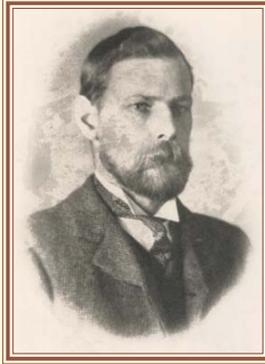


The well known, and much respected, Cambridge building firm, Coulson, was started in 1884 by a 21 year old carpenter, Herbert Charles Coulson. By 1889 Herbert and his growing company were occupying living and workshop accommodation and a builder's yard at 50 Burleigh Street, which he rented for £35 a year, another builder's yard and buildings in Paradise Street, which he rented for five guineas a year, and a stable and hayloft at the rear of 15 Burleigh Street, which he rented from his father, William Coulson, for £2-5s-0d a year.

Partners

In 1889 Herbert was joined by William Lofts and they became partners, trading from premises in East Road; a large mill on the ground floor equipped with the latest woodworking machinery, a joiners' shop upstairs and a



Herbert Charles Coulson (1863-1920).

timber yard opposite. Coulson & Lofts, as it became, retained Herbert's Yard in Paradise Street for stabling their horses. By 1900 the partnership was showing a healthy, if erratic, profit margin, varying between £1,007 in 1897, £4,681 in 1899 and £1,534 in 1903 (these figures included the partners' weekly wages of £1.10s.0d each).

An illustrated article in The Cambridge Graphic dated 6th July 1901 reports that:

"Coulson & Lofts have executed orders in various parts of the country including Ramsgate, Broadstairs, Chelmsford, Reading and many parts of London ... on average Messrs Coulson & Lofts have in employment some 260 men. Of these about 50 are employed at the mill and workshop. There are about 30 painters and decorators employed and there is an office of seven clerks. The firm has also carried out a great deal of work in Cambridge, including some speculative development in the area around Willis Road and Harvey Goodwin Avenue."



A view of the East Road timber yard at the end of the 19th century.



37 St. Andrew's Street, home of the company from 1901 to the 1960's.

Admired

Herbert and William acquired further cottage properties along East Road, and in 1901 they acquired the former Michael House Garage, 37 St Andrews Street, for use as a combined office and decorator's showroom, remodelling and building with oak beams, lattice windows and fine wooden furnishings. It is clear from their sales literature of the time that the partners were extremely proud of their premises and with good reason; both the East Road and St Andrew's Street buildings were much admired,



An early brochure and advertisement.



and both were excellent examples of their work. At this time, other properties were acquired in French's Road, which were used as an oak seasoning store, along with premises in Newmarket Road for a masonry yard and Bradwells Court and Granta Place for plumbers' stores and works.



The workshop in the early 1900s

In the years preceding the First World War the company thrived. Positioning themselves as builders, decorators, sanitary plumbers, shop fitters and contractors, the firm employed a full complement of specialist tradesmen including carpenters, joiners, bricklayers paperhangers, grainers, sign writers, hot water fitters and even bell hangers. Sales were rising fast, reaching £19,587 before the outbreak of war. An auditor and accountant, T F Greves, was employed to keep the firm's books. The partners' wages had crept up from £1.10s.0d a week in 1890 to £25 per month in 1908. Employees' perks included Christmas boxes of cigars or cigarettes, and an outing to Great Yarmouth in the summer of 1912, where 60 of the staff enjoyed dinner at the company's expense and consumed between them some eight gallons of lemonade! A staff football club was started in 1913.

Surviving the Great War

But in the run up to the First World War hard times hit the firm and the partnership was dissolved. As of 1st January 1914 Herbert Coulson was sole proprietor, trading as Coulson & Son but the effects of the First World War made money very tight. There were brave attempts to carry on business as usual but many of the company's men were away on active service. Amongst them was Mr W G James, who had joined the company in 1911 and was to serve it for over 50 years.

Herbert Charles Coulson died in 1920, and the following year the firm was incorporated as a private Limited Company, Coulson & Son Limited. W G James, who had been appointed Manager on his return from the war, became Managing Director, and the company in its new guise continued to earn a strong reputation for high quality work. Its involvement with projects such as the New Dorothy Café-Restaurant and Shop on Sidney Sussex corner, which begun in May 1929 and was completed in June 1931, brought much publicity; other major works were undertaken for Cambridge University and many of the colleges, including the Fisher Building for Queen's College and Chapel Court for St John's. The firm also played an important role in the growth of the commercial centre of Cambridge, and constructed buildings for Pye Limited and Cambridge Instrument Company Limited. Alongside major contracts, the firm continued to develop



its “jobbing” services for smaller customers and in 1932 Negus & Sons Limited was acquired by the Company but continued to trade as an independent subsidiary until the early nineties.

Supporting the Defence Effort

During the Second World War, the company’s resources were directed principally towards defence contracts, including work at many East Anglian air fields, coastal fortifications and radar stations. When the war was over, the provision of housing became a priority and the company turned its skills to the construction of hundreds of high quality rented dwellings for numerous local authorities and housing associations. More building work was done for Cambridge University, the colleges, the commercial and public sectors and for the expanding high tech economy in Cambridge.

