

JOHN EDWARD THORNTON: A FORGOTTEN MANCUNIAN

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Most amateur and professional photographers aged over sixty will have heard of the once world-famous camera makers Thornton-Pickard. Most citizens of Altrincham, of the same age, will remember the Thornton-Pickard factory in Atlantic Street, Broadheath. Some will remember the Pickards, a family of Quakers. Very few will be cognisant of the fact that Thornton-Pickard was originally based in Manchester. Very few, if any, will have ever heard of the Company's founder, John Edward Thornton. This article is largely based on Thornton's personal papers and effects some of which are at Vernon Park Museum, Stockport. These papers could easily have been destroyed but their fortunate survival has provided local historians, photographic historians and business historians with a unique archive which offers new evidence and fresh insights into the world of business, invention and photography in the region from the late Victorian period to the Edwardian years.

In the early 1970s Pickfords, the international removal firm, were converting their Stockport Depository into a travel agency. As the building was being cleared of uncollected deposits, a vast hoard of ephemera, photographs, photographic postcards, catalogues, ledgers and day books were found along with some film and glass plate negatives. The young man who had been temporarily employed to clear the building, and remove the contents to the local tip, decided to attempt to sell some of his discovery to local collectors and antique shops. Fortunately, a large proportion of what is now referred to as the Thornton Collection found its way into Vernon Park Museum. However, most of the photographs, photographic postcards and catalogues passed into the hands of local collectors. Some portions of the Thornton Collection were sold off at Christie's sale rooms, South Kensington, in 1983. The intriguing fact surrounding the discovery was that it had been deposited in 1910 by John Edward Thornton (then aged forty-five) but never collected. The deposit was made up of innumerable items for it appears that Thornton had, at least until 1910, hardly disposed of a single scrap of paper! Mundane messages such as 'gone to lunch', lay tied in bundles with other papers detailing Thornton's innermost thoughts on his business affairs and other matters.

John Edward Thornton, inventor, patent speculator, and failed entrepreneur, was born in Manchester at 92 Wellcombe Street, Hulme, on 30 May 1865. Some two years later his mother, Henrietta (née Buck) died of bronchitis, aged twenty-six; this tragedy was the first of many misfortunes throughout Thornton's life. Thornton's father, a fairly successful journeyman cabinet maker and upholsterer, re-married and his second wife, Catherine (née Cragg), gave birth to a daughter in July 1878. Thornton's half-sister, Florence, was probably his greatest friend and supporter throughout his life.¹ Florence Thornton, (she never married) was the only person at Thornton's side when he died in Bury Infirmary on 5 October 1940.



John Edward Thornton in 1895.

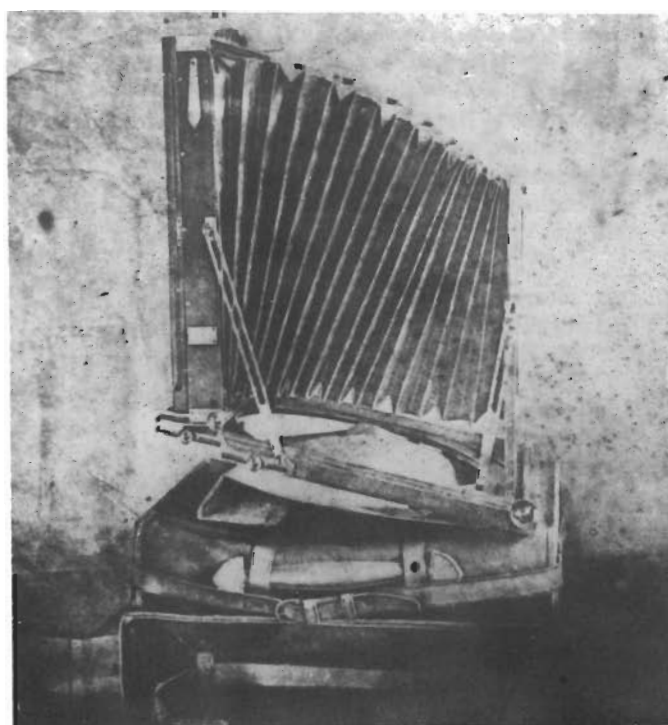
The Thornton family were ardent Methodists, and Thornton's father showed a deep interest in his son's education. Thornton's school books for September 1877 to July 1878 show he was studying arithmetic, geometry, geography and grammar.² His father was also keen on his son's future career, and was prepared to wait until his son could be placed as an apprentice with a prestigious printing firm — the Deansgate Press. Thornton was almost fifteen when he became a bound apprentice to the Deansgate Press (George Faulkner & Sons) in March 1880.³ In his leisure hours Thornton's father was an enthusiastic amateur painter, and Thornton used to accompany him to various sites whilst he painted in oil or water colours. However, Thornton's father used to complain that his long working hours reduced his painting time to an almost unacceptable degree. Thornton, who had recently become acquainted with photography persuaded his father to buy a second-hand camera so that in future the subjects of his paintings could be photographed and then painted at leisure.⁴

