

A brief history of Pilgrim Pipe Company and some of their clay pipes

The short-lived Pilgrim Pipe Company was set up in Skegness in 1970 in response to the shortage in supply of cheap and cheerful clay pipes required in part by pipe clubs for smoking competitions, by company and society annual dinners and conventions, and 'Olde English evenings' organised by the social committees of clubs and Masonic-type organisations. By far the greatest demand for such pipes, however, came from the pipe tobacco companies, in particular Ogden's, who gave them away free with samples of their well-known pipe tobaccos, such as Gold Block and St. Bruno. In the late 1960s, Ogden's, part of the Imperial Group, ran annual campaigns to promote pipe smoking. Ogden's Pipe Girls would visit pubs, clubs, rally meetings, in fact anywhere where males tended to congregate, giving away thousands of clay pipes with their sample tobaccos in an attempt to attract a younger generation to the 'joys of pipe smoking'. Inevitably, supplies ran out and by 1970 the shortage had become something of a crisis.

With this issue at the back of his mind, Roger Miller, Imperial's Assistant Public Relations Officer and a Liberal parliamentary candidate ventured out one night in 1970 to a fancy dress dance in his constituency dressed as a hippy with a clay pipe in his mouth. The pipe brought comment from his local party chairman, Harold Fainlight, a local manufacturer. Roger immediately asked 'Do you think you could make them?'. Mr. Fainlight, who already had some experience in pottery, hesitated for a moment then nodded his head.

Harold Fainlight and his co-director, William Hussey worked for L.E.B. Food Products Ltd. and had production space available in Skegness. With Miller, the pair formed a small start-up company in October 1970, called Dunnisher Ltd. which underwent a name change to Pilgrim Pipe Company in November 1970, at which time Miller resigned his directorship.

The fledgling company was preparing to make clay pipes, but they needed advice, lacking the expertise and moulds to get going. Late in 1970 and early in 1971 they consulted Gordon Pollock for advice as well as the Huntly House Museum in Edinburgh which had a wealth of pipe-making equipment, documentation and most importantly, pipe moulds, some of which the company borrowed.

Clay from Cornwall was shipped to the Albert Road factory in 50-kilo bags. It was placed first in temperature-controlled open pits for a month to bring it to the right degree of plasticity, after which it was pug-milled to mix the clay and remove air. The Company employed mostly teenage girls to undertake the pipe making processes and used hydraulic press moulds to speed up the production rate. Pipes were then placed into pre-formed polystyrene trays and dried in ovens at 80°C for two days in preparation for final firing. Six saggars, each containing 300-400 pipes stacked wigwam-style were then fired overnight at 1,000°C. Next day the pipes were taken to a bench for general inspection and airline testing to check the stems were clear.

After many experiments and failures the first batch of pipes came out of the kiln in May 1971. Their first pipes were the 8" and 9" (203 and 228mm) churchwardens [Fig.1] which had the final inch of stem tipped with a special non-toxic red paint to prevent the smoker's lips sticking to the clay. These retailed at 25p including purchase tax of 45%. To minimise breakages the pipes were packed into stack-locking polystyrene moulds similar to the drying trays.

Thousands of these pipes were supplied to Ogdens and so their pipe shortage was solved. Barling, the pipe manufacturer of Liverpool and London were responsible for marketing and distributing Pilgrim's pipes in the UK (except in Devon and Cornwall which was the domain of the Cornish Match Company). But to Barling's surprise, with only Gordon Pollock left still manufacturing clay pipes, they soon identified a wider demand for Pilgrim's pipes both here and abroad, to the extent that they believed they could sell all the pipes they could make.

By March 1972 a small but encouraging export trade had developed, with consignments being well received in Australia, U.S.A., Germany, Italy and Austria. Enquiries had even

been received from Holland, a traditional home of the clay pipe. There followed grand plans to widen the product range to include coloured and glazed pipes as well as a curious line called 'Nelson's blood' - a 13" churchwarden impregnated with rum and sealed in a polythene envelope!

But was everything as good as it seemed? It may have been the case that the flamboyant enthusiasm of the early days together with the grand plans Pilgrim had conjured up, clouded the realities of running a small clay pipe manufacturing business along economic and profitable lines. There is another darker side to the Pilgrim story that revolved around two significant interlinked issues that persistently dogged the Company and would ultimately bring about its swift demise. The first was the fact that it could never seem to make an operating profit. The second, which almost certainly contributed to the first, was the poor quality of their produce.

To take the finances first, Pilgrim managed to sustain successive losses year on year. They made an operating loss of £3,338 in their first year, followed by a heavier loss of £12,195 in 1972-1973. Like many small companies at the time, Pilgrim depended for survival on bank loans as well as personal loans raised by the Directors, Fainlight and Hussey, against their other interests. Hence, loans were drawn from Automatic Mirrors Ltd (£1,050), Pineapple Club (£3,500), L.E.B. Food Products Ltd (£7,303) and even Ogden's Tobacco Co. Ltd (£7,000). But never able to generate a trading profit, the Company just got further into debt and were unable to repay the capital it had borrowed. So financially, Pilgrim was doomed to fold.

