

A FAMILY COMPANY: BRIGGS SHOES 1849–2009

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Many Leicester people will remember the Briggs Shoes shop that was situated on Granby Street (Fig. 1) for many years until it closed in 2009, the final decade under new ownership. Few will know that Briggs had opened a shop on the street as early as 1880. This story describes the challenges and achievements of a business that remained under the control of the same family for 150 years. It started in a very small way and gradually developed until it became a well-known local business that played an important part in the development of the Leicester shoe industry. As is often the case with business records, there are gaps in the information available. The early ledgers, starting from 1863, are very basic and in some cases have been difficult to interpret.

To understand why the founder, William Briggs, started his business in Leicester, it is necessary to know something of the town during the early part of the nineteenth century. Leicester, following the short-lived boom after the end of the French Wars in 1815, entered a prolonged period of economic decline. Employment in the traditional trade of hosiery declined as manufacturers found it more and more difficult to obtain sufficient orders to keep workers employed. Hosiery workers were normally paid on piece rates, which reduced dramatically as men and women competed among themselves for whatever work was available. As a result, poverty in the town during the 1820s and 1830s was widespread.

Though some shoemaking had probably started by 1825, the earliest confirmed reference to shoemaking on more than a domestic scale was recorded in 1827, when Sir John Phillips visited the town during his tour of the country, and noted in his diary that ‘a new and important branch of hosiery, called fancy hosiery, has recently appeared, which includes cotton and worsted net braces, worsted cravats, under waistcoats, children’s shoes, stay laces, tippets etc.’¹ This was an attempt by some of the more progressive hosiery manufacturers to diversify away from their traditional production of stockings and hose. More hosiery firms started to make hand-sewn children’s shoes during the late 1820s, and gradually traditional hand-shoemakers recognised that circumstances were changing and there were opportunities to develop in new directions. The most innovative of the local shoemakers was Thomas Crick, who is often referred to as ‘father’ of the Leicester shoe industry. Following a severe economic downturn between 1837 and 1842, conditions in Leicester slowly began to improve. The embryo industry progressed slowly but surely during the 1830s. Commercial shoemaking began to develop at a faster rate from the early 1840s so that, by 1851, it was calculated about 1,400 people were engaged in making shoes.²

¹ R. Phillips, *A Tour of the United Kingdom* (1828), p. 59.

² The 1851 census lists 1,396 shoemakers.



Fig. 1. 20 Granby Street, Leicester.

This slow but important first stage of development set the stage for more rapid expansion during the second half of the century. The first machines were introduced about 1850. Mechanisation proceeded slowly at first, but with increasing momentum during the following decades. Commercial Directories show that the number of wholesale manufacturers increased rapidly from a single firm in 1848 to 111 in 1870, until, by 1900, there were 223 firms in the town making all types of men's, ladies', children's and infants' boots and shoes. The number of workers also increased rapidly from 1,396 in 1851 to 5,103 in 1871, by which time the boot and shoe industry employed more people than the hosiery industry. Employment peaked in 1901 when 26,561 were employed making boots and shoes. By this date, virtually all boots and shoes were machine-made in purpose-built factories.

The National Union of Boot and Shoe Riveters and Finishers, later to become the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives, was formed in 1874, and decided to establish its headquarters in the town. This was followed by the establishment of the Leicester Boot and Shoe Manufacturers Association, and later the National Federation of Boot and Shoe Manufacturers Associations, both of which chose Leicester as their headquarters. With concentration of the production of shoe machinery and materials required by manufacturers in the town, Leicester became the most important shoe centre in the country by the end of the century.

The introduction and rapid spread of the railway network was also to play an important role in development of the industry in Leicester. On the one hand, it enabled manufacturers to obtain supplies of leather and other materials more easily and quickly, while on the other, it enabled finished products to be distributed quickly to all parts of the country. This was one of the main reasons that Leicester

became the headquarters of all major multiple footwear retail companies. Briggs did not become a national multiple shoe retail organisation on the scale of Freeman Hardy & Willis or Stead & Simpson. In many ways, it was typical of most family owned firms that entered the industry without much finance during the second half of the nineteenth century, developing slowly as finance permitted and only expanded rapidly during the 1890s as opportunities arose.

EARLY YEARS 1849–78

Family records show that William Briggs was born in 1826 at Kimbolton, Huntingdonshire. His father, Thomas, was a local, time-served boot and shoemaker. William followed his father into the trade (Fig. 2). As a young man in the 1840s, William would have experienced the deprivations of rural East Anglia and known a number of people who had migrated to the growing industrial towns of the East Midlands. In 1849 he came to Leicester and started business in the town. In 1850 he was listed with an address on Sanvey Gate.³ In 1854 he had moved to Upper Conduit Street.⁴ The next reference, in 1861, lists him at 68 Upper Charles Street.⁵ By 1877, this had become 68 Northampton Street due to reordering of some streets as the town expanded.

In 1851, William married Harriet Sims at Lutterworth. They subsequently had four children: Sarah Elizabeth, born 1852; Harriet Ellen, born 1854; Arthur William, born 1856; and William Edwin, who was born in 1859. In 1861, William

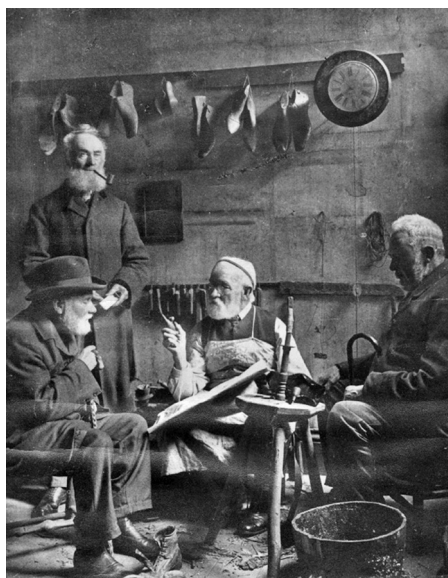


Fig. 2. William Briggs and John Bourn in their workshop.

