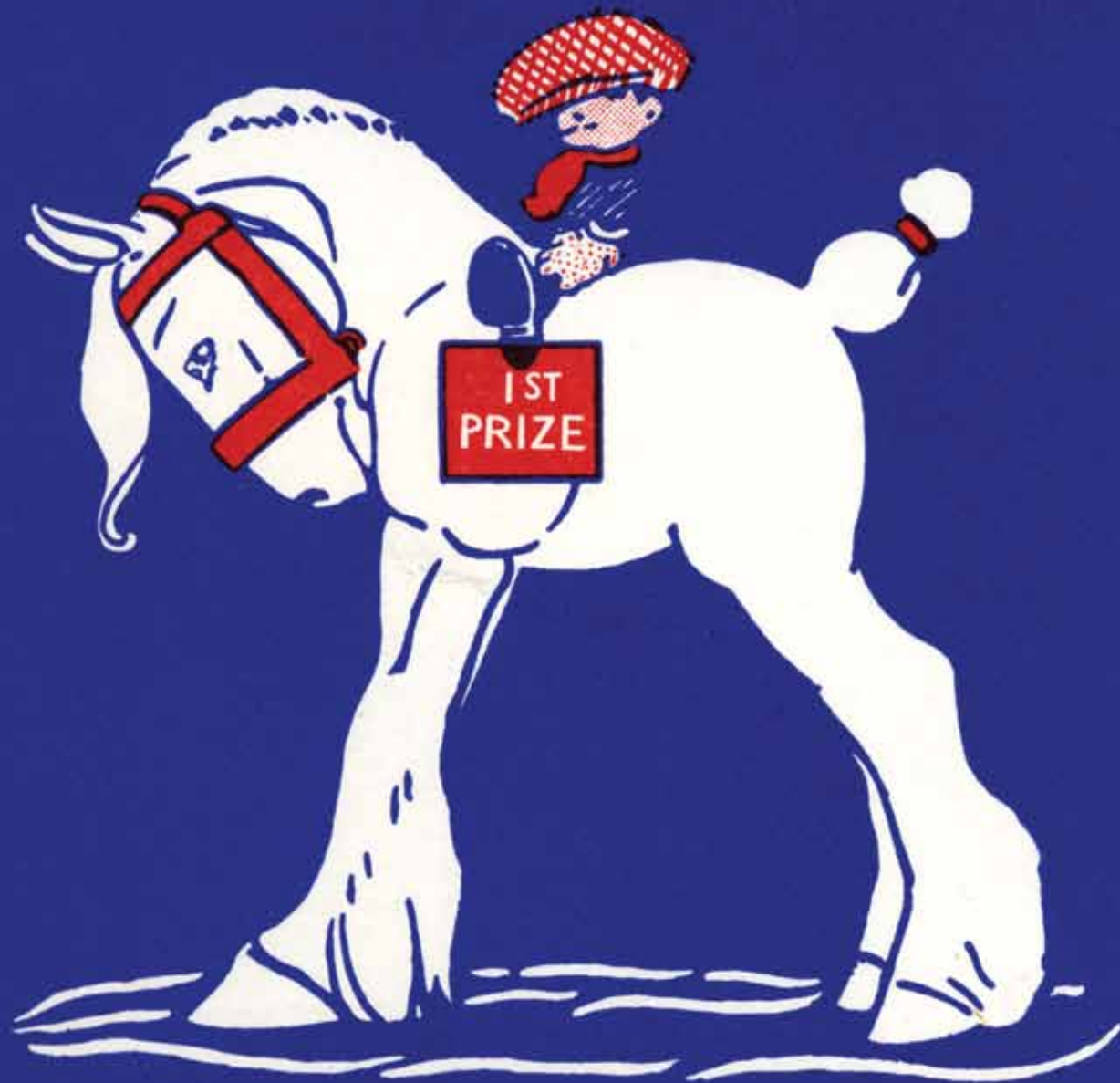
The laboratory proved to be the last major milestone in the career of the founder. He died on 23 June 1925, aged seventy-eight, at Downshire House in Bangor, his home of twenty years. His obituary and the funeral arrangements were given due prominence in the newspapers, and the *Belfast News Letter* summed the man up as follows:

The credit of the firm's present position is due to the business capacity of its founder. His word was his bond, and although he was a man of simple tastes he had great strength of character.³

He left behind a company whose 'present position' was indeed very healthy. Profits and turnover for the previous year were substantial; borrowing, zero. His personal wealth was stated as £26,000 (well over £1 million today) and the company was employing not just three members of the family but a workforce of over two hundred.

James was appointed managing director at the next directors' meeting on 20 July 1925, the minutes of which record this about the founder:

We desire to express of the effect of his character on the success of the Company. He was beloved and respected by all who were associated with him. His high standards of commercial honesty, prudence, independence, and absolute rectitude in all his dealings, will ever be remembered by those who were his colleagues for the many years he was spared to direct and influence the policy of the Company.



JOHN THOMPSON & SONS LIMITED
DONEGALL QUAY MILLS, BELFAST

The first Clydesdale logo from the 1930s, commissioned by Joe Thompson and designed by John Hassall

At the top of his form

‘The ratio will always favour the farmer.’

From this vantage-point, it is hard to judge whether the culture of loyalty within the company, well documented in later years, began in the days of John Thompson, the founder. Certainly, there is plenty of evidence that his son James, ever the hands-on formulator, commanded the loyalty and respect of the workforce – his habit of dropping in on a Sunday morning to do the rounds and check production did not go unnoticed. But without an inspired piece of branding in the early 1930s by James’s creatively aware brother Joe, who handled the company’s advertising and promotion, there might not have been such a powerful image around which the troops could rally.

The white horse, and the little chap with the cloth cap, were the brainchild of Joe, working with the company’s advertising agency, and a well-known English graphic designer and illustrator of children’s books called John Hassall. Joe’s brief for a new Thompsons’ logo must have called for an image arresting enough to be memorable; some visual reference to the rural community; a suggestion of power, of forging ahead; and, one assumes, an acknowledgement that the company should see its relationship with people in terms of mutual dependence. For ‘people’, read employees, farmers and the rural community.

That the company should have a human face will have seemed fundamental to a man of Joe’s sensibilities, and it’s no accident that the Clydesdale is known as the ‘gentle giant’ of the horse world.

The new logo was not intended to replace the company slogan – ‘The Pioneers of Better Feeding Stuffs’, which had been in use since the early days – but to work alongside it. Even today, although it has been replaced by the punchier, more contemporary ‘Feeding Innovation’, the original strapline is still quoted with pride, especially in answer to the question, ‘Why has Thompsons survived when so many other mills have disappeared?’ It’s a fair question: in the early 1900s there were around a dozen medium-sized or large feed



Messrs John Thompson & Sons Ltd F.C., 1928

mills in or near Belfast, including John Thompson & Sons, Isaac Andrews, T.H.White Ltd (later White, Tomkins & Courage), Jordans, John Clark & Co., J&A Davidson, J&C Gardiner, Garret, Grierson & Burns, J. Neil, Bernard Hughes, Hughes, Dickson & Co., Kennedy & Co., W&S Mercier, Wilson & Co. and Northern Milling Company.

By the 1960s, many of the main players had changed but the number was similar: in Belfast itself, John Thompson & Sons, E.T. Green, Isaac Andrews, Associated Feed Manufacturers (AFM: BOCM, R. Silcock & Sons, Levers Feeds and Crossfield & Calthorp), White, Tomkins & Courage, James Clow, William Marshall Ltd, Abraham Neil, Rank, Robert Wilson Ltd, Joseph Reavey, Carruthers Rea; and elsewhere Irwins, Scotts, Pattons, O'Hare, McLarnons, Sands, Bibbys, Jordans and Chestnutts.

Today, Thompsons is one of only two remaining Belfast feed mills.

This is not to suggest decline in the agri-food industry – merely change. Arguably,



The Millers League Challenge cup, won by Thompsons in 1929 and 1933 (the last year the league was played)

there were more changes in the decade following 1960 than in the century preceding it. The key movement was towards consolidation, so it was inevitable that only a few mills would remain. But it still begs the question, ‘Why Thompsons?’ And at least part of the answer can be found in the company’s longstanding focus on the customer.

One Thompsons’ man, who started straight from school and retired in 2004 after forty-eight years with the company, talks about a Sunday morning visit by James Thompson around 1960. At that time all supplements, of which there might be a dozen – vitamins, essential amino acids and minerals, zinc sulphate, zinc and ferrous oxide, vet prescriptions, binders and so on – were added by hand. Whoever happened to be on ‘hand-adds’ would fill a given size of container, run the flat of his hand across the top, and tip the contents into the mix. James watched this operation for a time and said: ‘This is how I’d like you to do it.’ He cupped his hand to make a bridge, ran it across an imaginary container, and said: ‘If you do it like this, the ratio will always favour the farmer.’



Ad wars

‘Quality is remembered long after price is forgotten.’

Traditionally, the concept of least-cost formulation is the feed miller’s Holy Grail, revisited every season by the formulators, whose job it is to examine what ingredients are available on world markets, and at what price, and to adjust the company’s range of products accordingly – the ultimate moveable feast.

The principle of least cost is so important because everyone, from the small country blending mill to the big compounder, has access to the same raw materials – global commodities within an increasingly global marketplace, which can ebb and flow with fluctuations in climate and crop yield, trade tariffs and even political stability – so that profitability rests on wafer-thin margins: typically, 85 per cent of the cost for the miller is in raw materials and another 12 per cent in manufacture, distribution and credit, so the margin is less than 3 per cent.

Paradoxically, least cost was not a priority for James Thompson, who managed by sheer talent to swim against the tide in this respect: for him, it was all about quality. ‘Quality,’ he once said, ‘will be remembered long after price is forgotten.’ One of James’s faults, according to his nephew Raymond (William’s son), who joined the company in 1931 with responsibility for buying, was that he would sign off on anything, as long as the quality was right.¹ That this was not commercial naivety, but simple conviction, says much about the culture of the organisation at the time.

Given that least-cost formulation, from the farmer’s point of view, is hardly a selling point except insofar as it affects the price of the finished product, the company has always been quick to capitalise on its unique selling point – that its feedstuffs are the best available, and that its formulations can be trusted to deliver. Take two flagship products from the 1930s: Fedol and Chick Mash. Each has its equivalent from other mills. For Fedol it was White, Tomkins & Courage’s Clarendo, named after its Clarendon mill, and for Chick Mash it was E.T. Green’s . . . Chick Mash. Whether it was born of indignation based on real experience, paranoia or clever marketing is hard to say, but in the *Belfast News Letter* of 30 May 1930 Thompsons ran an advertisement in the form of a solemn warning to potential customers:

WARNING

It has been brought to our notice that in quite a number of cases where stock-feeders have asked for FEDOL they have been given other brands of Cooked Food.