Sadly, 1962 brought the death of W G James, who had been Managing Director since the firm’s incorporation in 1921. But the family connection continued and was strengthened when ‘WG’ was succeeded by his three sons John, Thomas and Robert; John as Managing Director and overseeing the Estimating department, Thomas running Contracts and Robert heading up Small Works and Joinery. The family tradition continued into the next generation, when Christopher, Philip and Simon came into the business – the three grandsons of ‘WG’ remain directly involved today; Christopher as Chairman, Philip as a Director, and Simon as a Senior Surveyor.

During the 1960s a Small Works Department was developed to carry out all small building projects, with a specialist section offering householders a prompt property

repair service on such small but important problems as leaking roofs, broken sash cords, electrical faults and burst pipes. In 1969 Harry Langdon & Company Limited was acquired, and, like Negus, continued to trade as an independent subsidiary, dealing with small contracts and jobbing.

With an increase in workload over this period it was not long before the company outgrew its premises in St Andrew’s Street and 1963 saw the opening of a redeveloped site in East Road, with new purpose built head offices, and further new facilities for the Joinery and Masonry departments.

The growing need for an experienced and efficient electrical installation team led to the formation in 1968, of Hart Electrical Limited who acted as the company’s regular sub-contractor, carrying out electrical works large and small for trade and private customers. With the increased emphasis on the restoration and refurbishment of some of the Cambridge and the wider regional architectural heritage, Coulson Insulation and Coulson Preservation were set up to provide specialist services and advice on insulation, damp proofing and building preservation.

Cambridge Phenomenon

1969 saw the publication of the Mott report which advocated development of science and University research based industries. This opened the way for the Trinity Science Park and similar employment clusters which led to the “Cambridge Phenomenon”, high-tech boom and the general expansion of Cambridge and its sub-region, all of which provided opportunities for Coulson.

The 1970s saw Coulson working on a number of key sites. Major projects for Girton & Trinity Colleges, the University Music School, Barclays Banks at Market Hill and Chesterton Road as well as The School of Clinical Medicine at Addenbrooke’s Hospital and Orton Bushfield School Peterborough for Cambridgeshire County Council.

The education sector continued to play an important role in the eighties and nineties with projects both large and small for most of the Cambridge Colleges and University



Staff party in 1950. W G James (then Mayor of Cambridge) and his wife Catherine are seen in the foreground.

sites, including award winning projects at the Howard Building at Downing College and the Quincentenary Library for Jesus College as well as a major refurbishment programme for Clare College. This period also saw numerous schools projects including work at Kings School Ely, Perse Girls and St John's College School and, for the commercial sector, a number of projects on the Cambridge Science Park, including major projects for Cambridge Consultants and in the city centre for the Unex Group.



The opening of William James House in 1888. Robert James is seen here with Baroness Blatch.

In the mid eighties Coulson were approached by Grosvenor Estates to see if they would relocate their East Road site to allow the then recently opened Grafton Centre to be extended. After extensive negotiations and the purchase of suitable site in Cowley Road, Cambridge, the company moved into a purpose built office and yard in 1988.

Quality Service

In response to the economic turndown of the early nineties the Company restructured and the former independent subsidiaries Hart Electrical Ltd, Harry Langdon & Company Ltd and Negus & Sons Limited all become part of Coulson & Son Limited, with Langdon and Negus being relocated to Cowley Road. It was over this period that the current Services Department was developed into what is now the leading response and planned maintenance department in Cambridge.

Further expansion of their site in Cowley Road enabled the Coulson Building Group to take advantage of the increasing demand for serviced office space and the Group now has 17,000 ft² let to a number of key tenants.

More than a century of service has given Coulson Building Group a past and present to be proud of and a confidence to meet the change and challenge of the future. Coulson Building Group will carry on developing its plans and as ever, the company is committed to a robust approach to training and quality. In 2004 this commitment



The Headquarters of Coulson Building Group.

was acknowledged with a Certificate of Recognition as an Investor in People, in 2005 and 2006 Construction Skills awards for Outstanding Contribution to Training and Business Education Links. In 2009 the Group was awarded the ISO 9001:2008 registration. Over many years Coulson Building Group have been able to combine their traditional and specialist skills and good craftsmanship with the advantages of modern

working practices, quality control mechanisms and high quality apprenticeships.



The current Senior Management Team from left to right: Sid Cullum, Christopher James, Philip James, Stephen Terrell and Graham Watts.

More recently Coulson Building Group have been involved in a number of key partnership schemes across East Anglia in the Housing, Education and Defence sectors. In acknowledgment of their partnering approach they were awarded "Best in Supply Chain 2008" for their work with Babcock Infrastructure Services for Defence Estates. In addition the Group continue to service the local Colleges and Universities as well as commercial and domestic clients, many of which they have worked with for a number of years.

Few building firms can say they have had as much impact on the Cambridge "built environment", and throughout the sub-region there are examples of the consistently high standard of Coulson's quality and craftsmanship.

Confident

Herbert Coulson entered the 20th century as an enterprising, highly skilled carpenter who took great pride in his work, set himself rigorous standards and enjoyed an excellent reputation for quality built up over several decades. The Coulson Building Group entered the 21st century as a confident, forward-looking, family-run company with a highly-skilled workforce, which continues to enjoy an excellent reputation for quality going back a century and a quarter.