By the 1880s the camera was no longer the novelty that it had been in the opening years of Victoria's reign. Commercial photographers were well established in Manchester catering for all social classes. Manufacturers of photographic equipment had also established themselves in the city. The Manchester Photographic Society, one of the first provincial photographic societies, remained active, whilst in 1887 the founding of the

Manchester Amateur Photographic Society provided a new centre for people interested in photography. Technical improvements had made cameras easier to operate, and prices had fallen so that camera-ownership was no longer the prerogative of the middle-classes but was becoming a possibility for families of the upper-working class like the Thorntons. From the very moment that Thornton began to use his father's camera his inventive mind began to explore the possibility of photographic improvements. By 1886, whilst still a bound apprentice with Deansgate Press, he had designed a camera and a roller blind shutter. In July 1886 he rented an office in Regent's Chambers, King Street West, Manchester, and by May 1887 he had twelve patents registered (although not all were commercially produced) and was exhibiting a camera at the Jubilee Exhibition in the Botanical Gardens, Old Trafford.⁵ In the same year Thornton borrowed fifty pounds, and started a business at St. Mary's Street, off Deansgate but after only a few weeks he was in financial difficulties, largely through excessive advertising and continuing patent registration.⁶

further inventions. Where others saw only machines or gadgets, Thornton's fertile mind quickly discerned their underlying principles and began working on ways to improve them. Whether new or established technology, large or small-scale problems, Thornton was attracted. His designs included a motor car (a failure), a cardboard box making machine (a success), and a skirt suspender for ladies, to prevent the blouse pulling out of the skirt, (patent registered in his wife's name) which was also a failure.⁸

Thornton was constantly battling with his partner Edgar Pickard on the matter of the Company's finances, and he felt so brow beaten by Pickard that he used to set down his arguments (and Pickard's probable responses) on paper for the next day's battle.⁹ Thornton lost interest in the Company itself because of his continuing efforts to become a rich and powerful man. Thornton, a small and slightly built man, had a massive inferiority complex about his station in life and suffered from self-delusion which became near megalomania.¹⁰ Pickard who was suffering from severe stomach ulcers was constantly



Thornton's "Jubilee" camera, 1887.

Thornton was a relentless inventor and a great persuader if not a good businessman. His future career was blighted by his continuing, almost obsessive pursuit of further inventions, at no matter what cost. His first partner at St. Mary's Street was soon bought out by Edward Pickard, a successful engineer, and member of a rich Quaker family of wholesale provision merchants in Mansfield. Thus in January 1888 the Thornton-Pickard Manufacturing Company was formed.⁷ Initially the Company staggered from one financial crisis to another and had to be almost continuously supported by Pickard's father. However, when Thornton's Roller Blind Shutter finally became a commercially viable product in 1891, five years after patent registration, the Company's fortunes improved rapidly. Thornton's Shutter, now re-named the Thornton-Pickard Shutter sold worldwide and in 1897 the Thornton-Pickard Company, which had moved to Atlantic Street, Broadheath in 1891, became a limited company. Thornton was now a comparatively rich man, but most of his earnings, much to his new wife's and his partner's dismay, were spent on his passionate pursuit of