We would impress upon buyers of FEDOL the necessity of seeing that they get FEDOL, which is our registered brand and is manufactured only by us at Donegall Quay Mills, Belfast, for it is the standard of quality by which all other Cooked Foods are compared.

Where we have definite proof of wilful substitution of other Cooked Foods for FEDOL we shall take proceedings to protect our interests.

When you ask for FEDOL see that you get bags branded FEDOL with our name and address.

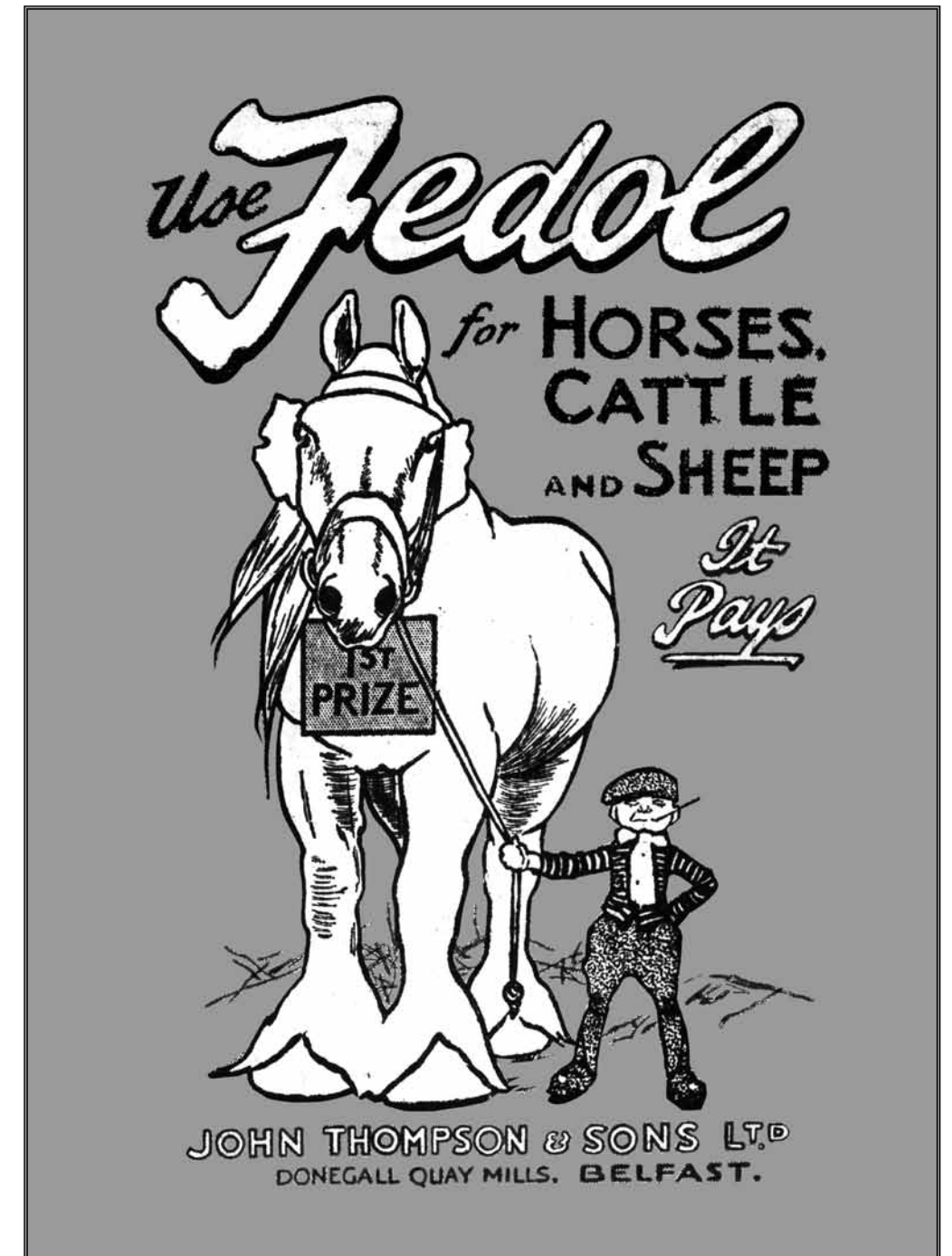
JOHN THOMPSON & SONS, LTD.

DONEGALL QUAY MILLS,
BELFAST.

This is inspired copy, because apart from mentioning the product six times in four short paragraphs, it implies (rightly) that Thompsons had been first to produce a blend of cooked, flaked maize and beans; and also that its formulation was unsurpassed in the industry. Short of listing the exact ingredients, with quantities, in a bag of Fedol, this piece of period hyperbole couldn't have got the message across more clearly: there is only one feed for ruminants, and that is FEDOL!

Admittedly, this kind of hard-hitting advertising wasn't typical. Almost exactly a year later, in the same newspaper, Thompsons used the first known version of its famous Clydesdale mascot to offer farmers and merchants an altogether cosier argument in favour of Fedol. All the salient messages of Joe's logo, which came a year or two later, can be found in this one advertisement. The little chap chewing the straw is there, for scale as

well as the 'Ahh ...' factor; so is the big horse with the big heart; the 'firsts' are alluded to by the First Prize banner which hangs from the horse's withers; and crucially, there is a strapline which in two words extols the virtues of a well-formulated feedstuff, and so addresses the one issue which is all-important to the farmer: 'It Pays.' The message? Fedol contains the right stuff: livestock will do better, you will do better.



Another battleground was Chick Mash. In a series from May 1939, Thompsons played advertising ping-pong with its main competitor, E.T. Green, over whose Chick Mash offered most benefit to the farmer. Thompsons – whose ads were consistently bigger, running deep over two columns – led with a banner proclaiming that Thompsons’ Chick Mash ‘MAKES GOOD FEATHERING’. Greens responded with a single-column ad saying, ‘The use of this mash will ensure proper development and . . . a successful laying future.’ Thompsons came back with ‘IT PROMOTES RAPID GROWTH’. Greens went bigger than before, its ad across two columns and accompanied by a line drawing, saying, more loudly this time, ‘For SUCCESSFUL LAYING future feed them on GREEN’S Chick Mash.’ Thompsons gave them both barrels with successive ads saying ‘FEED IT STRAIGHT FROM THE BAG’ and ‘WHEN THOSE EGGS ARE HATCHED, make sure the whole brood survives...’ to drive the benefits home.

These ad wars were generally hardest fought around the time of the Royal Ulster Agricultural Show at Balmoral, at which the feed mills presented new products and competed for business. Thompsons had a strong presence, particularly in the years before and after the Second World War. An ‘advertorial’ on 29 May 1931 claimed that ‘if any agriculturalist or farmer in Ireland were asked the name of the best firm of foodstuff manufacturers, it is almost a certainty that he would mention the firm of Messrs



The Thompsons poultry hall at Balmoral show, c.1939

Thompson, Donegal Quay Mills . . . [they] have at the service of their customers an up-to-date mill, the latest and best examples of cleaning, crushing and milling machinery, and an expert staff.’

The following year, Thompsons commissioned its own permanent two-storey, art deco building in the show grounds, Stand 399, which was described at the time as ‘one of the most attractive, if not the most attractive buildings in the show grounds. It is of beautiful design, and, having been artistically carried out, it is in harmony with the high quality of their [feed] manufacture.’ It was a place for reps to introduce new lines and entertain customers with a cup of tea, and products showcased that year included a maize meal called Pewrol; Cottonets – a cubed, decorticated cotton cake for feeding to cattle – and a full range of compound feeds and cakes including Fatenets, Dairiets, feeding nuts, grass nuts, sheep and lamb nuts, ‘balanced pig ration’ and, of course, the ubiquitous Fedol. On 28 May 1934, the company issued a general invitation (but presumably directed at farmers) to attend ‘Stand One, Section L’ and advertised – as well as its usual range of animal feeds – wheatmeal, wholemeal, custard powder in various flavours (in tins or packets), and last but certainly not least, Pat Oats. Pat Oats was Thompsons’ own brand of porridge, and was named after James’s daughter Patricia, who had been born five years earlier.

One pre-show notice, from the *Belfast Telegraph* of 24 May 1939, mentions that ‘no feeding stuff is marketed before it has proved its worth on the firm’s own experimental farm’. This matter-of-fact reference to Downshire Farm, near Bangor, belies the importance of the place to the mill, to James Thompson and in particular to a young and impressionable Pat, who has never forgotten a cloudless night in April 1941, when she and her father stood at the farm and looked, with growing horror, towards Belfast ...



Blitz damage to Thompsons mill at Donegall Quay, 1941

The Blitz

‘There will be Easter eggs for Belfast.’

In another Irish first – and in a logical extension to the work already being carried out in the laboratory – Downshire Farm, at Six Road Ends, Bangor, had been acquired by the company in 1930, primarily to research the benefits of poultry formulations before they were released on the market. Downshire had well-established poultry and pig units (fifty or sixty pigs, a good number for the time, in a state-of-the-art Scandinavian-designed unit), and a small dairy herd, and in due course Thompsons purchased the neighbouring farms of Brookmount and Cherryfield to address the remaining deficits: dairy and beef. Together, the farms totalled eighty acres.

From the mid-1930s, James and Hilda began to spend summers with young Pat at Downshire. Melville, who was older than his sister by eighteen years, was already living there.¹ In 1941 James and Hilda moved to the farm full-time, and Melville moved to Belfast with his wife of three years, Elizabeth.²

At 10.45 p.m. on Easter Tuesday, 15 April 1941, the air raid sirens sounded and the family headed for the shelter which James had installed at Downshire the year before. It was already full, locals and farm workers having got there before them, so they stood outside.³

Earlier, the propagandist William Joyce (Lord Haw Haw), in a radio broadcast from Hamburg, had said, ‘there will be Easter eggs for Belfast’. Upwards of two hundred German bombers left their bases in France and Holland, and in the course of a few hours visited upon Belfast more devastation, in terms of life and property, than was suffered by any city other than London in one night over the whole war. Industry and infrastructure, including the shipyards and the water works, were the targets, but much of the city centre was razed by successive waves of bombers dropping high explosives, incendiaries and land mines, and nine hundred people lost their lives.

Tomb Street, site of the Donegall Quay mill, vulnerable on account of its proximity to Harland & Wolff at Queen’s Island, was virtually destroyed.

