

The story of John Barker & Co Ltd, Kensington, London

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John Barker was born at Loose in Kent on 6 April 1840, the son of Joseph Barker, a carpenter and brewer. He was educated privately and in 1853 began a three-year apprenticeship to a Maidstone draper. He gained further experience in drapery shops in Folkestone and Dover before moving to London, in 1858, to join Spencer, Turner & Boldero, furnisiers and drapers of Marylebone.

After a few years in London Barker was offered a position at William Whiteley's new emporium in Westbourne Grove. He proved a talented salesman and was promoted to departmental manager at an annual salary of £300. Within a year he had doubled sales at the store, and although his salary was also doubled, his expectation of a partnership was disappointed. Whiteley, loath to relinquish sole control, instead offered Barker £1,000 per annum in compensation. Barker was, however, an ambitious man and left Whiteley in late 1870 to open a small linen drapery shop on his own account in nearby Kensington.

His partner, James Whitehead, a wealthy City merchant who had also begun his career as a draper's apprentice, provided capital and credit without overly interfering in the running of the business. Whitehead remained the principal investor throughout the early years with an initial stake of around £6,000 to Barker's £340. Both received interest on their invested capital and Barker, as managing partner, also drew an annual salary of £250. Barker had left a remunerative position for a speculative venture but, as part owner, was now able to implement and adapt the adventurous modes of retailing which he had experienced at Whiteleys. By dealing directly with manufacturers and selling for cash he was able to keep prices low and to achieve a rapid turnover. Overheads were kept to a minimum and Barker and his family lived over the shop with the staff for several years.

Barker's initial premises at 91 and 93 (then 43 and 44) Kensington High Street, recently rebuilt under the Kensington improvement scheme, quickly proved inadequate and, by the end of 1870, Barker had annexed 26 and 28 Ball Street where he installed millinery, dressmaking and underclothing departments. In 1871 he moved into 87 Kensington High Street, setting up men's mercery and tailoring and juvenile clothing departments.

At that time he employed over thirty staff, including his younger brother, Francis. The following year he acquired the stock and premises of a draper at 89 Kensington High Street and 24 Ball Street, where he installed a book, stationery, fancy goods and mantle departments which were, in 1873, extended into a newly acquired parcel of land behind 85 and 87 Kensington High Street. In 1880 Barker also took over 77 Kensington High Street, 14 and 16 Ball Street and the stock of a firm of ironmongers. This acquisition led to the development of furniture, carpet, china and glass departments. Later the same year he purchased 75 Kensington High Street, the stock in a trade of a grocer, and houses at 12 and 14 Ball Street, redeveloping the latter site to accommodate attractive showrooms for groceries, provisions, wine and spirits and cigars.

From the outset Barker had envisaged the creation of a vast store selling a huge range of goods, and accordingly took every opportunity to acquire the leases and freeholds of adjoining premises. By 1880 he was trading in fifteen shops and boasted an annual turnover of £150,000, almost four times the invested capital, and an annual profit of £8,500. The expansion of the business continued unabated with the acquisition of 95 and 97 Kensington High Street, on the corner of King Street, for silk and

dress goods, mantles and millinery in 1885, and the purchase of the former London and County Bank and two shop premises at 67-71 Kensington High Street, for the cabinet, upholstery and drug dispensing departments, in 1888.

The following year 63 and 65 Kensington High Street, 2, 4 and 6 Young Street and 6 Ball Street were purchased and immediately pulled down to make way for a handsome six-storey building, with a high mansard roof, offering some 30,000 square feet of floor space. This new wing was completed in December 1889. Invitations to the grand opening promised 'music, decorations and electricity' and attractions included the string band of the Scots Guards, sword dancing by Highland pipers and a lift or 'American elevator'. More than 1,200 guests attended the event. The new wing was primarily devoted to the extension of the furnishing, upholstery and carpet departments and was principally stocked with purchases made at the recent Paris Exhibition.