plotting with his father and brothers to remove Thornton from the Company because of his wild expenditure.¹¹ Prior to the Thornton-Pickard Company becoming Limited, Thornton owned all the patents. When the Company became limited Thornton's patents became the Company's property and also, Thornton, as Chairman, had to answer to the shareholders. Pickard and Thornton had also signed an agreement that, should they resign from the Company, neither of them would manufacture photographic equipment in the United Kingdom. Within a few months of the Limited Company being established Pickard died suddenly from his illness. The Pickard family however continued to try and check what they considered to be Thornton's impetuous and financially wasteful activities, and by 1898 they had made his life so intolerable (from his point of view) that he resigned. From then on Thornton indulged in wild speculative schemes. He had the breathtaking audacity to form the Altrincham Film Company less than ten minutes walk from Thornton-Pickard.¹² Naturally, the Pickards obtained an injunction to prevent Thornton from trading



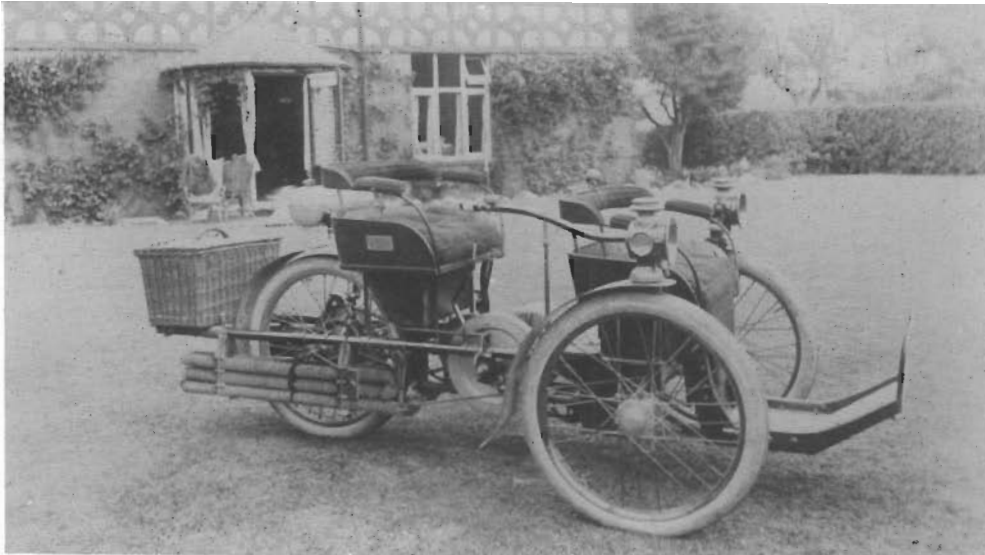
Thornton-Pickard works, St. Mary's Street, Manchester c. 1890.

in photographic goods. However, such was Thornton's reputation and his natural enthusiasm and persuasiveness that he was able to find support for most of his future schemes from investors who soon learnt to their regret that Thornton, although an imaginative inventor and designer of great skill, was also a wild gambler with little discipline whatsoever over his financial position.¹³ Patent followed patent but commercial success eluded him. It was perhaps Thornton's most famous invention, the Film Pack, that caused him the greatest pain. He was forced to sell the rights to the Film Pack to the Rochester Optical Company (USA), who were eventually bought out by Eastman Kodak, and who successfully sold it worldwide without having to pay Thornton a penny in royalties.¹⁴

By 1903, Thornton was in desperate financial straits and he began to issue share prospectuses for a number of different companies in order to attract investors. Unfortunately, Edith May (née Heaton), his wife, had persuaded her family to lend him money, and also some of her friends. As Thornton's business enterprises failed one after the other, due to his fanatical pursuit of new inventive ideas instead of more mundane business matters, the Heaton family appears to have spread malicious rumours (completely unfounded) concerning fraud and deception.¹⁵ Thornton removed from Altrincham to Southport, from Southport to Disley, from Disley to Manchester and finally in 1907 to Stockport. There he rented a large house at 161 Wellington Road, and in 1910, with his two sons, educated at Stockport



Thornton-Pickard factory at Atlantic Street, Broadheath, Altrincham c. 1892.



Thornton Motor Company's car c.1897. The car was eventually sold for scrap.