Pat stood beside her father and watched from Downshire as the firestorm lit the night sky, and early the next morning, with just enough rationed petrol to take the car to Belfast, James went to see the damage for himself. The mill and most of the ancillary



Thompsons mill after the Blitz in May 1941; and substantially rebuilt



James Thompson

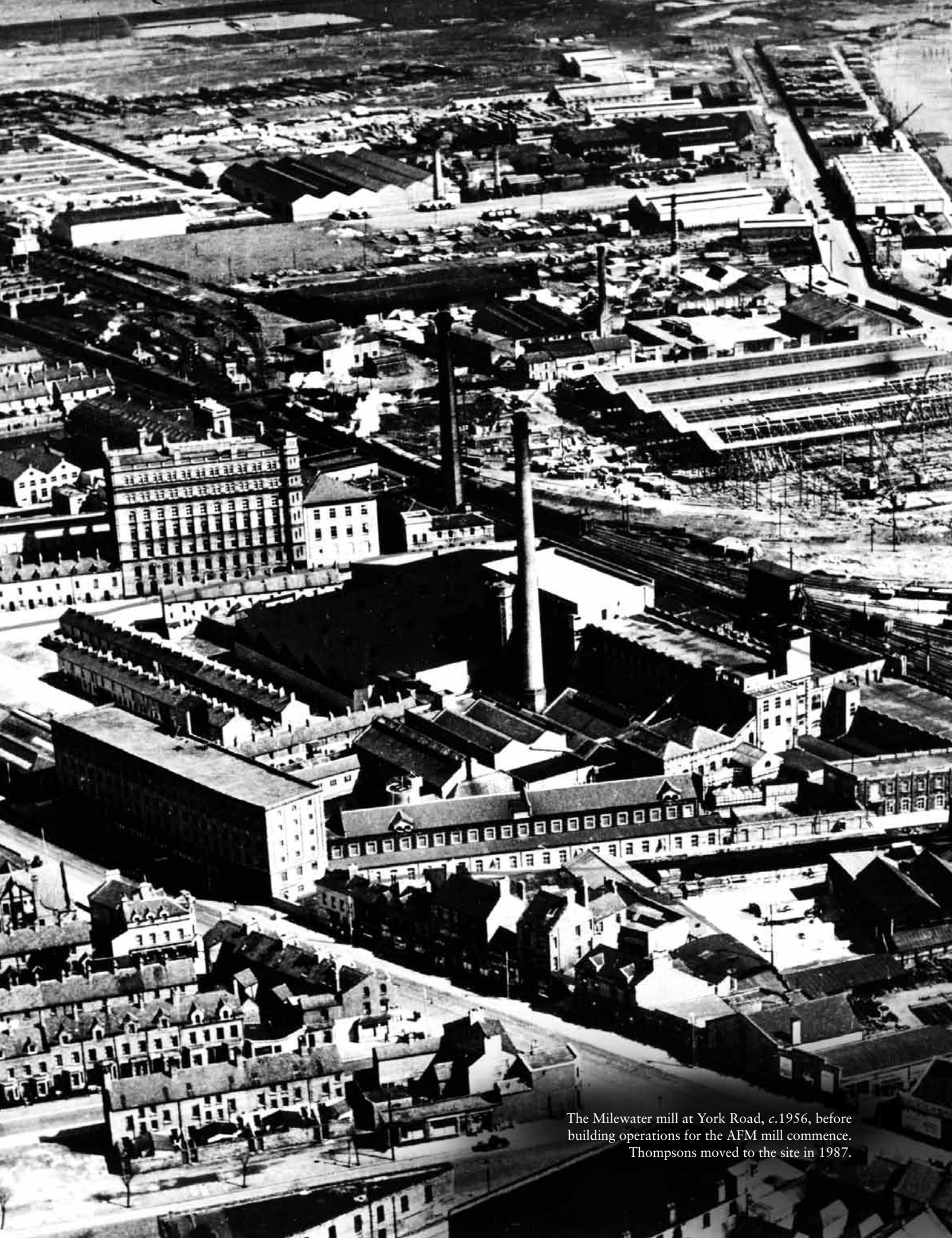
buildings had been reduced to smoking ruins.⁴ Gorman, the yard man, was standing in the rubble. ‘Mr James,’ he said, ‘what would you like me to do?’ – to which James replied, ‘Gorman, get this yard cleaned up.’

On his return to the farm, a shaken James Thompson simply said: ‘Three generations’ work – all gone.’

Pat asked him what he was going to do, and he looked at her as if she was mad. ‘I’m going to rebuild it.’

With considerable understatement, the minutes of the next board meeting recorded that ‘certain damage had occurred to the Company’s assets by reason of enemy action’. By arrangement, most of the mill’s production was picked up by E.T. Green and others, and restored to Thompsons after the war, which may say as much about mutual respect within the industry as about cooperation in time of war. Rebuilding work started almost immediately, continuing throughout the war. James negotiated with the Board of Trade for compensation ‘for loss of stock due to enemy action’, and sought government war damage grants: the accounts for October 1949 show expenditure on buildings and machinery of £55,384 and £51,514 respectively, and grants received to date of £93,137.

By 1945, the mill was functioning again, though it has to be said that until rationing ended some eight years later, none of the mills were able to operate at full capacity. In the meantime, John Thompson & Sons had proved that despite adverse trading conditions, and even the destruction of the mill, the company had a high degree of resilience; and this resilience would see it through a period of accelerated change in the decades to come.



The Milewater mill at York Road, c.1956, before building operations for the AFM mill commence. Thompsons moved to the site in 1987.

Baking the cake

‘Only a sissy would have complained.’

Deregulation and an end to import restrictions and rationing came in 1953 and heralded something of a free-for-all among animal feed manufacturers. Since the outbreak of war, raw materials had been strictly rationed, and Thompsons and others had been forced to withdraw most of their trademark-registered products for the time being, due to the scarcity of imported ingredients.

But with deregulation there was a rush to market with new and existing lines from a multiplicity of players, some of them manufacturing in Great Britain and distributing in Northern Ireland; and in such a crowded marketplace, consolidation was inevitable. One example, which would have profound significance for Thompsons, was the birth of Associated Feed Manufacturers (AFM). British Oil Cake Manufacturers (BOCM) of Renfrew, R. Silcock & Sons Ltd of Liverpool, Levers Feeds of Brumbrough, Merseyside, and Crossfield and Calthorp Ltd of Liverpool – all of which had a well-established receiving, storage and distribution infrastructure for finished, bagged, feeds in Ireland, but no manufacturing capability – joined forces to establish an independent production unit which would service all four.

The site chosen for AFM’s mill was the York Street Flax Spinning Company’s Milewater Mill, on York Road, which had ceased production after the war. This venerable brick-built mill, once part of the largest single-entity linen export operation in the world, had been given over during the war to the manufacture of parachute webbing and air frame covers – testament to the remarkable strength of Irish linen. The adjacent, rather smaller Jennymount Mill, recently restored to Victorian splendour, gives some indication of the mill’s appearance in the early 1950s. Most of the Milewater works was demolished to make way for the new mill, which was commissioned in 1959. Some of the other Belfast mills were in awe: in terms of scale it was like nothing seen before, and for almost thirty years AFM stood as one of Thompsons’ main competitors. During that time, Silcock & Sons merged with Lever Feeds (both had been owned by Unilever since 1935) to become Silcock & Lever Feeds; BOCM and Silcock & Lever Feeds became BOCM Silcock; and in 1976, BOCM Silcock decentralised and the company became BOCM Silcock Northern Ireland Ltd.



Site work progresses at York Road.



The machinery and systems were state of the art.



Old habits dying hard, the mill trade was still referring to AFM twenty years after it had ceased to exist.

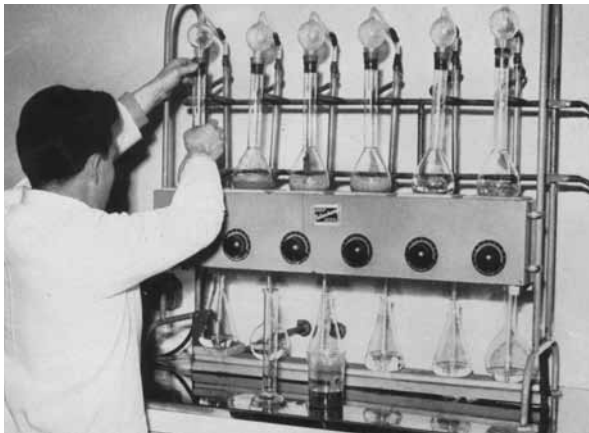
These changes over time reflect the shift towards a culture of cooperation, amalgamation, merger and takeover which has characterised the sector since the immediate post-war period, and in due course Thompsons would join the party with a number of strategic moves designed to consolidate its own position. In the meantime, however, there was feed to be manufactured, and with the stimulus of deregulation came a series of far-reaching changes in milling technology, and the structure of the wider agri-food industry, which Thompsons embraced and capitalised on with characteristic zeal.

The 1950s saw unprecedented change. The horse and dray had been gradually superseded, starting from before the war, by the lorry – for the most part, flatbed Commers and Bedford TKs. The railway network, though still used for some distribution, was becoming redundant – until well into the 1940s, bagged feed had been dispatched from the LMS (York Street) or GNR stations in Belfast and distributed by country stationmasters on Thompsons' order, either direct to the farmer or to local grocers/merchants, of whom there were hundreds.¹

In 1955 most raw materials in, and all finished feeds out, were still bagged in jute sacks of 112 or 140 lb, or paper bags of 112, 70 and 56 lb each. Chick Mash and Laver's Mash came in 100 cwt sacks of pure cotton. These sacks were of such fine material that they found their way into the homes of employees, where they were stitched into bed linen, four sacks to the sheet. The clue to their origin, after washing and bleaching, was a pair of yellow chicks which were the only markings to survive.



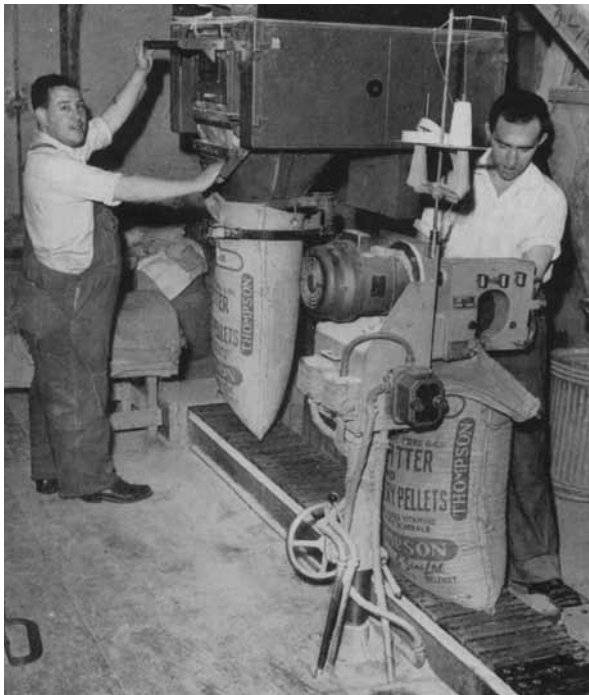
Pig and dairy meal leaves the bagged despatch area, c.1960. Lorries were loaded from chutes in the order in which delivery would be made to customers. Pictured, from left to right: Tommy Cairns, Davy Cairns, unknown, Billy 'Dusty' Miller.