³ *Slater's Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland*, 1850.

⁴ *Melville's Leicestershire Directory*, 1854.

⁵ *Drake's Directory of Leicestershire*, 1861.

| Year | Stock £ | Stock/Pairs | Cost Per Pair |
|------|---------|-------------|---------------|
| 1863 | 62.5 | 206 | 0.30 |
| 1864 | n/a | 256 | n/a |
| 1865 | 177.0 | 470 | 0.38 |
| 1866 | n/a | 405 | n/a |
| 1867 | 131.0 | 582 | 0.23 |
| 1868 | 158.5 | 500 | 0.32 |

Table 1. Stock details 1863–1968.

| Year | Sales £ | Pairs |
|------|---------|-------|
| 1863 | 275 | 797 |
| 1864 | 360 | n/a |
| 1865 | 506 | 1,158 |
| 1866 | 638 | n/a |
| 1867 | 637 | 2,549 |
| 1868 | 649 | 1,764 |

Table 2. Estimated sales 1863–68.

employed two men making boots and shoes at the back of the shop, and was selling them at the front – a common practice at this time.⁶ The family lived upstairs above the shop.

No information about the very early days of the business has survived; the earliest information dates from 1863 and comes from a ledger/cash book. Table 1 shows that business was growing and it was necessary to hold more goods in stock. It also shows that the cost per pair almost halved between 1865 and 1867. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing whether this was due to lower manufacturing costs or a change to producing cheaper products.

Sales show a regular increase up to 1866 and then two years of stagnation (Table 2). There is no reference to the number of shoes sold. However, if one assumes the mark-up on cost remains the same – let us say 15 per cent – we see that the pairs sold more than doubled between 1865 and 1867, though the value only increased by 25 per cent.

William Briggs died on 22 January 1868 at the age of 42 years and was buried in Welford Road cemetery. His widow, Harriet (see Fig. 3) carried on the business with the help of John Bourn, a cousin of William's. John Bourn looked after production, while Harriet dealt with sales. William had clearly been determined to create a business that would support his growing family. In his will, he left everything to Harriet, including £100 that was held at the Leicester and Leicestershire Building Society.⁷ Harriet obviously had the same business acumen as William as she guided development of the business. She bought their first house in 1876 (location not indicated, though it later appears to have been the house on Northampton Street) for £449 8s 7d.

⁶ 1861 Census.

⁷ ROLLR, reference RP 201.



Fig. 3. William and Harriet Briggs.

Arthur was 11 and Edwin nine years old at the time of their father's death. We do not know when the boys began to influence development of the business. However, we can assume that they were helping in some way immediately after their father's death and that their involvement would have increased as they grew older. The 1877 ledger mentions a second shop. The shops are referred to as 'No 1 Sales' and 'No 2 Sales'. No 1 Sales was located at Northampton Street, and No 2 Sales was at the corner of Humberstone Gate and Granby Street. Sales for the year in the two shops were respectively £615 and £271. They held 930 pairs in stock, as well as £45 of mercery. The following year, sales in No 2 Shop had almost doubled, while those in No 1 Shop had declined slightly. No 2 Sales was called Arthur's Boot Palace, which indicates that Arthur and William were beginning to exert an influence on the business.

The 1878 ledger also makes reference to the purchase of £10 of machinery to produce riveted work. This would suggest that they were producing a considerable quantity of boots and shoes and considered it necessary to mechanise production though there is no indication of quantity, or whether they were men's, ladies' or children's. Neither is there any information whether they were made in Northampton Street or had moved to other premises, or even if John Bourn was still employed. From this, we gain a picture that was typical of many of Leicester's more successful shoe firms who started from very small beginnings, moved a number of times as they required more space, and only expanded when profits and savings permitted.

CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT 1879–1918

Expansion of the business meant that more detailed accounts were necessary. The accounts for 1880 provide an insight into changes in the business. Sales from the two shops totalled £1,054, with Arthur's Boot Palace accounting for three-fifths of the amount. In addition, there was an element of wholesale trading to the value of £217. At this time, the business was operating as a partnership; the partners being Harriet Briggs and Mrs Royce – 75 per cent being held by Harriet. The following year, apart from Harriet and Mrs Royce, additional partners were a Mr Norman, and Harriet's children, Harriet Ellen, Arthur and Edwin. Arthur and Edwin are called 'boot dealer's assistants' in the 1881 census, which suggests, but does not prove, that they had ceased manufacturing in order to concentrate on retail. Apart from footwear, the 1883 accounts show that a small quantity of socks was also sold. A third shop, identified only as 'G', but almost certainly on Granby Street, had opened. Another shop, 'C', opened in 1885, and, by 1890, a fifth had been opened on Rutland Street.

Various land and property was acquired during the 1880s and 1890s, some of which was retained while other items were disposed of. This was the greatest period of Leicester's expansion and many businessmen took the opportunity to invest in its growth. In 1892, Harriet bought a house on Mecklenburg Street which subsequently became 28 Mecklenburg Street, in which she lived for the rest of her life.

