BAKER FAMILY MATTERS

I suppose that few of the Family will know that my Grandfather, John Baker, made much of his considerable fortune, not only in the manufacture of railway wheels and axles, but from property dealing, buying and selling and building in quite a big way: a method of fortune making which has come into prominence in recent years. But, of course, the original finance for this came from the profits from the manufacture of railway materials. My Father, John W. Baker, told me that in the 80's and 90's of the previous century such was the demand that it was considered a poor contract if it did not carry a 50% profit.

John Baker started in his own business in Conisborough in 1874 as described in my 1961 Family History Booklet, 'The Steel Bakers of Rotherham' with a Capital of £1,100, being £300 from his own savings and £800 from his Uncle George Baker, the Father of his first wife, the Midland Railway Goods Agent at Nottingham. Before this, while working at George Owen's Patent Wheel and Axle Company of Northfield, Rotherham, he got to know, through supplying him with wheels and axles, a Doncaster Wagon Builder. Thomas Burnett, who owned Burnett's Wagon Works at Hexthorpe, Doncaster - This man provided a further £1100 and went into partnership with John Baker to start the firm of Baker and Burnett Ltd. Burnett was, however, little more than a sleeping partner and took only a very small pan in the management of the business. In 1980 I visited the then newly established Durham County Industrial Museum at Beamish Co. Durham. I saw a row of old pit corves; small wagons capable of carrying only 30 cwt. of coal at the museum entrance. Crawling beneath these, I was pleased to find on the cast iron bosses of one pair of wheels the letters clearly marked " Baker and Burnett & Co, Conisborough 1874". I chalked these and photographed them. The firm moved to the Brinsworth works, Rotherham, in 1884 and within two years the partnership was dissolved and Burnett paid out, for he proved a most unsatisfactory partner, being addicted to the bottle. My Father told me how many times he had to conduct Burnett back to Doncaster by train as he was in no fit state to care for himself.

My 1961 booklet describes how the firm prospered in the first decade of the 2oth century until in 1909 it was decided to enter the wagon building business with such unfortunate consequence. The responsibility for buying and installing the necessary plant for this was given to Uncle Harry Baker who had recently married and as he was moved from the Rotherham Works to Kilnhurst, he bought a house at Swinton. He was a competent engineer and I am told his work was well planned. He designed himself and put down much of the equipment on the continuous line principle, as now used for many years in the motor manufacturing industry. As related, by 1913 the firm had lost so much money, not in the wagon business, but in the wheel and axle business, due to the loss of much of its home business with competing wagon builders who were not going to support another competitor in their field. An important decision had to be made, either to close the wagon business with the consequent great loss of the capital expenditure on it, or to stick it out and hope for better times. The wagon business was closed. This

divided the family and a fierce quarrel developed between Harry (who had devoted such energy to the design and construction of the wagon building plant) and his four years younger brother George. Both men were brilliant engineers, but one can only conclude that George had the stronger personality. For with the help of the vote of his three younger brothers Edward, Sydney and Stanley (the latter having only just started in the business) it was decided to oust Harry, who was compensated with the sum of £3,500, which my inflation table tells me would be worth £120,000 in today's terms. Apart from four years work on munitions at the St. George's Square Engineering Department of Sheffield University, Harry, although only 39 when he left the firm, never worked again, but he had many hobbies in which to indulge. Such was the bitterness of the dispute between the two brothers for the ensuing 34 years that, until Harry died in 1947, they never spoke to one another again although their respective houses in Swinton, Greno House and Brookfield, were only one hundred yards apart. Apart from Harry's two sons I was the only member of the Baker family to attend his funeral at Swinton Church where he was buried.