By 1892 John Barker & Co was operating one of the largest emporia in London with over forty-two departments, including building and plumbing and refreshment catering departments, along with allied workshops. The store employed over 1,000 staff and the huge delivery service despatched some 2,000 parcels daily.

In 1888 a company had been formally established to run the new druggists department with Barker and Whitehead as equal partners. However, in 1893, after a disagreement, Barker acquired Whitehead's share in the business, using capital provided by his son-in-law's father, Sir Walter Gilbey of Bishop's Stortford. To satisfy a condition of the loan the firm was floated as a public company, John Barker & Co Ltd, with an authorised capital of £330,000 and £150,000 45 per cent mortgage debenture stock. Over the previous seven years the firm had averaged annual net profits of around £28,350. As vendor, Barker received £402,017, comprising £282,017 in cash and the remainder in shares and debenture stock in the new company, including the entire issue of management shares. Barker became chairman and the new directors included Barker's brother, Francis, and H.H. Johnstone, who had long been partners and now became managing directors, Barker's son-in-law, Tresham Gilbey of Bishop's Stortford, and J.G. Barnes, former manager of Parr's Banking Company, Kensington branch. The incorporated business was divided into five sections – finance, purchases, audit and salaries, stationery and advertising, and horse vans and deliveries, with a committee of directors appointed to each. The transition from private ownership to public company was not, however, an easy one and the board was to be continually divided by disagreements large and small.

In early 1894 the new company bought the premises and stock of Seaman & Little, a shop which had previously divided the warehouse in half requiring customers to venture outside to reach certain departments. The acquisition of the new shop, incorporated in the main warehouse within five days, was celebrated with a huge sale. During the first day four departments alone took more than £4,000. The company then owned thirty-three shops, including sixteen fronting High Street. The store itself comprised sixty-four departments and employed 1,500 staff.

By 1895, save for two shops (numbered 73 and 85), the company owned every property between King Street and Young Street. The growth of the business continued with the opening of new jewellery and watch, and bicycle departments in 1895, the rebuilding of the Ball Street property in 1897, to house office staff, and acquisition of numbers 48½, 52, 54 and 56 on the north side of Kensington High Street in 1898. In 1900, 73 Kensington High Street was finally acquired and negotiations successfully concluded with London County Council for the provision of a building lease for a site with a 440-foot frontage on to the north side of Kensington High Street and two new side streets. Soon afterwards plans were laid for a large warehouse with flats above, along the lines of Harrods' recent development in Knightsbridge, and work began on rebuilding 42-60 Kensington High Street. Later the depository facilities in Cromwell Crescent (acquired 1895) were also reconstructed.

In 1905 the new furnishing building was completed and Sydney Skinner, who had joined the firm in 1889, was appointed a director to manage the reorganisation attendant upon the expansion into larger premises. It was largely through Skinner's influence that John Barker & Co Ltd continued its expansion in April 1907 with the acquisition of Ponting Brothers, a large drapery store a block further west along Kensington High Street, at a price of £84,000. The business, founded in 1873, had remained a profitable concern until 1906 when an ambitious scheme to diversify the trade foundered and the company went into liquidation. Pontings' old stock was largely cleared in a massive sale but the business continued to trade under its old name and with its own buying team. During the following years attention focused on the redevelopment of Pontings' premises.

In November 1912 the east section of the main block was devastated by fire and 130,000 £1 ordinary shares were issued to finance the rebuilding. Temporary premises were quickly found on the opposite side of the street, and reconstruction, to include a subway between the showrooms on the north and south sides of Kensington High Street, began in 1913 undertaken by the company's own building department. The work was, however, scarcely complete when, in December 1914, John Barker died. Awarded a baronetcy in 1908 he had been actively involved in the management of the business to the end, despite sitting as a Liberal member of parliament for Penrhyn and Falmouth between 1906 and 1910. Barker was succeeded as chairman by Sydney Skinner, who was immediately faced with the problems consequent upon the outbreak of the First World War. Despite some new orders from the army and Red Cross, trade, by 1915, was diminishing leaving the business over-stocked and over-borrowed. Unprofitable departments were closed, wages were reduced and the delivery service was curtailed, particularly after the sale of 100 horses to the War Office.