The 1890 accounts made reference to an unnamed Rubber Company, but without any information. The matter was clarified the following year when Arthur Briggs and Sarah Ann Kennell were partners in the Belgrave Rubber Company. This firm was situated on Bruin Street, Belgrave, and produced rubber footwear – mainly lawn tennis shoes. When Arthur started the Harboro Rubber Co. in 1894, his first customer was the Belgrave Rubber Co. In 1897/98, the Belgrave Rubber Co. was either taken over by or amalgamated with George Wilson & Co., another manufacturer on Bruin Street. Arthur Briggs and Frank Kennel (Sarah's son) became joint managing directors of George Wilson & Co.⁸ There is no reference to the company after 1908.⁹

Arthur's increasing involvement with rubber and rubber shoe manufacturing provided Edwin with the opportunity to develop the retail side of the business, which gained momentum after 1890. A repair service was offered from 1890, with repairs undertaken in each branch. The number of branch shops at the end of each year is shown in Table 3.

From such information as is available, it has been possible to show that expansion outside Leicester started in 1893 when shops were opened in Nuneaton, Wrexham, Rhosllanerchrugog (near Wrexham) and Hay-on-Wye. Figure 4 shows the distribution of shops in 1899 and Figure 5 shows how the business expanded during the next 20 years.

Three areas – Staffordshire, north Wales and south Wales – dominate the 1903 location list. The first two shops in Wales were opened in Wrexham and

⁸ *Wright's Directory of Leicester*, 1898. ROLLR, reference RP 201.

⁹ *Kelly's Directory of Leicestershire*, 1908.

| Year | Shops | Year | Shops |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| 1890 | 5 | 1905 | 41 |
| 1891 | na | 1906 | 49 |
| 1892 | na | 1907 | 51 |
| 1893 | 8 | 1908 | 55 |
| 1894 | 9 | 1909 | 56 |
| 1895 | 17 | 1910 | 57 |
| 1896 | 16 | 1911 | 58 |
| 1897 | 18 | 1912 | 60 |
| 1898 | 18 | 1913 | 71 |
| 1899 | 23 | 1914 | 71 |
| 1900 | 24 | 1915 | 70 |
| 1901 | 25 | 1916 | 70 |
| 1902 | 25 | 1917 | 70 |
| 1903 | 31 | 1918 | 70 |
| 1904 | 34 | 1919 | 70 |

Table 3. Number of shops 1890–1919.

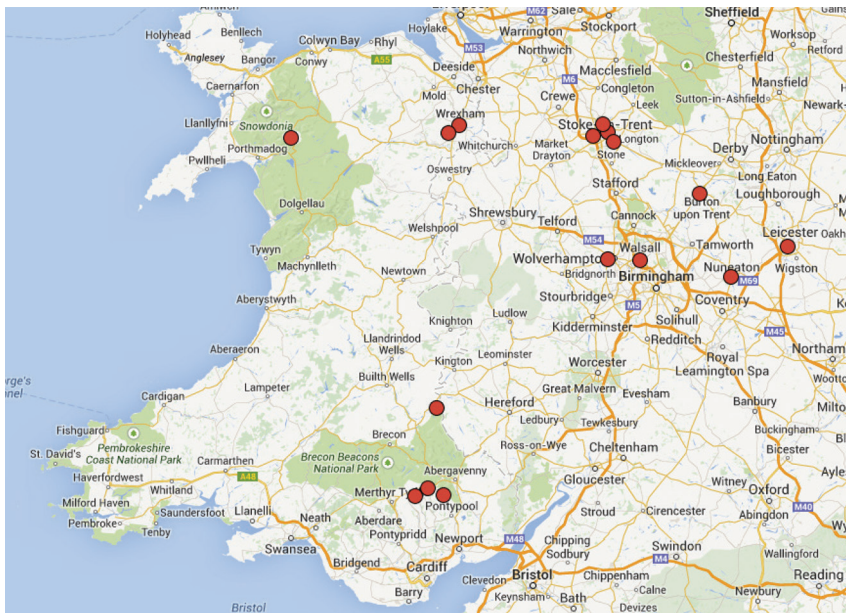


Fig. 4. Location of shops in 1899.

Rhosllanerchrugog, both places the brothers had visited previously while on cycling holidays. Apart from these, most north Wales shops were situated in the newly developed coastal resort towns. Virtually all south Wales shops were situated in coal mining towns. All Staffordshire shops were to be found in the pottery towns. From the beginning, Edwin obviously decided that it would be more profitable to concentrate on those unfashionable industrial areas employing large numbers of workers, and on holiday resorts where those workers would spend their leisure