Grammar School, financial circumstances forced him to move to a tiny terraced house at 126 Manchester Old Road, Stockport.¹⁶ It was from this address that he deposited his vast hoard of personal papers and ephemera at the Wellington Road Depository.

In 1913, Thornton emigrated to America and set up a photographic studio in Rochester, New York State.¹⁷ Again financial success eluded him and by 1915, Thornton had returned to England and was living at 14 Minster Avenue, Hampstead in London. Thornton stayed at this address until 1928 when he moved to Jersey in the Channel Islands.¹⁸ It was during this period Thornton invented a three-colour cine film which he allowed Eastman Kodak to produce under licence. It was a profitable arrangement and by 1930 this was providing Thornton with a comfortable income.¹⁹ But Thornton's desire to invent did not decline with age and he now had patents registered on electric radiators, weaving looms and, of course, new inventions relating to his chief interest, photography.²⁰

Thornton had also not completely severed his links with the Company which bore his name. When he resigned from Thornton-Pickard in 1898, he became virtually persona-non-grata as far as the Pickards were concerned. However, he had kept one preference share and attended every shareholders meeting from 1906 to 1913, and from 1915 to 1937. His attendances must have been an embarrassment for the management, especially as the 1937 meeting concerned the voluntary liquidation of the

Company due to continuing and damaging financial losses.

From 1937 Thornton, now living with his half-sister Florence at 26 Clarendon Street, Bury, appears to have been abandoned by his family. He does not appear to have been attended during his illness in 1940 by anyone other than Florence and her entry in the *Manchester Evening News* merely states the place and date of his death, but not where and when the funeral was to be held.

Thus Thornton had no obituary and no one commented publicly on his passing. Certainly no one made enquiries about the vast hoard of personal papers and ephemera which some thirty years before he had left at the Stockport Depository. The evidence of the first forty-five years of this remarkable man's life and work lay gathering dust for over sixty years until it was acquired by Vernon Park Museum. The lucky survival of his papers enable us to add Thornton to the list of those local inventors who can lay claim to photographic 'firsts'. They also permit us to follow in some detail the schemes, thought processes and activities of an inventor whose ideas were not always commercially viable, at least not when left in his own hands. Only further study into Thornton's life and into the business and commercial world in which he operated will help to clarify how typical or unrepresentative a figure he was. But hopefully in this short essay sufficient has been said to alert local historians, photographic historians and business historians to the achievements and failures of an inventor and businessman who by any criteria led a remarkable life.

NOTES

1. Correspondence between Florence and John Edward Thornton. Thornton Collection. Vernon Park Museum. Stockport.
2. School Books and Correspondence. Vernon Park Museum.
3. Extract from original indenture. T. Shaw, private collection.
4. Extracts from Thornton's 'loose leaf diaries'. Vernon Park Museum.
5. *Photographers' Handbook* (1887) and *Manchester Jubilee (1887) Catalogue* (Advertisements).
6. Thornton Manufacturing Company Ledgers. Vernon Park Museum.
7. Thornton-Pickard Company Ledgers. Vernon Park Museum.
8. The Skirt Suspender is now at Platt Hall Gallery of English Costume. Information and Patent Vernon Park Museum.
9. Extracts from Thornton's 'diaries'. Vernon Park Museum.
10. Thornton's diaries. Vernon Park Museum.
11. Correspondence between senior employees and Thornton concerning this 'plot'. Vernon Park Museum.
12. British Colonial Druggist advertisement (1900) and prospectuses at Vernon Park Museum.
13. Complaining letters from Thornton's creditors. Vernon Park Museum.
14. Thornton's correspondence with Rochester Optical Company. Vernon Park Museum.
15. Abusive correspondence from Thornton's brother-in-law and other creditors. Vernon Park Museum.
16. From records held at Stockport Grammar School.
17. Research by Mr. K. Kabelac, manuscript Librarian, University of Rochester, U.S.A. Also from records of Stockport Grammar School showing Thornton's sons withdrawn from the School in Spring Term 1913.
18. Rating Lists, Channel Islands and Extracts from Patents Lists.
19. Eastman Kodak Ltd. (U.S.A.) also D. Rendell, *British Journal of Photography*, 30 December 1983.
20. Patents Lists, *British Journal of Photography Almanacs and Patents Agents*.