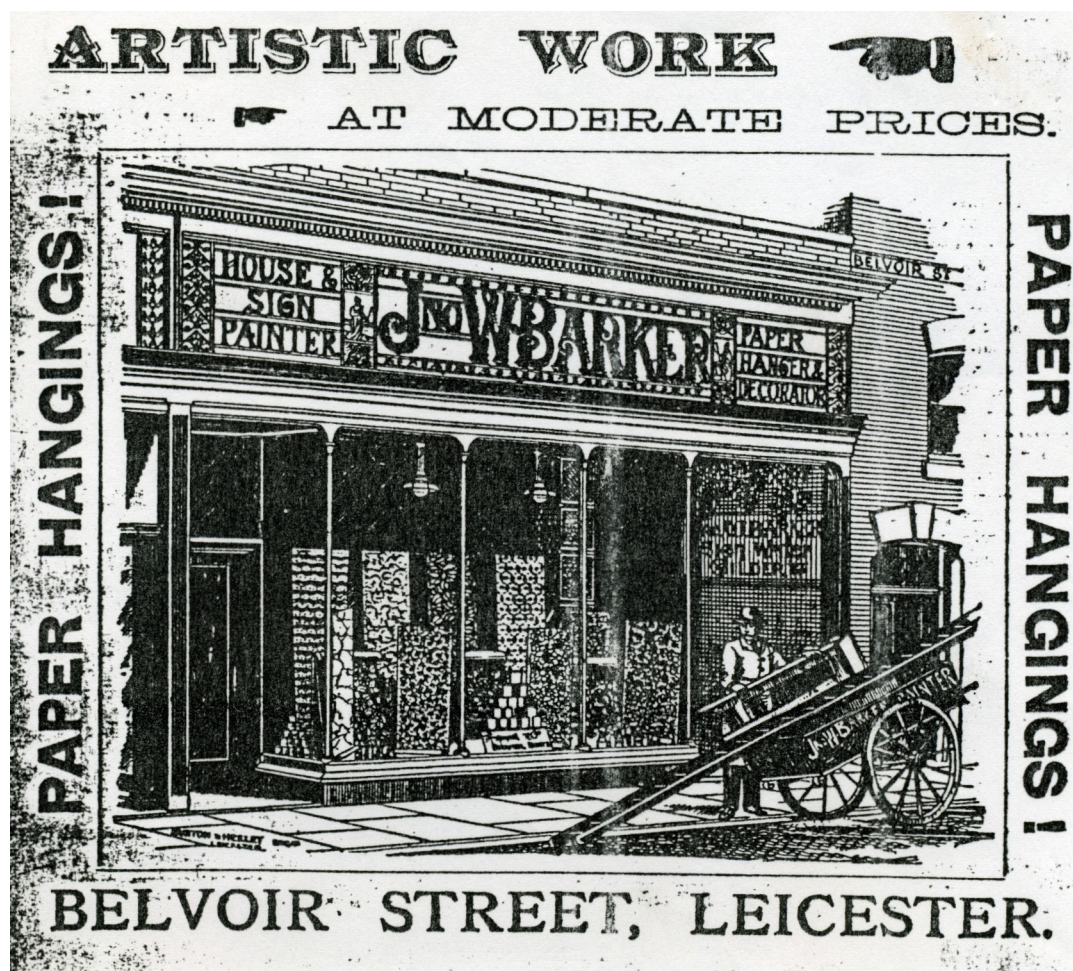


Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker continues his occupational history series with painters and decorators, John W Barker & Sons



As you step out along Belvoir Street in spring 1888, a colourful display catches your eye. Rolls of wallpaper – each one busy with repeating geometry or flourishing with flowers – are suspended in the window at John W Barker’s shop. The bell rings as you enter No 3 to take a closer look. “Ah, good morning to you, madam,” says Mr Barker, stepping out from behind the counter, “and how might I help you with your decorating plans?” He invites you to browse through his book of new wallpapers. Some designs incorporate fashionable Japanese motifs. Others leap out in swirling reds and yellows. “You might also care to look at these naturalistic patterns by William Morris,” he adds, turning to a sample book packed with designs called Willow, Artichoke and Pimpernel.

Wallpaper has become big business by the last quarter of the 19th century; the industrialisation of printing means that wallpapers can be produced quickly and inexpensively to meet ever-changing middle class tastes. Books such as the Art at Home series (1876-8), Mrs Orrinsmith’s The Drawing Room (1878), and The Furniture and Decoration of Town Houses (1881) by Robert Edis have pages devoted to the latest styles. Papers by Morris and Walter Crane

are regularly commended. Barker's – promising "Artistic Work at Moderate Prices" – can transform your living room or bedroom.