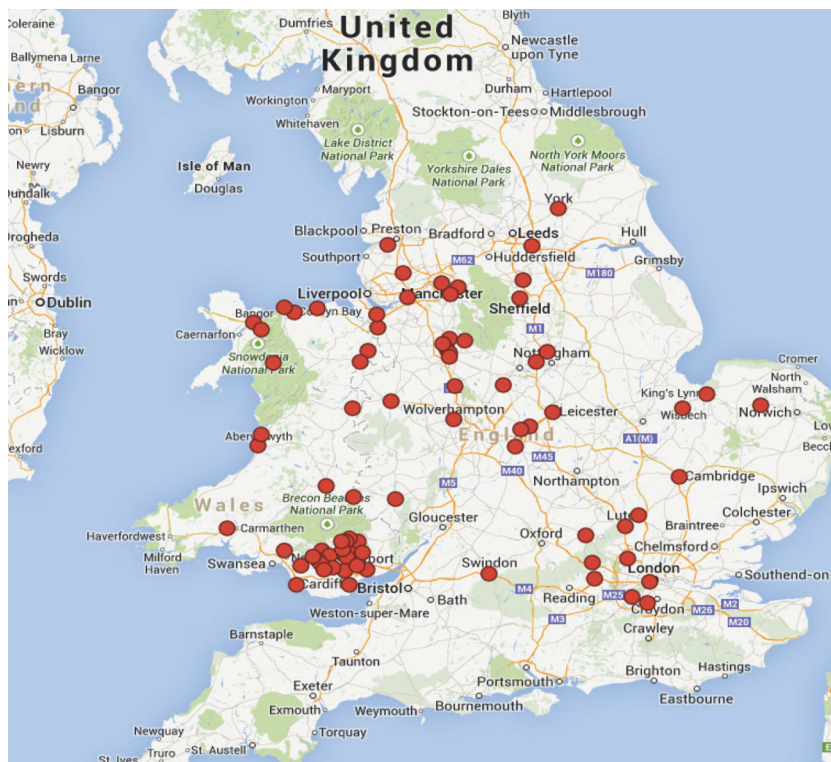


Fig. 5. Location of shops in 1919.

time. He does not seem to have been deterred from this by the fact that sales fell by over 50 per cent between 1907 and 1908, due to industrial unrest in the mining and transport industries. By 1919, 37 per cent of all branches were located in the south Wales coalfield area (see Fig. 6). The picture in north Wales was virtually unchanged, while that in Staffordshire showed an increased concentration in the Potteries towns. In general, Edwin did not open shops in the major cities; Watford was the nearest one to London and Wolverhampton was the nearest to Birmingham. It is, therefore, surprising to see that, for a few years, there were four shops in the Manchester conurbation. A shop had also been opened in Sheffield in 1906, which had by far the largest sales between 1913 and 1918, but this fact did not persuade Edwin to open branches in other large cities. In Leicestershire, the organisation had been trimmed so that there was only one shop in 1919, at No. 20 Granby Street, together with the main warehouse on Rutland Street. By 1921, sales from the Leicester shop just exceeded the Sheffield shop, and in 1925, Leicester had become and remained the most important retail outlet.

A bonus system was introduced for branch managers in 1893, which enabled them to earn 2.25 per cent on all sales above an agreed base. A flavour of the terms of employment for managers is given in this extract from the 1896 agreement with the manager of the Wolverhampton branch:

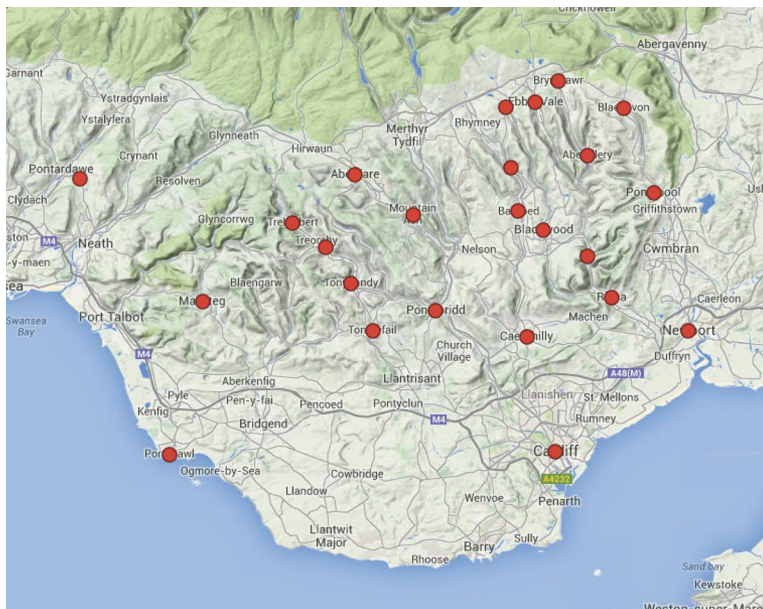


Fig. 6. Location of shops in south Wales in 1919.

Employment Agreement between W.E. Briggs, boot factor of 80a Rutland St and George Walls, manager of Wolverhampton Branch. His wage was to be 30s. per week plus commission of 2.25% on sales averaging over £30 per week with an extra 2.5% if sales averaged over £35 per week. Prices were set by Mr Briggs. Credit was only granted if approved by Mr Briggs. Mr Walls had to provide a bond of £50.

As the company did little or no advertising during the early part of the century, shop managers were responsible for advertising in their locality. A leaflet (Fig. 7) is typical of such advertising; shop staff would usually deliver copies to all houses in their town.

As shown above, the company developed rapidly during the period and this necessitated regular changes to the company's organisation. After Arthur left the business in 1894 to set up Harboro Rubber Company, the name was changed to W. E. Briggs in 1896, with an address at 80A Rutland Street. By 1916, more space was required so new premises were acquired at 12–28 York Street, which became the company headquarters and remained so until 1968 (Fig. 8).¹⁰

Until June 1907, all shops were listed in alphabetic order in the sales ledger. From July they were divided into three districts: one broadly covering north Wales and the Midlands; another covering south Wales; and a small section of three shops in the south of England. All other large multiple boot and shoe retailers adopted this system of area management. At the beginning of 1908, branches were divided into two districts – south Wales and the rest. This arrangement continued until August