The one thing that just might have lifted them out of debt was to produce high quality pipes. But again, unfortunately this was not the case. On the contrary, their pipes were little short of appalling. The churchwarden clays were often misaligned and very poorly finished. They then had a range of composite pipes including corrugated straight and corrugated bent [Fig.2], and a number of figurals such as William Shakespeare, Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill [Fig.3]. The quality of these pipes was similarly poor, with ill-fitting ferrules glued on to powdery clay stems and finished with a tacky plastic mouthpiece. The proportions of the figurals were also bad, for example the bowl of Shakespeare's head was truncated far too low.

From around 1974 Pilgrim produced probably their best known (and most bizarre) set of 12 figural character head cutties [Figs 4 to 8]. Each pipe is between 4½ - 5 inches (114 - 127mm) in length with a bowl 1½ - 2 inches (38 - 51mm) high, modelled as the head of a famous person. The surname is moulded in sans serif incuse capital letters on the right side of the stem. They appear to have been made using a 'liquid porcelain' mix rather than solid clay giving a coarse feel to the touch and the pipe is actually hollow inside with a void beneath the base of the bowl. If shaken, crumbs of clay can be heard rattling around in the void, and the stem hole is often punched through the back wall of the pipe rather than entering the bowl at the very bottom in the usual fashion. The underside of the stem has a flat profile in order that the pipe can stand unaided on its base. All the characters are rather crudely modelled and finished in a ghastly bright sand-coloured meerschaum wash, with the mouthpieces tipped in black or dark grey gloss paint.

The set comprises:

Robert Burns, Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, Adolf Hitler, Abraham Lincoln, Bernard Montgomery, Benito Mussolini, Horatio Nelson, Franklin Roosevelt, William Shakespeare, Joseph Stalin and the 1st Duke of Wellington (Arthur Wellesley).

It is thought, but not confirmed, the set was commissioned for promotional purposes by one of the tobacco companies, possibly Gallaher's or Ogden's. One can almost picture the scene - a group of dark-suited middle-aged tobacco executives seated round a table plucking names out of the smoky air and ending up with this kitsch and rather macho selection of 'great men' with no women chosen at all. Two of the nasties - Hitler and Mussolini - are the hardest pipes to find. It is almost unimaginable that a selection such as this could possibly be made today. They are just so awful they are collectable!

The combination of financial difficulties and the abysmal quality of their pipes was too much for Pilgrim to bear. Two brief but poignant notices appeared in 1975. The *Financial Times* for February 8th recorded: 'Pilgrim Pipe Co., which has sold 1m. clay pipes since it was founded in Skegness, Lincs., in 1972, has closed because of a drop in orders'. In November 1975, the news section of the trade journal *Tobacco* noted 'Pilgrim Pipe Closure'. 'Pilgrim Pipe Co Ltd have closed their tobacco pipe factory in Albert Road, Skegness, Lincs, and are dispersing their stocks of churchwarden and other clay pipes, including pipes bearing the heads of well known people, of which there are many hundreds'. Pilgrim Pipe Company Limited was struck off the Companies Register on 10th September 1982 and finally dissolved by notice in the *London Gazette* dated 21st September 1982.

And so ends a sad tale. Ironically, today, Pilgrim's pipes are not so much a collector's joke as a collector's prize. What they certainly lack in quality is counterbalanced by the fact that the Company was producing pipes for only about four years and the total output of all Pilgrim products in that time was relatively small, estimated to be 1 to 1.5 million units. That alone should make them highly desirable to clay pipe collectors.

End note: The author would be very interested to hear from any readers who might know about the fate of Pilgrim's pipe moulds and other equipment.



Fig.1



Fig.2





Fig.3



Fig.4



Fig.5



Fig.6



Fig.7



Fig.8

Sources

1. Pilgrim Pipe Co. Ltd, company no. 992665 GEN1, AR1, AC and A2 records, Companies House, London.
2. Carver, Ron. 'How Ogden's Clay Pipe Problem was Solved - and Barlings found a Winner'. *Tobacco*, March 1972 pp.41-43.
3. 'Pilgrim Pipe Co.', *Financial Times*, London, February 8, 1975.
4. Monitor presents the news in relief - 'Pilgrim Pipe Closure', *Tobacco*, November 1975 p17.
5. Fred Sambrook. Personal communication to author 11 July 2006. Fred's father, Bert Sambrook was William (Bill) Hussey's cousin.
6. Pipes illustrated from the D J Woodcock Collection. Images courtesy of Researchpod.

David Woodcock



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