Let's step out of the Belvoir Street shop for a moment. When I started researching my family history many moons ago, it soon became apparent that John William Barker was notable amongst my relatives; he ran the family painting and decorating firm for sixty years, and earned a bob or two in the process. I quickly traced his progress through census returns and trade directories. Obituary cuttings added further detail. But now it was time to get a broader view of his life as an enterprising late-Victorian painter and decorator.

The business had been established not by John but by his father, William Barker. After a difficult childhood – orphaned at three years old and raised by his eldest sister – William works initially as a winder in the cotton factory (1851). But by the time of his marriage (1856) he has switched to become a painter. No apprenticeship records arise; it seems likely that he learns his trade 'on the job', with encouragement from his bricklayer brother-in-law, Frederick Major.

A search online through the British Newspaper Archive unearths several adverts referring to the business being "Established 1862". William's shift to being self-employed is underlined by his first appearance in a trade directory as a painter and paper hanger at 217 Belgrave Gate (1864), a three-storey house and shop with outbuildings at the rear. Three years later a £100 business loan from the Thomas White Charity enables him to take on extra work and relocate to 159a Belgrave Gate (1869).

The Barker family grows. Between 1856 and 1875, William and his wife Harriot have ten children in all, of whom seven survive to adulthood. Family life, it seems, is characterised by a strong work ethic, an appetite for education, and abstinence from alcohol. It's all underpinned by their Primitive Methodist faith. In due course, his two eldest sons – John William and George Henry – join him as teenage apprentices in the business. Leicester is growing, and with it the demand for painting and decorating. Newly-built terraced streets roll out along Belgrave Road and Humberstone Road, and larger villas for merchants and professionals spring up in Stoneygate, and later Clarendon Park. Decorating work is there for the ambitious and energetic.

Whilst business prospers, William's health takes a turn for the worse; having suffered with phthisis or consumption for some eight years, he dies in 1875 aged only 39 years. His will indicates that he'd spotted signs of early promise in his eldest son: "I also desire that if practicable that my trade or such part thereof as is desirable shall be carried on by my beloved son John William Barker for the benefit of my beloved wife and lawful issue."

Shouldered with supporting the family, 19-year old John proves capable and rises to the challenge of running the business. His younger brother George soon heads off to set up as a painter on his own account; a clash of temperaments, perhaps, or a wish not to live in his older brother's shadow. Whilst George's enterprise remains small, John extends his team – in summer

1879 he advertises for three experienced brush hands, an apprentice and a “generally useful” youth.

TWO PAINTERS.—Three good BRUSH HANDS
Wanted.—Apply JNO. W. BARKER, Painter, 159A,
Belgrave-gate. [1214

WANTED a sharp intelligent YOUTH, one that
will make himself generally useful.—Apply
JNO. W. BARKER, 159A, Belgrave-gate 2140

JNO. W. BARKER, Decorative Painter, 159A, Bel-
grave-gate, has a vacancy for an Apprentice.—Apply
at once. 2189

The emphasis is often on decorative work: in July 1880, you might nip to Barker’s stall at the Floral Hall exhibition to see “imitation oak and walnut doors, decorated drawing room and dining room doors, and several patterns of wall decorations.” For house decoration he offers the “New season’s goods now in, comprising a large selection of French and English paper hangings including borders, friezes, dados, embossed papers”. Barker’s also undertakes commercial work – glass embossing or sign-writing – and tenders for corporation and church painting contracts too. The Belgrave Gate Primitive Methodist Church accounts of 1879 reveal he was paid £45 0s 6d for “preparing and whitewashing ceiling; sizing, staining and varnishing seats, doors and match boards;... [and] numbering seats.”

JNO. W. BARKER

HAVING been appointed successor to Mr. J. DEAN, Painter and Decorator, of Halford-street, Leicester, begs to ask the public of Leicester for the favour of their support, assuring them to fulfil that trust to the utmost of his ability. He has been connected with the trade of Painting, &c., for eighteen years, and on his own account for the past five years, and is in a position to execute any and all kinds of work. The Business will in future be carried on at

159A, BELGRAVE-GATE.