¹⁰ *Kelly's Directory of Leicestershire, 1916.*

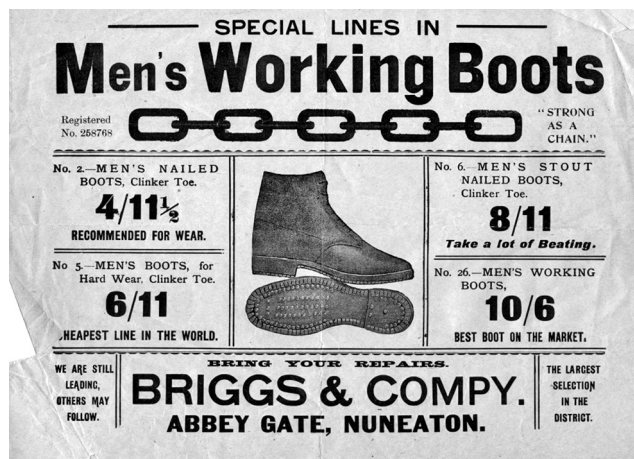


Fig. 7. Advertising flyer, early twentieth century.



Fig. 8. 12–28 York St., Leicester in 2015.

1909 when three districts were reinstated. In March 1913 a fourth district was added, so the arrangement became north Wales and northern England, south Wales, south Midlands, with the Burton and Sheffield shops forming a small district on their own. This arrangement continued until 1918.

A catalogue of 1900 lists a full range of men's boots and shoes, ladies' boots and shoes, rubber shoes and some children's boots. A list of suppliers, dated 1899, gives details of 35 companies that supplied men's boots and shoes, and 58 companies that supplied ladies' and children's shoes. In 1914, all shops sold some hosiery items (Fig. 9). It seems unlikely that the company ever manufactured hosiery, but the fact that



Fig. 9. Wisbech shop in 1914.

a separate company had been established by 1916 to deal in products other than footwear was an indication of future developments.

By 1918, Edwin had created a sizeable multiple retail company with 70 shops. Only Freeman Hardy & Willis, Stead & Simpson, George Oliver, Hiltons, W & E Turner and John Tyler (all based in Leicester), and Lennards, in Bristol, were larger. The location of shops was largely the result of Edwin's preferences and prejudices. How else can one explain the absence of any shop in central London when there were a number in seasonal holiday towns?

In 1909, Lloyd George introduced the Shops Act that limited staff to working 60 hours per week. Prior to this, many retail shops of all types stayed open till 11.00pm or even later. These new terms remained in force till the start of war in 1914. Unfortunately, there is no information as to how the company operated during the war or the difficulties that were experienced. The problems for retail companies were not as severe as for manufacturers, since fewer men were employed and there was already a large female workforce of shop assistants that could take over when men volunteered or were called up. From 1914, most factory production was aimed at providing all manner of boots and other types of footwear for the war effort. This meant there was a shortage of civilian products, especially during the latter part of the war. However, there was no price control on footwear other than that resulting from inflationary pressures.

HARD TIMES 1919–45

Overall sales had increased during the war from £150,598 in 1914 to £329,149 in 1918, almost entirely due to inflation. The Government did not impose regulations,

| Year | Sales £ |
|------|---------|
| 1919 | 423,133 |
| 1920 | 516,229 |
| 1921 | 693,932 |
| 1922 | 339,719 |
| 1923 | 308,591 |
| 1924 | 318,953 |
| 1925 | 247,412 |
| 1926 | 244,380 |
| 1927 | 287,090 |
| 1928 | 238,813 |
| 1929 | 253,156 |

Table 4. Total sales 1919–29.

so prices increased as the shortage of leather forced manufacturers to compete for whatever material was available. Euphoria following the end of hostilities created a boom. Sales increased in each of the next three years, reaching £693,932 in 1921 – an increase of almost 111 per cent. However, the good times soon came to an end; the sales figures (Table 4) tell their own story. Sales fell by 51 per cent in a single year to £339,719 in 1922. Such a dramatic decline only mirrored what was happening in all industries. As a result, workers had to accept wage cuts and there was considerable unemployment. This was the start of a long period of difficult trading that only began to improve after 1935, by which time many shoe businesses were financially weakened.

Briggs was more vulnerable than some multiple shoe retailers because of its concentration in mining areas and industrial towns, especially so during the general strike of 1926 when sales fell to a level not seen since 1916/17. Despite these trading difficulties, the company expanded and, in 1926, controlled 77 shops.

A problem for all multiple footwear retailers was their concentration on a single product. For many years, firms had sold some associated items alongside the core business of shoe sales and repairs. Items usually included shoe polish, laces, umbrellas, socks, belts etc. In 1930, a new company, Briggs Stores Ltd, was formed. Briggs was unique among footwear multiples in that it established a number of general stores that sold a wide range of drapery items; this reflected the company's belief that it was a family business, there to serve the needs of the family. In this way, it distinguished itself from all other footwear multiples. The concept was first tested in Grantham, but that store seems to have been unprofitable and closed in 1936.¹¹ By 1939, stores had been opened in Aberdare, Amlwch, Blaenavon, Brynmawr, Braunton, Colwyn Bay, Merthyr, Portmadoc and Torrington. Some stores were an integral part of the shoe shop, with shoes sold on one side and drapery on the other (Fig. 10). Others were separate shops (Fig. 11). A separate warehouse to service the drapery trade was opened on York Street, Leicester, which was managed by Edwin's brother, Geoffrey.

¹¹ Mentioned in the National Institute of Psychology Report, 1936.



Fig. 10. Combined shoe and drapery shop in 1953, location unknown.

In 1932, Edwin bought Red Line Shoes, a small group of shoe shops based in Plymouth, with branches mainly in Devon and Cornwall. This acquisition formed the base for future development of Briggs' business in the south west.