1



2



3



4



5

1. Jimmy Chambers in the lab at Donegall Quay, c.1958

2. Arthur Willis stitching bags at the one-ton mixer, c.1957

3. Bobby Rainey (left) and Albert Keys at the cubing, packing and stitching area, c.1958

4. c.1960. Hand trucks were used to move pallets of cwt bags around the upper-storey bag warehouse (pictured, Hugh 'HP' Prentice).

5. The bagged intake, c.1958. Raw materials bags were 'ripped and tipped' onto conveyors, thence to holding raw material bins. Pictured: Sammy Owens (left) and Jimmy Robinson.

Family members at this pre-war company gathering are, left to right: James (second row, centre, with spectacles) and Hilda; Maureen and Raymond; Betty and Melville; and Raymond's brother Bobby.



These bags were also put to use at the mill, where they were made into working aprons and hats for the men.

Most of the men worked a seventy-hour week during the busier winter months, including four hours on Saturday and eight on Sunday. Because sacks were constantly being dropped from the shoulder or emptied by hand, there was dust everywhere. With virtually no extraction, the cloud of dust was sometimes so dense that two packers working together couldn't see each other; indeed, for much of the time they couldn't hear each other either for the clatter of machinery.

In 1956, a manual packing system was still being used in tandem with the high-speed system that would eventually replace it. Four men using a one-ton mixer could produce five tons per hour using the manual system. Sacks were ripped open and tipped in according to a list on the formula card for that particular feed: six bags of maize, two bags of soya, minerals, vitamins and so on. All was added by hand. It was hot, noisy, dusty, backbreaking work; but these were the days before health and safety, and as one employee remarked years later: 'Only a sissy would have complained.'²

The new high-speed system, known fondly by a grateful workforce as the 'Big Dipper' and capable of mixing and packing thirty-two tons per hour, had replaced the manual system by 1958. Raw materials came by conveyor from the bins, and the grinding, mixing and weighing was fully automated. One man could pack up to eighteen tons per hour, and two Big Dipper mixers could keep three packers, at three separate packing stations, continuously supplied.

It wasn't all hi-tech. Around the same time, in a mildly bizarre and wholly endearing development, James Thompson had a number of timber chicken houses built on the roof of the mill, for the purpose of monitoring feed performance. Apparently he spent a good deal of time up there, and who knows whether it was worth the effort; but if nothing else, it paints a telling picture of the man.³



Raymond Thompson



Melville Thompson



Peter Thompson



Robin Thompson

New owners

‘What will happen to the mill when I’m gone?’

The winds of change began to blow for the Thompson family in 1961. James, now eighty-three, confided his thoughts about the future of the mill, which after all had been his life for over fifty years, to his daughter Pat, saying, ‘What will happen to the mill when I’m gone?’

As things turned out, it was a fair question, but not because the family was lacking in either ability or enthusiasm. Pat had been a regular attendee at board meetings for many years, and although she had never been actively involved in the business, that was perhaps a reflection of the times rather than her management potential. True, her older brother Melville, though heir apparent to their father, had worsening health problems and only an ex circumstantia interest in the mill; but William’s son Raymond had been highly effective in the company for three decades (latterly as commercial director), had worked closely with his uncle James, whom he hugely admired, for years (the warmth was mutual – James once said that without Raymond, he would never have been able to rebuild the mill after the Blitz), and got on very well with his cousin Melville. Raymond’s twenty-year-old son Robin was studying for a degree in agriculture at Queen’s, and Robin’s second cousin, twenty-two-year-old Peter Thompson (Melville’s son) had recently graduated from Cambridge with a B.Sc.(Agric.): it had never occurred to either that they would not in due course join the family business, and both had strong ambitions for the mill. Indeed when Peter, the older of the two, said he was thinking of taking flying lessons at a Newtownards flying club, James remarked that he felt it too risky for a future owner of the business: clearly, James saw the future in terms of family.

For the moment, that future lay in the hands of the directors and major shareholders – James, his wife Hilda, Raymond, Melville and Pat – and while James was chairman, any fundamental change, certainly any change of ownership, was unthinkable.

On 20 February 1962, James Thompson died in Belfast after a short illness. His passing was reported by both daily newspapers the following day, the *Belfast Telegraph* describing him as ‘an expert on animal nutrition and a pioneer of many developments in the field of animal feeding stuffs, especially compound foods’; adding the very telling comment that ‘Mr. Thompson was in the company for 62 years and was in his office daily until a week ago’.¹



A Thompsons sales team at the Balmoral Show in 1964. Pictured are Peter Thompson (back row, far right) and Matt Hayes (front row, third from right). In the early 1970s, Matt founded Skea Eggs, a very successful egg packing and marketing business. The company has always been a key customer of John Thompson & Sons.



Pat Aldwell,
James Thompson's daughter

It is accepted within the Thompson family that James would have been less than delighted with the turn of events that followed his death; and indeed there were reservations among the surviving family shareholders. But the consensus was that there would never be a better time to take the biggest leap since incorporation in 1905: to seek a buyer for the company. Profits were strong, as was the balance sheet; James had been the driving force for thirty-five years, and in terms of sheer dedication would be a hard act to follow; and his death gave rise to a significant liability for inheritance tax, which there were insufficient funds (James having died relatively asset-rich but cash-poor) outside the company to meet. But by far the most important consideration was the Labour government's stated intention to introduce, for the first time, a tax on capital gains: if a sale were left too late, there would potentially be a substantial liability.²

So, the shareholders quietly made it known that they would consider offers for the company. Over on York Road, Unilever's BOCM Silcock more than glanced in its direction. They carried out an audit (which found, to the great satisfaction of the board, that the company was doing things right) and began discussions; but in the end these went nowhere because BOCM wanted to make part-payment in its own shares, a proposal which left Melville in particular, who had been appointed chairman and managing director on his father's death, unimpressed.



William Barnett

It was entirely natural that Melville would discuss the company's future with his friend William Barnett, chairman of W&R Barnett, the grain merchants. Having supplied raw materials to Thompsons and its competitors for many years, Barnetts was intimately involved in the feed business and well placed to take a strategic view. The upshot, in March 1964, was a three-way purchase of the company by Barnetts, R&H Hall and the feed and flour millers, Isaac Andrews, in equal shares. Barnetts and Halls had been trading partners in the grain business since 1953, and of course Thompsons, Barnetts and Halls had been doing business for over sixty years, so there was a clear synergy in that part of the arrangement. Andrews, on the other hand, was a direct competitor of Thompsons, so its involvement was a little harder for some of the workforce to accommodate; but

Andrews was a well-respected family company with a long and successful history (its first flour mill opened in Comber in 1722), and was known to have good management systems. Moreover, as Andrews would have to dig deep to finance its one-third share as indeed would Barnetts and Halls, the company could be relied upon to be thoroughly invested, in every sense of the word.

Melville Thompson, who had made it clear he intended to retire, stayed on as chairman and managing director pro tem, but stepped aside after the sale in favour of his cousin Raymond and the former managing director of Isaac Andrews, Sam Meharg, who became, de facto, joint managing directors. To help fill James's role on the production side, Bob McClure was brought in from White, Tomkins & Courage as production manager. He reported to Raymond, who broadly continued in his commercial role, sourcing everything from packaging to proteins, corn to cars on the company's behalf. Unlike his uncle James, whose main interest had been in product, Raymond concentrated on costs, margins and the bottom line, and indeed had played a key role in maintaining Thompsons' position as the most profitable feed company in Northern Ireland.

Raymond's son Robin joined the company, first as Sam Meharg's assistant and later moving to marketing, purchasing and personnel, making his mark in the latter with some progressive thinking in 1967.³ He shared an office with Melville's son Peter, who



Peter, Sandra, Robin and Cathy Thompson at the staff dinner dance at the Kings Arms Hotel, Larne, c.1964



Hands-on: James (second left) and Raymond (far right), with two representatives from BOCM, 1958

had responsibility for sales. Peter – who talked, thought and perhaps lived at more speed than most – is remembered as having a natural talent, and a measure of his grandfather's affinity with the feed business.⁴

Unsurprisingly, Raymond did not have quite the same enthusiasm for the business after the sale. He saw his role as facilitating the handover to his meantime co-manager Sam Meharg; helping Robin and Peter to find their feet in the business – in particular, to gain an understanding of the company's relationship with suppliers and the purchase of raw materials and nutrients – and otherwise putting in place arrangements to fill the gaps left by his uncle's death. He retired in 1969.⁵

Sadly, his cousin Melville did not live to enjoy his retirement. In 1965, at the age of fifty-four, he suffered a fatal brain haemorrhage.

Melville had been the last Thompson to sit as chairman; and if his death represents the end of an era, there is nevertheless a sense that his grandfather John – tough, pragmatic Victorian entrepreneur that he was – would have been gratified, not only that the future of the mill was in the hands of a trio of long-established family businesses like his own, and that Thompson family members were still involved in its management, but also that the company he founded had acquired, eighty-five years on, a new lease of life with potential for further expansion.



Thompsons trade stand



Loading flatbed lorries at Donegall Quay

Bags to bulk

‘It never came to fisticuffs ...’

The Donegall Quay site became increasingly cramped during the 1960s and ’70s. The mill was built to the pavement, with no parking and very little manoeuvring space inside the gates, so merchants and farmers buying bagged feed would begin gathering in Tomb Street, Gamble Street and further afield the night before collection, sleeping in their lorries and taking their place in the queue early next morning.

Derek Glover, whose father started a feed merchants business after the war on the family farm near Crossgar, remembers joining this daily log jam in an ex-army petrol Bedford, which he used to load with up to two tons of feed in 100-cwt bags.¹ On one occasion, an unfortunate driver – who was close to the front of the queue when he went to sleep – woke a little late to find himself comprehensively overtaken by a line of others, none of whom had thought to rouse him. According to Derek, ‘It never came to fisticuffs, but there was competition . . .’

The constraints of the site, together with a massive increase in volume – by 1965 the mill was handling around 180,000 tons annually – imposed a degree of discipline. Efficiency was key, and an opportunity to improve it was provided by two major changes within the industry. The first had been underway since deregulation: more automation, less handling. (The trend continues. Compared with even ten years ago, bag handling today is unrecognisable. A ‘packing line’, rather quaintly, still exists, but there is only one person in attendance, and he or she works from a remote computer. An enormous roll of plastic sleeving, pre-printed with the name of one of fourteen generic bagged feeds, is auto-fed into the bagging machine, where it is cut to single-bag lengths, printed as to formulation, heat-sealed at one end, held open, filled with feed, heat-sealed at the other end, dropped on its side and fed to a robotic palletiser, which recognises its position and orientation, grabs it, rotates it and stacks it with great precision onto a pallet. There is virtually no dust, noise or smell.)