The end of the war brought some relief and in January 1920 the policy of expansion was resumed with the acquisition of Derry & Toms, a large drapery store established in 1853, occupying the block between Barkers and Pontings. A purchase price of £603,084 was agreed and met by bank loans and a new share issue. Derry & Toms, like Pontings, was to continue as a separate concern and it was agreed that 'Barkers should be conducted on high-class lines and Pontings and Derry & Toms cater for the multitude of good middle-class lines.' During the next two years Derry & Toms' turnover doubled. Meanwhile Barkers' store on the south side of High Street was reorganised by carving a grand central entrance out of the window frontage and providing a magnificent staircase and lift service to every floor.

The difficult postwar years demanded a flexible approach and during the early 1920s intensive advertising was coupled with the introduction of new lines, such as ready-to-wear clothing and branded 'Kenbar' products, and an emphasis on such departments as furniture, household goods and provisions. The latter was, in fact, flourishing under the control of Trevor Bowen, an experienced confectioner, who joined the business from J. Lyons & Co Ltd in 1914 and handled the army supply contracts during the war. In 1919 Bowen and other managers visited the major American stores to acquire new retailing techniques and to buy unusual stock.

In 1922 Sydney Skinner was knighted and Bowen was promoted to departmental manager. That year Pontings was extensively refurbished. Both Pontings and Derry & Toms were, however, beginning to show trading losses. Both were massively over-stocked and a gulf was emerging between managers and buyers. These difficulties were compounded in succeeding months by rapidly falling prices. In 1924 experimental piano and gramophone shops were opened in Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester; these were not, however, a success and were closed within two years.

In 1925 Zeeta Co Ltd, a chain of high-class catering shops owned by Bowen and Skinner as a separate business in 1919, was acquired by Barkers for £120,000. That year Bowen was appointed a director. Between 1922 and 1930 the area of property owned by the company doubled with acquisitions on both sides of High Street. In 1926 a large furniture store was built on a site belonging to the Crown and adjoining the existing building, opposite the main block, at 26-40 Kensington High

Street. The company had occupied temporary premises here since the fire of 1912 and took a long lease in 1919. Work on the store, known as the Ladymere Building, had begun in 1924. The eight floors were attractively fitted out with specimen rooms and, on the first and mezzanine floors, a men's shop was installed. The new store was linked with the main block by a subway at lower ground floor level.

In 1927 the company reached agreement with the Crown, the principal local landowner, for an exchange of properties which would allow the consolidation and rebuilding of Barkers and Derry & Toms. Plans were laid for a phased redevelopment of both stores during the 1930s, setting Barkers back by thirty feet to reduce the acute congestion in Kensington High Street. The project was to be financed entirely from reserves. The first stage involved the closure of Ball Street, which was built over between 1927 and 1929, and erection of new administrative offices and household showrooms. Meanwhile Pontings was developed southwards along Wrights Lane.

Architect Bernard George was commissioned to produce designs for both stores, and work on Derry & Toms began immediately, greatly disturbing the trade. The new Derry & Toms store was opened in March 1933, amidst a fanfare of press publicity – 'a beautiful store to sell beautiful things.' Arranged on six floors it was a bold and simple departure in store design, with a fine stone façade of columns and friezes and restrained interior, marble and bronze Art-Deco panels providing the only decorative features. An American designer was engaged to plan the floor layouts and Derry & Toms was consequently one of the first London stores to adopt the horizontal system. Each floor was totally open plan, whilst the absence of well-holes and central staircases reduced the risk of fire. On the fifth floor there was an elegant restaurant, The Rainbow Room, and a fashion theatre. The entire store was beautifully appointed with blue and gold carpets, concealed lighting and attractive display areas. In 1936 work began at the instigation of Trevor Bowen, on the famous room gardens. Opened in May 1938, the gardens comprised a sun pavilion and three discrete areas – an English woodland garden, a Spanish garden and a Tudor garden. Meanwhile the demolition team had moved in on Barkers where a new frontage was to be lined with the earlier Ball Street building. Construction began at the western end and was only two-thirds complete when war was declared.

