



Chris Clifford, Croft Managing Director guides us through 150 years of family manufacturing history from 1868 to 2018.

“It has been 150 years since my great grandfather Reuben Clifford moved to Willenhall, and at the age of 21 set up in business trading as R. Clifford and Son, manufacturers of builders and ships brass foundry.”



Chris Clifford, Croft Managing Director

“Successive generations of our family have since designed and manufactured architectural hardware for the industry. From those very early days as R. Clifford and Son, through the heyday of Clifford Brothers employing 150 and producing high volume products, to today as Croft Architectural Hardware. With a reputation as manufacturers of the finest brass and bronze door and window fittings, using a mixture of traditional hand work methods, the latest CNC lathes, millers and machining centres, we are very proud of what we have achieved.”

Today, the fifth generation are looking after the company, continuing to invest in new and improved manufacturing methods and introducing new designs and finishes, making sure Croft and our sixty employees has a bright and strong future ahead.”



Our story starts in the Nechells area of Birmingham where Reuben Clifford was born in the year 1847. He lived in the city with his widowed mother Jane and brother a sister, and when he left school he learned his trade as a foundry man and in the manufacture of builders and ships brass foundry.

Reuben moved to Willenhall where he met and married a local girl, Sarah, and they had the first of their thirteen children in 1867.



From our archives, an early photo of Reuben and Sarah.

In 1868, Reuben began trading as R. Clifford and Son, still manufacturing the builders and ships brass foundry and he became quite successful.

So much so that he owned one of the finest motor cars in town, a De Dion, which by all accounts was none too reliable. He employed a chauffeur who accompanied him on his outings and in the event of a breakdown, Reuben would return home on the train and the chauffer was left to make his own way home with the vehicle, as best he could.

Reuben was also the owner of four public houses and this possibly led to his downfall as in 1895, he was unfortunately made bankrupt.

Although this was the end of R. Clifford and Son, Reuben by now had four others sons who had learned his trade and in 1899 they set up in business as Clifford Brothers in the cellar of the family home in Little Wood Street, Willenhall. This was mainly to clear some debts accumulated by their father.

From the start Clifford Brothers was very successful. New designs for Sash Fasteners were produced and patents were applied for and they became one of the leading producers of brass sash fittings in the country. They also produced and designed a full range of door fittings, again patents were applied, including letter plates and postal knockers with a concave flap and aperture.

They needed to expand their premises and a new factory was built in Villiers Street, Willenhall in 1908. However it is believed they did not own all of the land that they built the factory on, but there were no objections and the real ownership was never known.



Home of Clifford Brothers from 1908, Villiers Street, Willenhall.



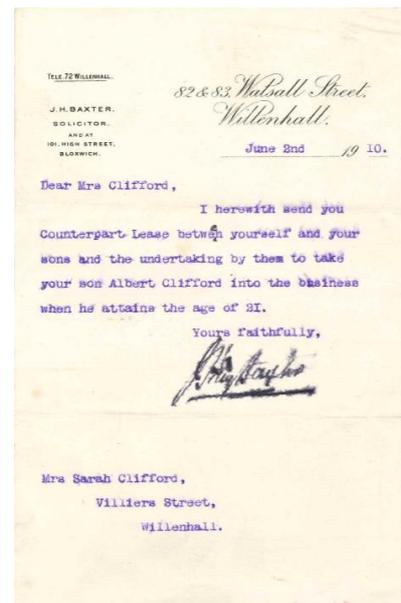
These new premises gave the company the opportunity to expand their potential even further, but the outcome of World War 1 meant the company had to manufacture items to help with the war effort and a number of employees went off to fight for their country, including the sons of the founders of Clifford Brothers. Alfred joined the Royal Naval Voluntary Reserve but was transferred to the Flying Corp. He flew in the British Experimental Plane and did renaissance work and was an observer. Another, Charlie, joined the army and fought in the battle of the Somme, where he was injured and walked with a limp for the rest of his life.

After the war, things slowly returned to normal. The factory was producing its core brass foundry and sash window fittings were still its main product line, with vast quantities being sent to customers in Scotland.

So much so, that the company became known as the 'Sash Fastener Kings' and over 150 people were employed there. Padlocks were added to the range to meet a growing demand, both in cast brass and gunmetal as well as the traditional galvanised iron.

Wooden door knobs were still made in high volume numbers as they had since the R. Clifford and Son days. At that time, they used to chop trees down themselves to get the wood for the door knobs and use horses to drag the tree trunks back to the factory where it would be cut up into blocks so that it could be put onto the lathes and turned to shape. Local butchers would come to the factory to collect the saw dust, to sprinkle onto the floors of their butcher shops.