The second major change, which swept through the mills from around the time the company changed ownership, was brought into sharp focus when in 1966 Jack Luke, Thompsons’ production manager, walked into Sam Meharg’s office and announced that in the previous week, the company had turned out 4,000 tons, of which 1,000 was . . . bulk.



Andy McClurg (right) with John 'Dixie' Logan, c.1958. The Commer is loaded with bags of chick mash. Andy was with Thompsons for forty-eight years, retiring as production director in 2004.



Bulk lorry, Pepper (Dromore) Ltd

Bulk delivery of raw materials had been a reality for years, but the transition to bulk finished feed changed the industry forever. Together with greater automation, it meant fewer hands, and a comparison between manpower levels in 1960 and 2012 is telling enough. In 1960 the big Belfast mills produced approximately 800,000 tons per annum between them and employed around 1,700 people: 150–250 at E.T. Greens, 250–300 at White, Tompkins & Courage, 50 at James Clow, 400 at AFM, 350 at Andrews, and 350–400 at John Thompson & Sons. Today, with a workforce of 167, Thompsons alone is producing more than the combined 1960 tonnage of all six.

It wasn't just the need for efficiencies that drove the change to bulk. Farms were becoming bigger and more mechanised, farm labourers were harder to find, and a new and dynamic feature had been added to the agricultural landscape: a network of independent farms producing broiler chickens, on contract to processors who were operating on an increasingly industrial scale which was wholly unsuited to the handling of bagged feed. Critically, the processors had their own fleets of bulk lorries. The biggest operator in this field was Dungannon Park, later Moy Park, which twenty years on would work closely with Thompsons to bring about another revolution – this time on an international scale.



Robert Capper with his first bulk feed lorry, 1968

Relationships

‘We didn’t just go out to sell feed; we went out to build relationships, and some of those relationships have lasted literally a lifetime ... It’s not all smooth, but if you have faith and trust in people you can resolve anything.’¹

From 1935 to 1966 the Northern Ireland Road Transport Board and its successor, the Ulster Transport Authority, had control of road transport (for hire) in Northern Ireland. The only way that companies could circumvent this monopoly was to run their own lorries, so Thompsons operated a fleet and employed drivers until the early 1970s. This was intrinsically inefficient for two reasons: first, it was hard to incentivise wage-earning drivers, who had the potential to earn overtime, to get product out to a rapidly expanding network of merchants as fast as possible; and second, when there were breakdowns or accidents it was the company’s responsibility to keep the feed moving – a role more suited to a haulage firm than a feed mill.

Following denationalisation in 1966, the first Belfast mill to introduce owner-drivers was the rather smaller, and much-respected, James Clow. A scheme was devised whereby the company acquired bulk lorries and sold them by instalments to prospective owner-drivers.² The size of the instalments, critically, was linked to the tonnage delivered, and this linkage brought enormous benefits to both mill and haulier.

In time, most of the mills, including Thompsons, moved to using owner-drivers, some of whom went on to build substantial fleets. Robert Capper bought his first Commer lorry in 1968, delivered the second-ever bulk load out of R.Silcock & Sons at York Road, and went on to establish a relationship with Thompsons which has lasted for over forty years. Cappers now handles all Thompsons’ deliveries of poultry feed to Moy Park,³ as well as bulk deliveries throughout Armagh, Tyrone and much of Fermanagh and Donegal.

For a few years, indeed, Cappers had a clear run, the only other firms hauling out of Thompsons being merchants with their own lorries; but the Ulster Workers’ Strike in 1974 provided Thompsons with a wake-up call that changed all that. When it became clear that the strike was likely to be rigorously enforced and Belfast effectively paralysed,

Thompsons’ sales manager, Victor Truesdale, called Robert Capper and told him to come to Donegall Quay at 4 a.m., empty every bin of finished feed in the mill and take the lot to Cappers’ premises at Dungannon, from where, he hoped, there would be a better chance of getting it distributed. The feed was duly collected and sent out to customers, but word got out, and within twenty-four hours the gates of Cappers’ depot at Dungannon were blockaded from the outside by a serious-looking cadre of hardliners.

Meanwhile, production had continued at the mill – indeed, Andy McClurg, the then production manager with responsibility for employee relations, had won concessions for animal feed deliveries from the Ulster Workers’ Council – and with bins replenished and customers waiting, Victor Truesdale put in a call to Robert, asking, ‘Where are the lorries?’

For Thompsons, the whole episode pointed up the vulnerabilities inherent in over-reliance on one contractor. The upshot was that Sam Meharg asked Robert Capper to come to his office, where he explained that, whilst Capper had stepped up to the mark and could have done no more, he had no choice but to spread the company’s risk by speaking to other hauliers.



Alan Pepper (front) and John Dobbin, c.1965



M. Keys Ltd. delivers Thompsons’ ruminant feed to the Republic of Ireland and to parts of Tyrone and Fermanagh, and all its pig feed, North and South.

One candidate was the Dromore-based family firm of Peppers, run by Alan and Derek Pepper, who had been hauling feed from Levers’ York Road plant since 1965. For thirty-eight years now, Peppers have been delivering Thompsons’ ruminant bulk feeds throughout Down and Antrim, part of Londonderry and beyond – as a family they strongly believe, like so many others in the agri-food industry, in building long-term relationships.

Today, Thompsons works with a third haulier, Malcolm Keys of Clogher, which delivers ruminant feed to Fermanagh, Tyrone and the Republic of Ireland, in addition to delivering all of Thompsons’ pig feed.

All three haulage firms are rural at heart, focused on customer support 24/7 and, although operating as contractors, are very much a part of the mill’s customer service: apart from anything else, the driver often represents the most regular point of contact between mill and farmer, and timely feedback to the mill is a valuable asset.

The logistics of distribution have evolved with the industry. In the early years, most feed was collected, using horse and dray, by the farmer from the mill or, more typically, from small grocer-merchants (much like John Thompson’s Shankill Road grocery store)



Thompsons east sales team, 1995. From left: Kenny Aitken, Michael Graham, Stanley Holland, Harry Watterson, Jimmy Thompson, Jackie Fall, Robert McCaw, Donald Coulter (sales manager), Wesley Johnston, Mark Fielding and Gordon Donaldson (current sales director)

to whom delivery from the mill was by rail, dray or a combination of both. Over time, tractor and trailer replaced horse and dray, and until well after the Second World War it was common for eggs to be bartered for feed at the back of the grocer's, since laying hens were a staple of every farm, regardless of size. With the advent of motor transport by road, grocers were replaced by small country merchants, often farm-based, who could stock larger quantities, not just of feed but of fertilizer, seed and other farm supplies.

Thompsons' guiding philosophy, which turned out to be highly successful, was to keep the range broad and to encourage the reps to open accounts, no matter how small: in the context of an agricultural community where every farmer kept a few cattle, a few pigs, a few hens, the volume soon added up. Then, as farms invested in scale, and bulk deliveries became the norm, country merchants grew bigger and began running their own fleets. The company responded, from the mid-1960s, by itself building a network of merchants, mainly through acquisition of local operations with which they already had a trading relationship.⁴ But this muddled the waters of competition, and over time, many of these operations either devolved back to their original owners or they closed. Now, there are three clear lines of distribution: wholesale to the merchant; retail to the farm; or

to buying groups set up by farms that pool resources to negotiate terms.

Whatever the conduit, the principle is the same: the feed must go through. In December 2010, when Arctic conditions persisted for three weeks across Northern Ireland, it became a daily trial to keep animals fed. Drivers' maximum hours were temporarily relaxed, farmers helped by transferring loads at lane-ends, and the hauliers had support teams with salt and sand on standby, to keep lorries on the move. When one Capper lorry became stuck on a long incline en route to a Moy Park supplier, the driver took some photographs which made it into *Farming Life* the following week with the caption: 'Pony Express – Northern Ireland-style', a reference to the famous 1861 slogan: 'The mail must get through!'



Winter 2010, Cappers' gritting hit squad in attendance



Joe Turner transfers a pallet of finished bagged feed on Gamble Street, mid-1970s. Space became so tight at Donegall Quay that lorries often had to be loaded in the surrounding streets.

Expansion

‘It was like wiring a jumbo jet.’

In 1986 Allan Price, the managing director of BOCM Silcock – whose York Road plant, by virtue of its sheer size, had so impressed other mills when it was commissioned in 1959 – approached Patrick Montgomery at a meeting of the trade body UKASTA with a suggestion. At the time Montgomery sat on the board of W&R Barnett with responsibility for feed milling interests. He was also acting managing director of Thompsons.

BOCM operated twenty-two mills in the UK, with around 25–30 per cent of the animal feed market in Great Britain and over 10 per cent in Northern Ireland; but the company was unhappy with its margins and had been losing volume and profitability at the Belfast plant since the mid-1970s. This was partly the result of under-investment during the Troubles by its London-based parent company, the mighty Unilever – not unusual for multinationals, and certainly not peculiar to the feed industry. It was felt that the company should either quit Northern Ireland altogether, or acquire much-needed tonnage; so Price’s mission was to sound out Barnetts about the possibility of Unilever acquiring all or part of Thompsons. Patrick took this suggestion to Robert Barnett, who promptly turned the idea on its head: what, he said, if we were to buy BOCM instead?

From Thompsons’ perspective, there was a good deal of logic in this idea. With output at well over 200,000 tonnes, Donegall Quay was bursting at the seams, with sometimes chaotic consequences for hauliers and the general public – car drivers and pedestrians alike. Various neighbouring premises in Gamble or Tomb streets had already been bought or rented to accommodate extra weighbridges and storage; but when the only property big enough to make a real difference, J.T. Sinclair’s curing premises, came up for sale, the Royal Mail intimated that however deep the company’s pockets were, its were deeper.¹ Moving had seemed a sensible option for some time, and indeed would shortly become the only one: the projected route of the new M3 bridge and flyover at Donegall Quay would cut across the northeast corner of the site.