Despite some bomb damage to Derry & Toms and extreme staff shortages, profits were maintained throughout the war. This success was in a large measure due to the company's cash purchasing policy and prudent acquisition of large stocks of merchandise during the late 1930s. Sir Sydney Skinner died in 1941 and was succeeded as chairman by Trevor Bowen. Despite postwar shortages and controls Bowen determined to expand the business. In 1947 he acquired Gosling & Sons Ltd of Richmond, a small drapery business established during the 1790s, and in mid-1951 explored the possibility of acquiring the enormous Selfridge business in Oxford Street. The latter was in fact taken over by Lewis's Investment Trust and Bowen subsequently bought a vacant site in Terminus Road, Eastbourne, where, in September 1953, he opened a new store with thirty departments. It was not, however, until April 1955 that work was resumed on the Barker building in Kensington and the new store there was opened in September 1958.

Inside the store was designed along the same open-plan lines as Derry & Toms, although the exterior, with its curved frontage, continuous canopy and projecting tower staircases, presented a striking contrast.

Before the construction of the new building was completed, the business had changed hands. In July 1957 House of Fraser made an offer for the entire share capital offering ten shillings cash and four Fraser 'A' five-shilling shares for each Barker £1 ordinary share. The board recommended acceptance and the offer became unconditional in August. Bowen remained honorary president of the company until his death in 1965, but was replaced as chairman by Hugh Fraser. Under House of Fraser's ownership, the business was gradually streamlined.

Between 1959 and 1962 the Zeeta stores were gradually disposed of along with surplus property on the north side of Kensington High Street and in Young Street. In 1965 John Barker (Construction and Development) Ltd was formed to continue the company's old-established building and decorating department. In 1968 Gosling & Sons of Richmond ceased to trade and the store was demolished prior to redevelopment.

By 1970 it had become evident that it would not be economical to maintain all three of the Kensington stores. In February 1971 Pontings was closed and within forty hours the entire store had been installed in the lower ground floor of the Barkers building where it became known as 'Pontings Bargain Basement'. The new showrooms included menswear, fabric, linens and furnishing departments, and a self-service restaurant. The mail-order business was continued as before and the entire Pontings site was sold. The same year, agreement was also reached for the sale of Derry & Toms, although the store was not closed until January 1973. Meanwhile, in late 1972, work began on the refurbishment of Barkers in order to capture the trade of the closed stores.

In 1975 House of Fraser also acquired Army & Navy Stores Ltd and Barkers became the flagship of a new Army & Navy Division. In 1976 the food hall was revamped and a new china and glass department and restaurant opened. The following year automatic lifts were installed and the Pontings basement, which was out of keeping with the new store image, closed. Further modernisation work was undertaken in 1978 with the construction of a new main entrance on the corner of Derry Street and the opening of a new fashion area on the first floor and electrical and hardware departments on the lower ground floor.

By the early 1980s it had become clear that the store's sales area, in excess of 600,000 square feet, was too large for the existing trade. In 1982 the number of sales floors was reduced from seven to four and architects were commissioned to refurbish and redevelop Barkers as a compact store of 140,000 square feet alongside a new arcade of nine boutiques. The remaining part of the building was to comprise around 200,000 square feet of office space, with a spectacular barrel vaulted atrium, the largest in Europe, overlooking garden terraces. The new department store was completed by November 1986 and the shopping arcade opened in October 1987. In August 2005 House of Fraser announced the closure of Barkers store.