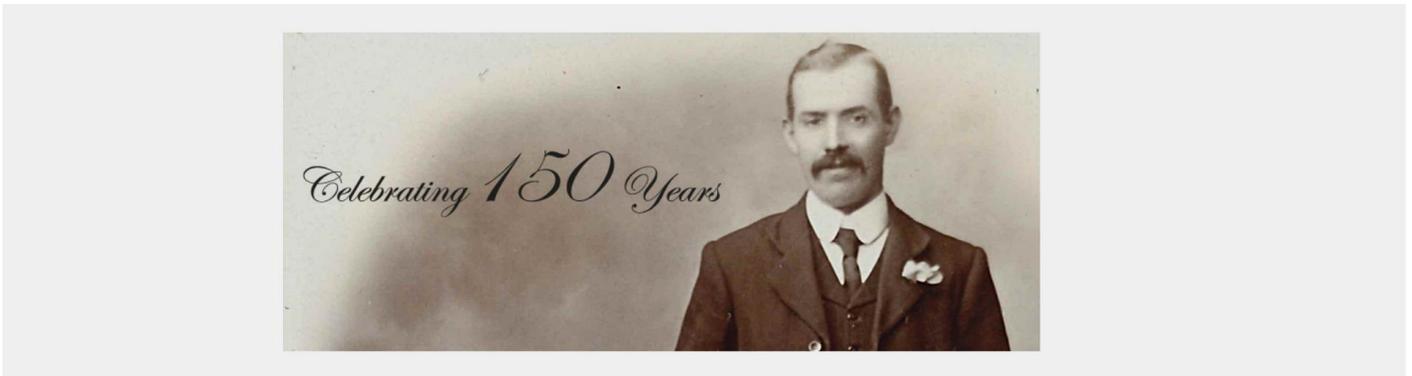
But the company suffered a major set-back when a fire started in the wood turning department and quickly enveloped the whole factory, leaving it a burnt out shell. The whole factory had to be rebuilt.



An original letter to Renben's wife Sarah, dated 1910

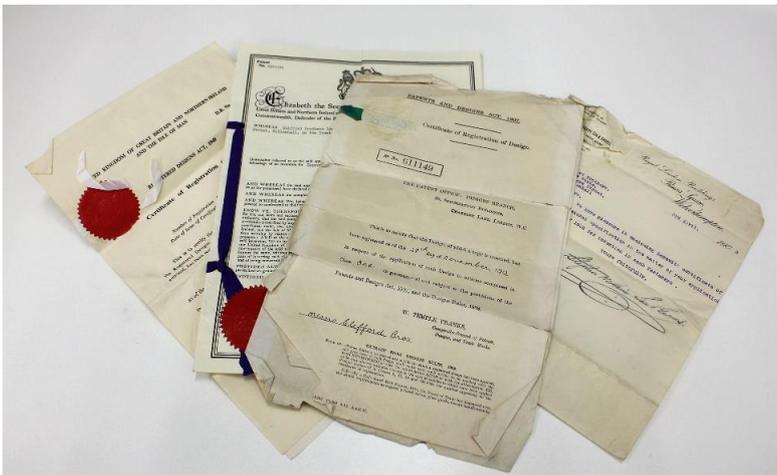
The Second World War came and again the factory helped with the war effort. Some employees went off to fight abroad, whilst others had reserved occupations because of their skills but also did their duty in the Home Guard. German planes were a regular sight as they tried to bomb the factories in the Black Country and Birmingham areas and fires had to be put out.

After the war, the bitter winter of 1947 meant power was regularly cut to from the factory. To help keep production going, a tractor was brought in from a nearby farm and used to drive the overhead shafting, which then operated the machinery via leather belting.



Clifford Brothers was doing well in the 1950s and 60s. New designs and ideas were needed for the post war period and aluminium was the new material for the future. Patents were applied for the new designs of letter plates, which were now made from extrusions and a whole new range of door and window fittings were produced to meet the demand for the post war building boom.

The company needed to expand, and the Imperial Works on Wednesfield Road, Willenhall, was purchased, mainly for the production of the aluminium lines. Another unit was purchased in Colliery Road, Wolverhampton and this became the electroplating and anodising division and was named the Deansfield Metal Finishing Company.



The 1960's and 1970's brought changes to the family structure. Clifford Brothers remained in the hands of Alfred, a grandson of the founder, and his sons Harry and Peter. Reuben, also a grandson and named after his grandfather, had started a company in The Croft at Willenhall, called Croft Manufacturing Company. Later to become Croft Architectural Hardware and move to Lower Lichfield Street.

Original patent documents

Reuben's eldest son Gerald, took over the running of Deansfield Metal Finishing whilst his youngest son Chris, joined him at Croft

Another branch of the family also produced similar items in brass and bronze and traded as E Whitehouse and Company, but suffered a spate of burglaries in the 1990s and was subsequently bought by Croft and moved into the Lower Lichfield Street premises.

An early collection of Clifford Brother's brochures.





By the early 1990s Clifford Brothers was sold to a South African company and eventually ceased production at the Villiers Street factory. This left Croft as the only factory in the Clifford family still producing builders and architectural hardware in brass and bronze.

Croft continued to expand as the twenty first century arrived and in 2012, Croft purchase Fred Dennis Ltd of Tamworth, along with the barrel bolt machinery and moved into Lower Lichfield Street. The purchase of The Quality Lock Company at Leve Lane was completed from Kirkpatrick of Walsall in 2013, the machinery and employees also moving into Lower Lichfield Street.

Adjacent premises were purchased to help with the expansion and a new machine shop was built at the rear of the premises on land in Doctors Piece.

Today the company is run by Chris's sons Paul and Nick, who joined the company in 1999 and 2007 respectively. They are the fifth generation of the Clifford family to work in manufacturing in Willenhall. Almost 60 employees are employed at Croft which operates from a 16,000 square foot factory based in the heart of Willenhall.

The latest CNC machining centres, millers and lathes are used in conjunction with traditional methods to help the company be one of the leading manufacturers of brass and bronze architectural hardware in the UK today, something which everyone at Croft is very proud of.

The company's products can be found on the leading buildings within the UK, including Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament, and on many prestigious projects abroad, from luxury hotels to private residencies.

So after one hundred and fifty years of proud heritage, manufacturing by the Clifford family still continues in Willenhall and Croft Architectural Hardware is in safe hands, with an exciting future ahead.

PRESENT DAY



Croft factory and CNC workshop, 2018.