There were alternatives. The management team had looked at sites in and around Belfast for a proposed £2.5 million ‘super-mill’. But after protracted discussions, a model for the way forward, which accommodated the interests of all five parties – Thompsons, Unilever, Barnetts, Halls and Andrews – was agreed in principle. Unilever

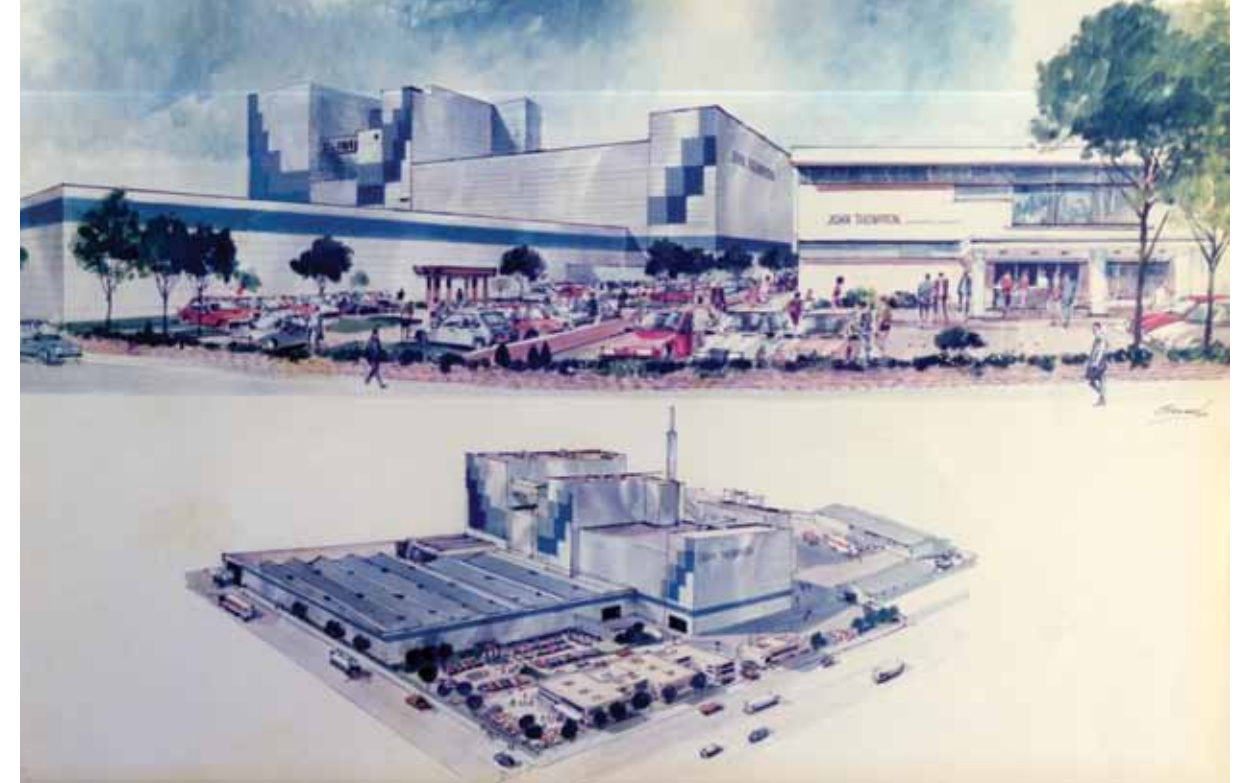
would acquire Andrews' shares in Thompsons; its holding would in turn be optioned by Barnetts and Halls after five years; BOCM Silcock NI Ltd would cease to exist; Thompsons would absorb all of BOCM's tonnage into Donegall Quay; and, as soon as York Road had been redesigned, substantially rebuilt and modernised, the tonnage would transfer to the new mill.

Patrick Montgomery travelled to the United States, and a Thompsons' team to Holland, Germany and elsewhere, to look at other mills; and they came back with ideas for sweeping logistical changes based on best practice in the industry.² Patrick persuaded the colourful Jack Corney to look at the designs on the table;³ it was Corney who recommended moving from pre- to post-grind, a step change in terms of flow which was, in the end, adopted on a permanent basis – another first for Thompsons in Northern Ireland.⁴

By early 1987, a design for a remodelled York Road mill had been agreed. For the production team the challenge was enormous, first in absorbing BOCM's tonnage at the already-stretched Donegall Quay site while York Road was overhauled, and then



Thompsons' Donegall Quay premises are demolished, 1991.



Artist's impression of the upgraded premises at York Road in 1997

in transferring production seamlessly between mills, as and when the new press lines were commissioned.

The plan was to use the spring–summer window – when, in particular, there was less demand for dairy feed – to transfer production to Donegall Quay, install the new pelleting presses and hundreds of tons of ancillary equipment at York Road, and move the bulk of both mills' production to the new eight-acre site – all within six months. It was a massive logistical challenge – Patrick Montgomery said of the engineering task alone that it was 'like wiring a jumbo jet'. The first two press lines at York Road began producing in September 1987, and the bulk of production had moved by November, just seven months after delivery of the first plant. Construction and assembly continued over the winter, and York Road finally took on 100 per cent of the combined tonnage of Thompsons and the old BOCM in early 1988.

In the space of two years Thompsons had gone from 200,000 to more than 300,000 tonnes per annum. The workforce swelled temporarily from 150 to 300, but quickly shrunk back to 140 on the strength of improvements built into the new mill: where before annual output was 1,300 tonnes per employee, now it was 2,100 tonnes. In terms of efficiency this was a major advance, albeit the trend has continued – indeed accelerated – in the twenty-five years since: the ratio in 2012 was one man for every 5,000 tonnes.

Remarkably, during this exercise and in similar reorganisations over the years, streamlining of the workforce was generally achieved by natural shrinkage rather than layoffs; with so many long-serving employees, there was always scope for voluntary redundancy or retirement.

Seven 60 tonne bins were added to the biosecure mill in June 2005. The main bio mill was completed in 1998.



Biosecurity

‘Time and temperature’

In 1964, a young Eric Reid, whose father farmed poultry, cattle and pigs at Richhill, spent six months in Canada and the US under an International Farmers’ Youth Exchange Programme. In Maryland, he spent time with a contract grower who supplied broilers to a large US-based processing company; and its operation so impressed him that he returned to Northern Ireland fired with enthusiasm for a new model for the industry, based on the simple concept of integrated production.

Hitherto, the UK’s nascent poultry industry (up to 1961, chicken meat had largely been a by-product of egg production) had been based on the principle of company-managed farms. The new model for Northern Ireland would involve hundreds of independent growers, each having an exclusive contractual relationship with a single processor, under which the company would supply the eggs and the feed, and the farmers would supply broilers at an annually renegotiated price.

Integrated production turned out to be a hugely successful formula. When Reid joined processors Moy Park (then known as Dungannon Park) in 1966, the company’s output was around thirty thousand birds per week. Since then the agricultural team, headed by Reid as production director, has driven the weekly figure to over eight million. The company is now the largest hatching egg producer, the only integrated grandparent distributor, and one of the largest processors in the EU.¹

With Moy Park and others undergoing such rapid growth, there was much competition among feed manufacturers to supply them. By the mid-1980s, only Clows, Dalgety and Thompsons were still supplying; but the dynamics of the sector – and the fortunes of all three mills – were about to change forever, courtesy of unwelcome visitors as high-profile as they were invisible: salmonella and E. coli.

It had long been known that it was especially important in the poultry industry to protect against salmonella and E. coli. For the feed mills, this presented a challenge, as contaminated feed was one of many potential vehicles for the spread of disease. Thompsons was fortunate to have on the team a man who was uniquely qualified, by disposition and experience, to meet that challenge. Victor Truesdale had worked for Moy Park in the mid-1960s and joined Thompsons as poultry advisor in 1971, quickly rising



Delivering to Moy Park grower Colin Donnelly, Ballygawley



Left to right: Eric Reid of Moy Park, Desmond O'Kane (of O'Kane Poultry, Ballymena) and Victor Truesdale

to sales director with responsibility for all feeds, ruminant as well as poultry. There was a meeting of minds between Victor at Thompsons and Eric Reid at Moy Park. Long before Edwina Currie made her famous remark in 1988 about the prevalence of salmonella in eggs (a remark that lost the industry 20 per cent of its volume), both men were concerned about the mortality rate in flocks and how to combat it by guaranteeing a supply of pathogen-free feed.

War was declared on the feed miller's perennial enemies, vermin and pigeons – to eradicate one and exclude the other.² In addition, raw materials and finished product were kept as far apart as possible; the press lines were meticulously cleaned between batches; bulk lorries were enclosed; and all poultry feed was cooked, before pelletising, for longer and at higher temperatures. The new watchword was 'biosecurity' and the mantra became 'time and temperature'.

The process began on Patrick Montgomery's watch and was enthusiastically adopted by his successor John McAuley, who assembled a team – including Victor Truesdale, production director Andy McClurg, and the then engineering manager Aidan Mitchell, technical director George McIlroy and, as consultant on disease control, Professor Brian McFerran of Queen's – for a ground-up re-examination of biosecurity at York Road. It was decided to seal off an entire poultry feed facility, insofar as was



The robot palletising machine at York Road



Victor Truesdale

physically possible, from the rest of the mill – to build, in effect, a mill-within-a-mill. Commissioned in 1998, the biosecure mill today produces over 350,000 tonnes per annum of poultry feed alone, twice the total output, for all feeds, of Thompsons’ nearest competitors in Northern Ireland. It is unique around the world, and a testament to the strong and open relationship that exists between Barnetts, Thompsons and Moy Park.

Happily, Victor Truesdale, who so passionately blazed the biosecure trail alongside his friend Eric Reid, lived to see the mill fully commissioned. During the latter stages of the project he was fighting cancer, and he died in 2001 at the tragically early age of fifty-seven. In a letter to his widow Ann, Robert Barnett described him in glowing terms: ‘Victor was the public face of Thompsons.’

All change

‘As much as anything, it’s down to the experience of the entire staff, which includes sales, production, engineering and administration.’

The reward for such single-minded pursuit of biosecurity was a near-exclusive deal to supply Moy Park. If that was a coup for Thompsons, it was something of a blow for the under-bidders, Dalgety, whose mill had been supplying Moy Park with poultry feed since the 1970s; but the new developments coincided with a strategic decision by Australian-owned Dalgety to exit feed milling across the UK, and in 1997 Phillip Lynch, chief executive of the Irish Agricultural Wholesale Society (IAWS), which had acquired Halls in 1991 and was thus a 50 per cent shareholder in Thompsons, agreed the purchase of Dalgety in Northern Ireland by IAWS and its trading partners, Barnetts.¹

As with BOCM ten years before, the Thompsons team was tasked with moving equipment to York Road from Dalgetys’ Clarendon mill in Corporation Street – without losing that mill’s considerable volume. In the event, Dalgetys’ sales force, many of whom transferred to Thompsons, did manage to hold volume while production moved over, and the Clarendon mill was duly closed.

By absorbing Dalgetys’ Belfast operation Thompsons was, in a sense, inheriting four large Belfast mills at the same time. In 1941 Rank Hovis had diversified from its dockside grain import and flour milling business by acquiring E.T. Green, at Ann Street and Donegall Quay; Rank/E.T. Green had then acquired White, Tomkins & Courage in 1976, moving to the Clarendon mill at Corporation Street and becoming RHM Ltd (Rank Hovis McDougall); and finally, in 1984, the Belfast operation of RHM Ltd had been acquired by Dalgety.