In February 1935, Briggs 'Palm Shoes' Ltd was established, with its head office at 16–28 York Street. Most of the branch shops were transferred to this company; Edwin was appointed Chairman.¹² One of the first decisions made by the directors was to introduce a scheme whereby certain senior members of staff were offered Employee Preference Shares – usually 100 shares.

The mid-1930s was a very difficult time for all sectors of industry. It was a situation faced by many footwear firms; having financed their businesses during the past five years out of reserves, they were now in a weakened financial position. Some firms ceased trading, while others amalgamated. Briggs commissioned the National Institute of Psychology (NIP) to prepare a report on the company and make recommendations for its future. The report identified a number of weaknesses. The revised stock system that had been introduced in 1935 was discontinued due to its inability to improve services or reduce costs.

¹² W. E. Briggs & Co. continued to control some shops.



Fig. 11. Hereford shop in 1952.

In 1935 the branch system consisted of 80 shoe shops, five general stores, one 'Harriet' shop and one men's shop. It is unclear if these last two were general stores or not. Five area managers were responsible for their day-to-day management. The NIP report suggested that this number be reduced to three. The report also noted that the company ran a 'club scheme', though there is no reference as to when it was introduced. Club schemes were common with other multiple retailers and some manufacturers from the 1890s as they were a means of allowing customers to save weekly towards a new pair of shoes. Some systems required a customer to visit the shop to make payment; others sent a representative to customers' homes to collect money, in the same way that rent and insurance was collected. They were especially popular in industrial towns such as those where Briggs had most of their shops. Weekly saving schemes also removed the necessity of granting credit. In general, 8–10 weekly payments were sufficient to buy a pair of work boots. The company continued to run its Club scheme with Provident and Premier cheques during the 1960s and 1970s; the scheme was discontinued during 1977. The Club system was more popular in Wales than elsewhere.

During the 1930s, fashion became more important to customers. One manifestation of this was the introduction of summer and winter collections for clothing and footwear. It therefore followed that retailers had to improve their advertising and brand image in order to attract customers' attention. The company now recognised it was necessary to advertise much more than had previously been the case, especially so as it sought to promote the 'Palm' name.



Fig. 12. Utility shoe 1944.
Photograph by permission of Leicester Museums

In 1935 it was still common for companies to take on apprentices. A Briggs Stores Agreement was for four years, with the apprentice starting wage of eight shillings per week at age 15, which was increased by four shillings per week annually. The apprentice received £5 on satisfactory completion of his term.

The Government was much more prepared for war in 1939 than it had been in 1914. Many of the ideas developed during the latter part of the previous war to manage the economy and satisfy the needs of the military, while still providing goods for the domestic population, were implemented from an early stage. Price control and rationing were the two most obvious changes for retailers. Rationing of clothing and footwear was introduced in May 1941. As the war continued, manufacturers produced ranges of ‘utility’ designs, the selling price of which was strictly controlled. The aim was to ensure everyone had the same opportunity of buying goods at a reasonable price (Fig. 12).

Edwin Briggs died in 1940 and was replaced as Chairman by his son, Oscar. Oscar was mainly concerned with Harboro Rubber Co., while his brother, Arthur Edwin, looked after the shoe shops and his other brother, Geoffrey, managed Briggs General Stores.

The company continued trading throughout the war despite the difficulties. A number of buildings suffered bomb damage, including the main warehouse on York Street, Leicester. However, the greatest damage occurred in Plymouth where three shops were completely destroyed. Inevitably, there was a shortage of labour in all branches as men were called up and women volunteered for war work. In addition, the rationing system (see Figs 13 and 14) imposed an increased workload on retailers. By 1945, there was an acute shortage of goods to sell as the number of ration coupons issued to individuals was reduced by 25 per cent, and, at the same time, the number of coupons required to purchase a pair of shoes was increased.

1942-43 CLOTHING BOOK

This book may not be used until the holder's name, full postal address and National Registration (Identity Card) Number have been plainly written below IN INK.



NAME JOHN GIBSON WILLCOX.
(BLOCK LETTERS)

ADDRESS WESTCOTT HOUSE
(BLOCK LETTERS)

(TOWN) SHERBORNE (COUNTY) DORSET

NATIONAL REGISTRATION (IDENTITY CARD) NUMBER

P.D
/
7064
/
-

Read the instructions within carefully, and take great care not to lose this book
Page 1

Fig. 13. Clothes Ration Book.

BOARD OF TRADE CONSUMER RATIONING ORDER
Licence S.R. & O. 1943. No. 312.

Safety Boot Certificate

SERIES ONE

permitting the miner to whom it is issued to obtain without the surrender of coupons

One Pair Industrial Safety Boots or Shoes

providing that the Certificate is surrendered with a SAFETY BOOT BUYING PERMIT

NOTE.—A trader who has supplied against this Certificate may, when it is correctly endorsed, deposit it in his Coupon Account at the Bank as equivalent to FOUR COUPONS.

4
COUPONS

CERTIFICATE NUMBER 539483

5B / A

IMPORTANT—SEE DIRECTIONS OVERLEAF

BRIGGS, F.B.W. VALL. PAGE ONE

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Fig. 14. Miner's Safety Boot Certificate and coupons 1944.