**A LARGE ASSORTMENT OF
BORDERS, FRIEZES, DADOES, FRENCH AND
ENGLISH PAPER HANGINGS.**

159a, Belgrave-gate,
Leicester, May 25th, 1882. w5 89

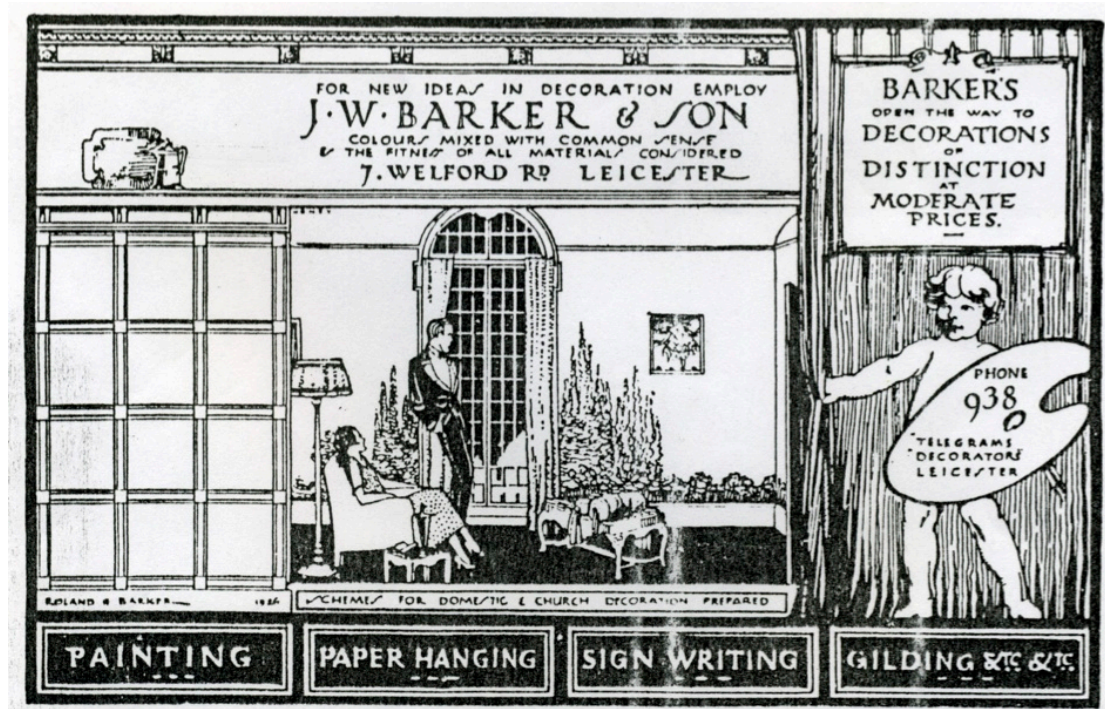
The ensuing decades are busy – John W Barker acquires John Dean’s Halford Street business (1882) and relocates to Belvoir Street (by 1888). His social aspirations grow in tandem with his business: he becomes a Freemason at St John’s Lodge (1890), President of the National Association

of Master Painters of England and Wales (1901), a Freeman of London as a member of the Painter-Stainers' Company (1901), and a director of the Leicester Temperance Building (1902). He hobnobs with Liberal town councillors, including his uncle Frederick Major and shoe retailer Stephen Hilton. A good social network can lead to business opportunities, he figures, and much of his working day is spent visiting prospective clients' homes and workplaces to quote on decoration work.

By the late 1890s – after a lifetime spent living 'over the shop' – he's able to move to Denbigh House in Stoneygate. It's a substantial, if rather plain, villa in Elmfield Avenue. John and his wife Sarah marry their children into like-minded families – Billsons the hosiers and Shimelds the shoe manufacturers – and before long, grandchildren start to appear. By 1914, home shifts to an altogether more agreeable house: Firwood in Knighton Park Road. During his scant leisure time John paints watercolours – something of a busman's holiday – and a trio of Scarborough beach scenes and two views of Firwood's gardens still survive.

Barker's staff grows to 40-50, including John's youngest brother Willy, and his sons John Edward ('Ted') and Roland George. It's a proud moment when the sign-writers re-work the shop fascia to read 'J W Barker & Sons'. All is set fair: "Ted was destined to take over the firm and was very capable and full of drive," writes fellow decorator Ernest Cundy. But tragedy strikes swiftly; Ted is killed in action at Hohenzollern Redoubt in October 1915 and, like thousands of families throughout the land, the Barkers are plunged into mourning. Our family history takes a different course, as Roland steps up to help run the business.

It proves to be a successful father-and-son partnership – later relocated to premises at the top of Welford Road – that continues until John's death in 1935. Roland too is a keen artist, "showing remarkable artistic attainments" when he wins a £50 International Travelling Scholarship at 17. Further encouragement comes from professional landscape artist Edward Davies, his future father-in-law. Roland spends over thirty years at the helm of Barker's – as well as teaching decoration at Leicester's Municipal Technical and Art School during the evenings – but as retirement approaches it becomes clear that the next generation have interests elsewhere. Roland's son John was to become a commercial artist but that, as they say, is another story. And so it is that Roland sells the business to Cundy's in 1948, the end of over ninety years family involvement in the painting and decorating trade. As this 1926 advert illustrated by Roland proudly declares, three generations of Barkers had "Opened the Way to Decorations of Distinction at Moderate Prices" and hopefully, in the process, they'd added a dash of colour to Leicester life.



Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories

To read Graham's previous 'Trading Stories, Working Lives' articles, visit www.auntiemabel.org; as well as stories about Barrow lime workers, Loughborough boatmen, and postmen in Victorian Leicester, the site includes ideas for writing your own family history.