With the absorption of Dalgety, BOCM and others, there was invariably a technology exchange agreement, which meant that while Thompsons inexorably grew, its knowledge base and technological capability grew with it: the multinationals, in particular, had enjoyed years of substantial investment in research and development, the rewards of which they were contractually obliged to share with Thompsons, and there were always lessons to be learned in terms of best (or occasionally worst) practice.



Robert Barnett

Elsewhere, there were similar manoeuvrings. By 2000, Robert Wilson Ltd had been acquired by Andrews Holdings Ltd (formed in 1987 following a directors' buyout of Isaac Andrews) to become A.H. Feeds Ltd; United Dairy Farmers had then bought into A.H. Feeds to form United Feeds Ltd.; Andrews was no longer in animal feeds at all, having transferred its production to United Feeds so as to concentrate on flour at its Percy Street mill; and some of the smaller mills had closed altogether. The only compounders left in Belfast were Thompsons, Clows and United Feeds. Outside the city, there were Bibbys in Lisburn, Scotts of Omagh (later acquired by Fane Valley) and McLarnons in Randalstown (owned by O'Kane Poultry and later inherited by Moy Park with its acquisition of O'Kane); as well as a number of smaller country compounders producing 50–80,000 tonnes annually, including Hutchisons (Cookstown), Moores (Broughshane), Masons (Armagh), Irwins (Benburb) and Chestnutts (Antrim). Of all of them, Thompsons was the largest by a factor of three, turning out almost 500,000 tonnes annually.

Of those three remaining Belfast mills, James Clow was perhaps the most vulnerable. It was a good and highly adaptable mill but it was relatively small – in 2000, annual volume was around 70,000 tonnes – and it was heavily reliant on a single sector. Thompsons, on the other hand, was unshakably multi-species and had seen that the future lay in scale. Already a wholly-owned subsidiary of Barnetts, Clows was absorbed by Thompsons over the three years to 2002, following the familiar formula established with BOCM and refined with Dalgety: while Thompsons upgraded, volume was maintained at Clows, all production moving to York Road only when the move could be achieved without loss of tonnage.

Although the additional volume from Clows was relatively modest, it was enough to establish Thompsons as the largest multi-species feed mill in Europe, at 650,000 tonnes annually. And in 2008 part of yet another multinational, Bibbys, operating from its Lisburn mill as ABN (Associated British Nutrition), became part of the Thompsons family. At the time of writing, the logistical operation is ongoing but the acquisition of ABN, a quarter of whose 200,000-tonne volume was in pig feed, has consolidated Thompsons' position in that sector and provided yet another talented sales force on which to draw.

It has perplexed others in the industry that Thompsons has managed, time after time, to squeeze extra volume from a mill which was already, so it appeared, producing to capacity. However, without extending the site, Thompsons has managed to augment volume year on year, so that now, with production at over 850,000 tonnes, the new target is a million. Certainly, the long runs of broiler feed that are possible in the biosecure mill, which accounts for three of the ten press lines and approximately 40 per cent of total volume, are a factor; but much more important are the less tangible assets of sound management, a dedicated sales force and robust systems. Financial director Fintan Craig comments: 'as much as anything, it's down to the experience of the entire staff, which includes sales, production, engineering and administration'.



In the field

‘At present the lion’s share of the value is captured by the supermarkets, and the lion’s share of the costs rest with the farmer. How long can that continue?’

The agri-food industry has experienced turbulent times in 2012 and 2013.

To take just one area: maize and soya are the world’s most important feed ingredients, and the United States is the biggest exporter of both, accounting for half the world’s maize, and 40 per cent of its soya bean trade. At the beginning of July 2012, the price of soya in Belfast was £340 per ton; by mid-August it was £416 – a jump of 22 per cent in six weeks, or the equivalent of over 200 per cent per annum. The figures for maize, corn and other raw materials were equally volatile, and the buyers at Thompsons and other mills, as indeed the grain importers themselves, were unable to do much about it: in the case of corn, the price on world markets is fixed, more or less, by the Chicago Board of Trade, and the Midwestern corn belt – the breadbasket of the world – was in the grip of the most sustained drought in decades, with awful implications for the 2012 harvest.

When climate plays havoc with the price of grain, the effect on farmers can be immediate and severe. In Northern Ireland, where land is almost exclusively owner-occupied and farming is in the blood, the sector has been characterised by an unfailingly forward-looking attitude and a determination to scale up, to modernise and to invest; but when, say, a dairy farmer working a fifteen-hour day and investing in the latest milking technology, finds that he is getting 24p per litre for milk that is costing 26p per litre to produce, his resilience is tested.

If agriculture is in crisis, there is a sense within the feed industry, and certainly at Thompsons, that farmers and millers are in it together. Part of the problem and arguably most of the answer lies further down the agri-food chain: in recessionary times, when government is preoccupied with inflation and the price of food, there seems little outside pressure on supermarkets to pay a fair price for farm produce. In the dairy sector in particular, this problem is compounded by the fact that 80 per cent of Northern Ireland’s milk output is processed for export and is, as such, a global commodity. This means that



Thompsons consultant, Professor Fred Gordon, takes a 'hands-on' approach to grassland management at a farm workshop held in County Monaghan.

the dairy sector is squeezed by commodities-driven, supply- and demand-side pressures simultaneously: the rising cost of raw materials on the one hand, with its consequent impact on animal feed prices, and the relentless pressure for lower food prices on the other (the culprits there are the supermarkets or the consumer, depending on which you ask).

'At present,' says current CEO Declan Billington, 'the lion's share of the value is captured by the supermarket, and the lion's share of the costs rest with the farmer. How long can that continue?' As things stand, so much of the ticket price is absorbed by the supermarket's 40 per cent mark-up, that all too often the producer gets nothing – or indeed less than nothing.

On the supply side – the price of feed – there isn't very much the mill can do about the cost of raw materials except to buy forward or pay daily raw material prices, both of which require substantial financing. However, a great deal of investment has gone into those areas where the company *can* make a difference: the quality, breadth and performance of the product offering on the one hand, and a robust support structure for customers on the other.

Raymond Thompson, who looked after purchasing in the early 1960s, used to say that while every effort was made to achieve least-cost formulation using calculated analysis, his uncle James Thompson always put quality before cost. In 2012, when the 'Pioneers of Better Feeding Stuffs' strapline was replaced by the punchier 'Feeding Innovation', the message was still the same.

In the drive for products that deliver better performance and therefore better value, Thompsons has been prepared to invest, and to take the long view. For example, in 2008, with support from Invest NI and in collaboration with AFBI (Agri-Food and Biosciences

Institute) in Hillsborough and forty-two local dairy farms, the company spearheaded a £500,000 research programme to develop and test a new dairy feed supplement. The result, after three years of clinical and on-farm research and observation, was Rumitech, a next-generation compound which improves rumen function and increases milk yield and quality by 7 per cent.



The result of three years' research, Rumitech was introduced in 2011

A close second to quality is range. According to Billington, the drivers for farmers are broad range and good support. As evidence of its commitment to a multi-species, broad-range approach, Thompsons list almost four hundred compound feed diets covering dairy and beef cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, chickens and turkeys; and in 2008 a new blending facility was built at the York Road site, now producing over 90,000 tonnes per annum of bespoke blends – a flexible alternative to compound rations. This is more than a niche offering. At farm level, it is part of the job of the field staff to work with farmers to design a diet regime for their livestock, in their particular circumstances. The advantage of a blended feed is that its formulation can be adjusted at any time, according to variables like herd performance and silage quality – both, these days, monitored with a high degree of sophistication by farmer and nutritionist.



Thompsons' laboratory at York Road. Left to right: foreground, James Mitchell, David Montgomery and Heather Kerrigan; background. Robert Dunlop and Hadyn Murray.



Ten press lines and three blending lines are monitored from the control room, where primary and backup systems run in tandem round the clock (pictured, operators Noel Lowry and Larry Mahood).

Sales rep, farm advisor, nutritionist and haulier (not just the company but the individual drivers) are each part of a mutually dependent support team. Collectively, they are the company's day-to-day point of contact with the customer and one of the mill's most valuable resources – the link with the operations, sales and support infrastructure at York Road. The field staff liaise with formulators, the buyer, customer services, production, finance and haulier; all with a view, ultimately, to delivering value and quality on farm. Knowledge is indeed power, and communication is key: the company operates an extrapolative sales system, for example, which depends on accurate historical reporting and good communication between sales rep, customer and customer services to keep the bins topped up and the livestock fed.

This is how one sales rep describes his role:

There is a modern thinking that it's about the best deal, the best product, the best technical advice; as sales guys, yes, that's important – but it's about people and relationships. You build friendships and you tread the line: you're a politician, diplomat, friend. It's about people; it's not just about walking in and selling a ton of dairy nuts, it's about understanding people's concerns and how they work.



Looking ahead

‘Farmers are stewards of the land ... it’s in the DNA.’



Richard Moore,
presenting at a
Thompsons’ on-farm
workshop, 2012



James Black (left) discussing the
Greenmount Future Herd with
Mark Scott (CAFRE), 2012

If feed milling is the last bastion of industrial manufacturing in Northern Ireland, the wider agri-food industry is the last man standing of the economic giants – shipbuilding, engineering, rope, linen and agriculture – of the last century and a half.

This is not to suggest that the sector is in retreat, or that the outlook is bleak. On the contrary, the growth in output of the dairy and poultry sectors in particular is encouraging and has more than offset some shrinkage in the pig, and to a lesser extent beef, sectors; and if farmers in general can weather the present storm there are signs that in the coming years agriculture will emerge as the great new hope of Northern Ireland’s economy, with milling at its manufacturing heart.

The two great assets of the rural economy in Northern Ireland have always been, on the one hand, the rock-solid foundation of owner-occupancy on which it was built, and on the other, the sheer spirit of the agricultural community, for whom farming is in the blood and good husbandry is simply a responsibility that comes with the inherited role of land custodian. As Declan Billington says:

Farmers are so passionate: I’ve never known an industry like it. They believe they are stewards of the land, for their children and grandchildren; it’s in the DNA. They appreciate land as heritage, in a way that the man in the street can’t. That’s why they’re the last man standing.

One model of a brighter future for the farming community, in the context of a growing and increasingly urban world population which has a higher disposable income and demands a protein-based diet, may be that supermarkets can no longer as easily use imports to ratchet down the prices on the shelf. They may have to source not just from within Europe but much closer to home, and the farming community will be only too happy to oblige – at a fair price.