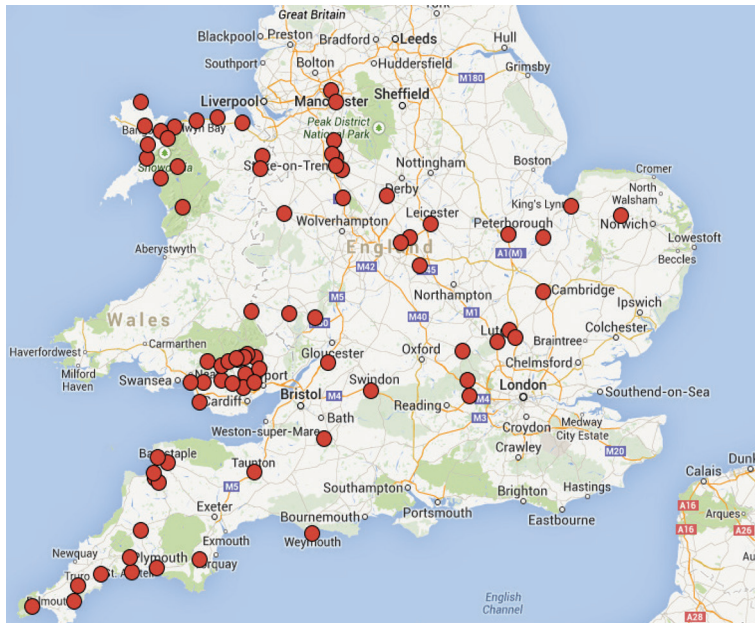


Fig. 15. Distribution of shops in 1944.

Shop opening hours were reduced, partly to save power for lighting and heating, and partly to meet the needs of a limited labour force.

The end of hostilities in 1945 did not signal an immediate return to normal life. One of the first changes was the end of war-time daylight saving on 15 July. Some improvements were soon made to the terms of employment: holiday entitlement for those with more than three years' service was increased to 12 days plus four bank holidays. In September, the wages of branch managers were increased between 33 per cent and 50 per cent above pre-war levels. Shop hours were revised so they became 08.30am–6.30pm, with 1¼ hours for lunch.

The distribution of shops around the country in 1944 is shown in Fig. 15. In some towns there was more than one shop, as, for example, in Blaenavon and Brynmawr, where there were three shops, a shoe shop, a store and a man's (menswear) shop.

THE MODERN ERA 1946–1999

Conditions after the war were, if anything, more difficult than during. Supplies of clothing and footwear in 1946 were more limited as the country struggled to produce sufficient power and raw materials. At the same time, there was a great shortage of labour as many men were retained by the armed forces to bring some semblance of order to war-torn countries.

For many years the company had sold industrial footwear, and to emphasise this fact, a separate company, Briggs Industrial Footwear Ltd, was established in 1944 with an address on Dover Street, Leicester.



Fig. 16. Janet shop, Blaenavon in 1959.

Many of Briggs' shops were situated in unglamorous industrial and market towns, where they competed for the working-class family budget. Apart from those towns where general stores had been opened, Briggs had no clear advantage over its competitors. By 1947 the directors had decided to open a few shops that would sell higher quality shoes under the name of 'Janet', 'Janet & John' and 'John Bourn'. Janet would only sell ladies' and girl's shoes, John Bourn would sell only men's and boy's shoes, while Janet & John would sell the complete range. The first 'Janet' shop opened in 1948 in Peterborough. Rationing of footwear was generally discontinued in July 1948, though it was not formally removed from the statute book until 1952. The first 'John Bourn' shop was opened at Longton, Staffordshire, in 1949. These shops were always opened in towns where there was already a Briggs shoe shop. A number of new shops were either opened or bought from existing traders during the late 1940s and early 1950s. 'Janet' later became a vehicle for selling ladies' fashion clothes (Fig. 16) and, in one case at Merthyr Tydfil, a 'Janet Babywear' shop was opened. At the same time, a national advertising campaign accompanied the opening of new shops. At the beginning of 1949 the company controlled 89 shops.

As the economy gradually returned to normal, the company found great difficulty in recruiting male shop managers despite advertising nationally. In order to improve the knowledge and skills of employees, it was decided to establish a staff training school in Leicester (Fig. 17). Over the next couple of years, a series of week-long courses was held with staff from different shops attending, the first being held in September 1949. The majority of courses were for shoe shop staff, but some were specifically tailored to the needs of general store personnel. In another attempt to improve staff performance, a bonus scheme was introduced during 1949 for all employees with more than one year's service.



Fig. 17. Attendees at a staff training course in Leicester in 1950.

Up to this time, the company was constituted as a partnership. In 1949, W. E. Briggs & Sons Ltd was incorporated as a private limited company, with Oscar Briggs as first chairman. As the complexity of managing the business increased, a decision was made in December 1951 to establish local boards of directors to deal with local problems. The company was a member of various trade organisations. In 1952, A. E. Briggs was appointed Chairman of the Multiple Shops Federation. At the same time, he was Chairman of the Multiple Shoe Retailers Federation.

About this time, a house magazine was introduced. It was called *Shapes & Sizes*¹³ and the first issue was produced in October 1950. The magazine was published quarterly until the mid-1960s and sought to show all members of staff what was going on throughout the organisation. The first reference to supervisors covering their district by car occurred in October 1950. At the same time, delivery of supplies to the shops was made by lorry. In 1952 there were five Bedford three-ton trucks (Fig. 18), each able to carry 200 containers or 5,000 pairs, plus two small vans. These vehicles visited 80 towns each week, travelling 2,350 miles.

The year 1952 was important in a number of ways. Difficult trading brought an end to the opening of new branches. Demand for footwear fell nationally during the early part of the year, which caused considerable short-time working in shoe factories. This caused the price of leather and footwear to plummet. The bonus

¹³ *Shapes & Sizes*, Feb. 1952.



