

Lancashire Watch Company

Watches were made in Prescot from the early 1700s. The industry flourished during the 18th and 19th centuries and Prescot became the centre of the North West clock and watch industry.



The Lancashire Watch Company which became the Pals' Barracks

Prescot gained world-wide recognition as a centre for high quality craftsmanship. The expensive, high quality watches and clocks were produced by hand in workshops attached to the workers' houses. The craftsmen specialised in making different parts of the watches and clocks, along with the precision hand tools needed to create them. The small town thrived on its industry and in 1860 over a third of the town's population were employed in the trade, and Prescot was described as a 'town of little workshops'. Although the hours were long with few holidays, watchmaking was considered a good occupation.

By the 1870s fierce competition from cheaper, machine-made watches produced in America and Switzerland hit the Prescot trade badly. The local workers were reluctant to let go of their traditional skills and by 1885 after a rapid decline most of the workshops scattered through the town had closed down.

One initiative to save the industry was the establishment of the Lancashire Watch Company in 1889. This was one of the first English factories to combine all the different manufacturing processes under one roof, producing complete watches and clocks. The new company bought up many of the old Prescot workshops, complete with their tools and workers. The main factory was in Albany Road, with a warehouse in the 'Flat Iron' building, Eccleston Street. The factory building was later used as the Pals' Barracks in World War One.

<http://www.knowsley.gov.uk/things-to-see-and-do/galleries-and-museum.aspx>

Women were also employed in the watchmaking trade, however when the Lancashire Watch Company was founded it had a strict policy that only unmarried women could work there. Once a female employee wed, she had to leave her job at the factory.

The Lancashire Watch Company, finishing & adjusting room

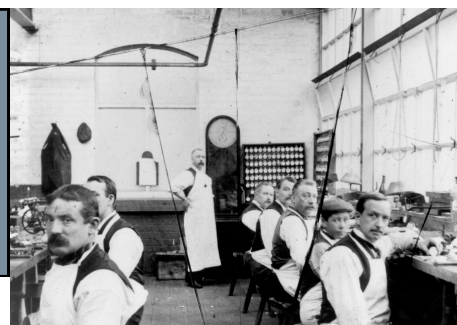


The Lancashire Watch Company



Female workers in the factory

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The high level of manual skill required to operate the traditional machinery used in small workshops was not required because advances in tool design and manufacture had resulted in tools which were inherently accurate, robust and capable of producing large quantities of identical components without adjustment. Semi-skilled or even unskilled workers could operate them. Steam power reduced physical fatigue and large numbers of components were quickly produced.

Although the methods and machines used were novel in England, techniques were developing very rapidly on the continent and in America, but the Lancashire Watch Company did not innovate sufficiently to remain competitive; the company also produced too wide a range of movements which was not cost-effective. The company closed in January 1911, and the factory contents were sold by auction. During its 21 years existence, an estimated 400,000 watches were produced.

Watchmaking in Prescot did not end with the collapse of the Lancashire Watch Company. Some of the factory machinery was bought by Mr A J Huckle, who established The Prescot Watch Company in the 'Flat Iron' building. They continued to make and sell watches until 1912. Joseph Preston & Sons, a company that held on to their traditional techniques, remained in business until 1952.

The Lancashire Watch Company made watches and clocks in a wide variety of styles and finishes. These ranged from high quality gold-cased ladies and men's pocket watches, to cheap metal-cased men's pocket watches and fusee dial clocks.

The Lancashire Watch Company factory workers



Watchmaking assembly tray