The future is full of opportunities, not just for the agri-food industry but for the wider community, and Thompsons, like its customers, has shown that it’s in it for the long haul and wants to play its part. That, really, is what the relentless investment in scale has been all about – staying in the game. And not just for the direct benefit of



The Victor Truesdale Prize has been awarded annually since 2002 to an outstanding student from Harper Adams University, with whom Thompsons has a long association. Winners include Graeme Treadwell (pictured, with Ann Truesdale and Thompsons MD John McAuley), and John Butterfly, Louth; Cathal McCarron, Tyrone; Peter Coburn, Tipperary; Maeve Moran, Mayo; Stuart Eakin and Jonathan Speers, Armagh; David O'Lone, Offaly; Andrew Helen and Paudie Fehin, Cork; and Chris Megarry, Antrim.



Sam Rooney, of Thompsons, presenting the trophy for the Champion Group of Three which was won by the Ayrshire breed. Exhibiting the champions are Sam Wadsworth, Stuart Baxter and Michael Hunter.



ABOVE CLOCKWISE:

Karen McFaul, from Customer Services, was one member of the Thompsons team that ran to raise money for Marie Curie in the Belfast marathon in 2012.

Small Fry Community Playgroup, Maguiresbridge. Children (from left), Sam Clarke, Eoin McCaffrey, Rory Clifford, and Jamie-Lee Doonan with (from left) playgroup leader Maureen Breen; Joan Jackman, Early Years; and Ian Jordan, Thompsons.

Garvagh Young Farmers Club taking victory at the annual Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster Tug of War competition at Balmoral Show in 2005



shareholders, or even customers. Corporate responsibility is a notion much flagged in the literature of companies who aspire to it, but at Thompsons, if you ask about schemes to encourage and reward students at colleges like Greenmount, Harper Adams or University College Dublin; employees' relay marathons and tea-and-sandwich fundraisers for Marie Curie; the Early Learning toy farm project for pre-schools; or numberless worthy causes around the country to which the company is alerted by its eyes and ears on the ground – the field staff – then the answer will invariably be, 'Yes, we do that, but we tend not to shout about it.' In the corporate environment, this is an endearing tendency.

And the company hasn't lost sight of the idea that milling is about feeding farm animals, and farm animals are about feeding people: in the areas of healthy consumption, convenience and nutrition, the consumer has much to gain from the feed industry's investment in research and development. Thompsons are proud to have been pioneers in projects like the development of spreadable butter, or Omega 3 eggs (with another longstanding customer, Matt Hayes of Skea Eggs). As Billington says:

Looking to the future, there are a lot of areas – like low-cholesterol meat, high-energy eggs – where you can improve human health through animal feeding, and the opportunity exists to achieve a lot more with our natural resources. That's what agri-food strategy is about: how do you grow the business while doing that?

That the company continues to ask the question suggests that it may already know the answer.



Notes

From farmer to miller

- Dwellings were assessed on the combined total: first class was 12 or more, second 6–11, third 3–5 and fourth 1–2. So, the remains of a house, with no roof and only one wall standing, was assessed, rather optimistically, as fourth class. There was only one other first-class dwelling in Craignageeragh.
- The Thompson farm was later bought by the McFall family. Leo McFall remembers his grandfather talking about the horse mill in operation on the original McFall family farm.
- 185–189 is now occupied by Ulster Bank.
- Belfast News Letter*, 22 July 1875
- Belfast News Letter*, 1 November 1879
- Obituary, *County Down Spectator*, 27 June 1925

Keeping it in the family

- The mill of J. Boland, Grand Canal Dock, Dublin
- Some Belfast mills, including James Clow, retained steam power for certain machinery until the 1960s.
- W&R Barnett was founded in 1896 and became a limited company in 1926.
- The other main importers were R&H Hall, who would also play a key role in Thompsons’ future; and later, Ranks.
- For haulage by road to and from the mill, which had relocated to Donegall Quay by 1905, motor vehicles had more or less replaced horses by the mid-1950s, but until at least 1962 a horse was kept tied to a ring, with hay and water, at the north end of Queen’s Bridge – a standby to assist other horses with loaded drays to make the rather steep, tight turn from Donegall Quay onto the bridge.
- The *Ordnance Survey* map from 1903 shows fields behind the house, and what may have been a cow shed.
- The eldest son, John (28) had left home to join the Church and was living in Dunminning, Co. Antrim; he later became Presbyterian minister in Clontibret, Co. Monaghan. Harry and Stafford both emigrated to British Columbia, and went into the motor engineering business in Vancouver. There was an eighth child, also Stafford, who was born in 1888 and died in infancy of ‘the black measles’. Yet another Stafford, the minister’s son, became a doctor and played international rugby, captaining Ireland in 1923.
- Edenderry Mill, Crumlin Road, had no connection with John Shaw Brown’s Edenderry Village Mill near Shaw’s Bridge.
- Belfast News Letter*, 24 June 1925

The coal face

- Of W&R Barnett Ltd, grain merchants.

Pioneers of better feeding stuffs

- The organ and plaque are still there.
- Thompson had accompanied his son Henry to Canada in 1911, the year that cubing machinery was installed in the mill: it seems likely that he was introduced to the new technology while visiting mills in North America.
- Belfast News Letter*, 24 June 1925

Ad wars

- Everyone liked William, the middle of the three brothers: he was a people person, a natural fit for personnel, with a ready sense of humour. His nephew Melville, James’s son, was particularly fond of him. He died in 1938, aged just sixty-two.

The Blitz

- So was William’s son Raymond. He and Melville spent much of their youth together; they were first cousins, but also lifelong friends. Pat remembers frequent trips to the mill, by car or rail, in company of her work-driven father. She was fond of a yard man at the mill called Gorman, who used to give her sweets with the words, ‘Don’t tell Mr James’.
- The reason for the musical chairs was that, the mill having been destroyed, James set up ‘temporary’ offices in early summer 1941 at his house off the Malone Road in Belfast, displacing himself and his family in the process. Hilda, by all accounts, was not impressed.
- James had thought the cost of the air raid shelter rather high, and Melville had said, ‘The alternative is a long time dead.’ His lighthearted comment presaged the family’s rather bleak experience of the war years (beyond the effects of the Blitz described below). Melville joined the navy and served in West Africa, returning to Europe towards the end of the war, where he was injured by a shell while carrying a wounded comrade to safety from the beach at Calais; he had a difficult war and never fully recovered his health. His sister Pat, in 1953, married Basil ‘Buzzy’ Aldwell, who as a Lieutenant in the Fleet Air Arm had been shot down during the Allied attack on Port Blair in 1943, and suffered appallingly at the hands of the Japanese as a prisoner of war. William’s son Robert (Bobby) joined the East Lancashires and was killed in 1940 in a road accident while training in the north of England. Bobby’s fun-loving sister Marjory joined the WAAF and died in Egypt, from meningitis, in 1945. Her mother Florence, therefore, lost husband William, son Robert and daughter Marjory, all in relatively quick succession. Finally, Joe – painter, composer, Fellow of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and the father of the white horse logo – died of prostate cancer in 1947.

- When the air raid sirens had sounded, several mill workers, mostly older men who were not eligible for military service, had rushed to the mill and driven the lorries to relative safety: the fleet, in fact, was virtually the only asset saved.

Baking the cake

- Until at least 1966, despatch dockets for finished feed were still called ‘Rail Dockets’.
- Andy McClurg, former production director, quoted in *Farm Week*, 1 April 2005
- It seems likely that the high-rise hen houses remained on the rooftop until 1963.

New owners

- Belfast Telegraph*, 21 February 1962
- In the event, James Callaghan introduced CGT in his 1965 budget, at a flat rate of 30 per cent, which would have cost the family a considerable amount of money.
- In pursuit of efficiencies, Sam Meharg and Robin Thompson brought in management consultants PA Management in 1967. They made a number of far-reaching changes, including palletising on the mill floor and streamlining of personnel. (Robin was in fact the last Thompson to work for the company. He left in 1972, spent five years as a management consultant with Coopers and Lybrand and went on to establish Danish-owned Bulrush Peat in Northern Ireland, retiring in 2000.)
- Despite his talent, Peter never fully settled with the company, leaving in 1970 to farm full-time. Tragically, in 1987 he lost his wife Sandra in a car accident, in which he himself was injured. He remarried, to Fiona McCleery, and died of cancer in 1997, aged just fifty-seven.
- Raymond already held a number of other directorships and went on to become president of the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce.

Bags to bulk

- At that time, the merchants would buy grain from local farmers and take it in bags to the mill, where the moisture content would be reduced in bulk driers to 15 per cent before processing (in a bad year, moisture content could reach 26 per cent). The sales traffic was therefore two-way: the merchants delivered grain and collected feed. Today, with larger farms and farming cooperatives who handle their own transport, and the trend away from cereal production to livestock, the surviving merchants take little grain to the mill, and 90 per cent of raw materials are imported.

Relationships

- Interview with Andy McClurg, September 2012

- The scheme was designed by Clow’s MD Patrick Montgomery, who would later become MD at Thompsons.
- Of which more below
- The vehicle for this network of merchants was a company jointly owned by Thompsons and Isaac Andrews, until Andrews withdrew following the BOCM acquisition in 1986.

Expansion

- The Post Office did acquire the site for its Belfast headquarters.
- Montgomery was appointed acting managing director on 1 February 1986, succeeding Terry Houston. He became managing director after the shareholdings were rearranged on 1 September 1986.
- Corney was ex-RAF, a talented designer and something of a character. He kept a collection of snakes and had retired to open a zoo on the Isle of Wight. His advice was sought in the early stages, but the new mill was actually designed by the much-respected Mike Holland of Crossan Engineering, with input from Corney, BOCM’s Basingstoke-based engineer Bill Lewis, Thompsons’ mill manager Bob McClure, and production manager Andy McClurg.
- In pre-grind, raw materials are brought in, ground, stored in separate bins and then mixed; in post-grind, raw materials are first mixed, then ground, a saving on grinding operations and storage.

Biosecurity

- Even in other areas of the agri-food industry, the finer points of grandparent and parent breeding stock in poultry are little understood – but to grossly over-simplify: in an industry where disease-free stock is so important, if grandparent birds are seen as the tip of the breeding pyramid, parent birds the mid-point, and the tens of thousands of third-generation birds as the base, then absolute certainty as to the health of grandparent stock is of self-evident importance.
- Among other measures, cats were given a try, but proved altogether too popular with the men, who kept them in food and milk – eventually, the cat population itself became the problem ...

All change

- IAWS went on to merge with Hiestand Holding AG to form Aryzta AG, IAWS itself becoming a wholly owned subsidiary of the new company. In 1997, IAWS spun off its agribusiness interests as a new company, Origin Enterprises plc., based in Dublin and quoted on the Irish Enterprise Exchange and the Alternative Investment Market. Aryzta retains a majority shareholding in Origin, who are now equal shareholders, with Barnetts, in Thompsons.



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Michael Faulkner