Fig. 18. Bedford three-ton truck in 1952.

scheme, introduced in 1949, was discontinued because the directors felt it had not achieved its aims. Inflation began to increase during the decade, heralding the start of the modern trading era.

In 1954 the shops in Braunton and Cambourne were closed. Due to the increasing cost of holding stock, it was also deemed necessary to have a dedicated stock-control manager in the south west, based at Plymouth. Costs continued to increase during the second half of the decade, partly due to inflation and partly as a result of legislation that was designed to improve working conditions. In 1957 the holiday entitlement was increased by five days for adult staff and three days for junior members. Various means were introduced to encourage sales; for example, in 1959, the wages of branch staff were increased by 5 per cent if a shop took less than £100 per week and by 6 per cent if sales were over £100.

The 1960s was an era of increasing competition and change. Growth of the British Shoe Corporation (BSC), with its emphasis on competitive pricing, made it more difficult for all but the largest multiples to compete on price. Imports from Italy, Spain and other European countries increased rapidly. In 1964, Briggs decided to reduce staff levels in an attempt to remain competitive. Another problem was the growing difficulty in managing distribution from city centre warehouses, a problem that persuaded all Leicester's multiple retail groups to relocate to the city boundaries; BSC and George Oliver moved to Braunstone, Stead & Simpson to Syston and, in 1968, Briggs moved to Edwin House, Cornwall Road, South Wigston (Fig. 19). By now, Geoffrey Briggs was chairman of the company.

Competition and change continued unabated during the 1970s. In 1968, Briggs had purchased Ross & Sons, an established footwear and drapery retail company in Ludlow. In February 1970 the company acquired Sidney George Ltd, an established retailer with two shops in Ludlow. About the same time, Stanley Gane Ltd, an established retailer in Tavistock, also joined the group. No regular list of the number



Fig. 19. Edwin House, Cornwall Road, South Wigston, 2015.

of employees has survived, but by the end of 1970 the total was about 350 persons. The increased number of Bank Holidays enjoyed today was established in stages during the 1970s. Imports soared from Poland and other East European countries, as well as from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Another very significant factor was the introduction of the training shoe or jogger in 1972, which created a completely new leisure sector. Nike and Reebok were the leading suppliers of these shoes, and insisted on selling through sports shops rather than traditional shoe retailers.

In 1974 a comment in the Board of Directors' Minutes noted that restrictions imposed by the Prices Commission would restrict profit in the next year. Though a profit was made in 1975, trading became more difficult, mainly caused by inflation, which reached 15 per cent in 1975. Efforts were made to control costs and reduce stocks. Geoffrey Briggs retired in June 1975 and was succeeded as chairman by Brian Briggs.

The first half of 1977 was profitable, but the cost of purchasing stock required additional financing. The directors decided to conserve funds by various means; unsold stock was disposed of by whatever means possible, while general stock levels were reduced.

In early 1979 an agreement was made with Burtons the Tailors to sell footwear in their menswear shops. It was agreed to hold a three-month trial in Bletchley, Abergavenny and Alfreton. Burtons were to receive commission on sales. In July it was felt that initial trading results were good and further shops were included in the arrangement. However, by March 1980, the directors considered the arrangement was not meeting expectations and the agreement was terminated by mutual consent later that year.



Fig. 20. Widemarsh Street, Hereford, 2015.

Trading conditions were no easier during the 1980s. The long-term problem was similar to that of all other old-established multiple shoe retail companies – the retail scene was changing and customers no longer retained loyalty in the same way as before. Though sales rose 9 per cent in 1982, costs continued to rise at a greater rate. During the decade, annual sales increased regularly while costs continued to rise at a faster rate; as, for example, in 1986, when sales rose by 4.9 per cent while costs increased by 7.5 per cent.

A number of changes were made during the decade, aimed at improving the company's image and efficiency so it could meet the new retail challenges. In 1980 the company began to accept Access and Barclay cards. It was decided in 1986 to install point of sale tills in 25 of the larger branches in order to better manage the company. At the same time, it was felt that the Briggs shop image was somewhat old-fashioned and required updating. Following a professional survey, a new corporate identity and style was adopted in 1989. Burgundy was adopted as the corporate colour and a softer, more modern image for some shops – under the title of 'Peter Briggs' – was created.

Most of the shoes sold were manufactured by well-known English brands. From the late 1950s, manufacturers with a strong brand image had gradually developed their own retailing organisations. This was later to cause problems when such companies had a shop in the same town as Briggs. In 1982 it was decided to promote some unbranded makes.

James Briggs was appointed chairman early in 1989. He instigated a review of the company and the alternatives available for its future. The preferred option was to retain 20 of the most profitable shops and develop them under the 'Peter Briggs' premium name. The number of branches had been gradually reduced from the 1970s so that the group controlled 52 shops in 1990. The last drapery store, in Abergavenny, closed in 1992/93.

A revised computer system was installed in 1990, which extended and improved the 1986 system to include the whole group. These changes enabled management to improve all areas of the business. The company now concentrated on the middle-class family market. A programme of shop refurbishment was started in 1991, which resulted in improved sales. However, continued difficult trading conditions eventually led to a decision that the business was no longer viable, as the margins available could not support central costs. In 1999 the footwear retail business was sold to Stead & Simpson Ltd, who continued the business for another decade.

Though Briggs Shoes may no longer be trading on the high street, the name has not been entirely forgotten (Fig. 20) and shoes continue to be sold in at least one of their former shops.

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