It was said that it was only the First World War and George and Harry's energy in converting the plant at both Works to the production of munitions that saved the firm from bankruptcy. Fortunately my Father, working at the Rotherham Works, took little part in this dispute and remained on friendly terms with his brother Harry. A delicate situation arose in respect of this dispute in 1925. I had studied electrical engineering and in 1924 was accepted for being a premium apprentice at the British Thomson Houston Works at Rugby when I had finished my studies. I obtained a London University degree in this subject in July 1925, but B.T.H. decided that due to the severe trade depression at that time, no more apprentices could be taken on. This was how I started on the shop floor at Kilnhurst Steel Works in September 1925. In August of that year Uncle Harry had taken a furnished house in Perthshire on the banks of Loch Voil near Balquhidder for the month and invited me to have a three weeks fishing holiday with him. Uncle George had to be consulted as to the wisdom of my going and fortunately granted his consent. On this holiday I developed an affectionate and lasting regard for my Uncle Harry. I found him a real gentleman and furthermore an outstanding craftsman, cultured and generous.

When John Baker died so unexpectedly in 1904 at the early age of 61 he had left his Estate in three Trusts. One for his widow, one for his sons and their children and a third for his three daughters. This Will was drawn up by his son-in-law, the barrister George Alexander, who had married his eldest daughter Mary Ann (Sis) in 1901 and it was a very lengthy and complicated document. This marriage was one of the very rare occasions when, I imagine, John Baker was beaten in business for, on the eve of the wedding George Alexander saw his intended father-in-law and told him that he could not go through with the wedding unless he gave his daughter a sufficient dowry to enable her to live in the manner to which she was accustomed. This request had to be conceded.

The first Will George Alexander drafted was given to his father-in-law to read. The first sentence of it appointed "My stepson (sic) John William Baker and my

sons Henry Gouldthorpe Baker and George Baker as my three executors and trustees". On reading these words John Baker tore the Will up and angrily said as he destroyed it "You can start again - John William is not my stepson, but my natural son ! "
In 1947 when Harry died the surviving Trustees, my Father and George, decided to retire from the Trusteeships and appoint new ones. So my cousin Bernard and I were asked and agreed to stand. Neither realised them the tremendous amount of work this would involve us in. The first thing we discovered was that nothing had been done in the management of the trusts in the way of changes in the investments for 34 years since the dispute between George and Harry began in 1913, because the latter had consistently refused to sign any document whatever. All the property had been managed as regards tenancies and repairs by a firm of estate agents in Rotherham and the income from investments by the accountants Hart Moss and Copley, of Rotherham. No property had been sold.

In his Will John Baker left a capital sum for all his children, equally divided between them, in Trust for them to enjoy the income thereof during their lives and thereafter the Capital to go to his grandchildren absolutely. One result of this was that as his children died, property had to be sold to provide the cash for their heirs. Had the trustees mutually agreed, these properties could have been beneficially sold on their vacation by a tenant or on his death and the money more profitably invested. There were houses all over Rotherham and mortgages on four houses in Tinsley at only 3%. One typical investment was the purchase of about 5 acres of land opposite the Brecon Hotel, Moorgate, Rotherham. Here was an area adjacent to the Rotherham Cemetery which, before he died. John Baker had let to Moorgate Tennis Club. Leading to it he had built a road which he called Moorgate Avenue and alongside it he built a group of houses in one of which my cousin R.C. Baker was born in 1915. As a boy I often wondered why it was called an avenue when it had no trees. My Father answered this query by saying that his Father had died suddenly in 1904 before he had time to plant any trees. During the First World War we grew quantities of vegetables on the comer of this land abutting Moorgate, which was surrounded by a spiked iron fence with a padlocked gate.

More houses owned by the trusts were in Moorgate, lying opposite the present Rotherham General Hospital. As time went on I had to sell 110 houses in the Masbrough area, also the land occupied by Moorgate Tennis Club on which in 1936 they had built a substantial pavilion, as well as four hard tennis courts. More houses were owned in St. Leonard's Road behind Selwood, Doncaster Road, where the Watson family lived. These were attached to the Daughters' trust and had to be sold in 1951, when Mary Ann (Aunt Sis) died, in order to pay out the Alexander children.

A large long disused quarry occupying an acre of land in Cottenham Road, off Doncaster Road, had been bought by John Baker and over the years, being unfenced, had been illicitly filled in by rubbish. While it seemed to be unsuitable for heavy building because this would have necessitated much piling, it appeared to Bernard and I in 1951 to be suitable for completing the filling in and building

on it light asbestos cement garages for letting to nearby Council house tenants, for at that time parking on roads without lights was not allowed. With this thought in mind I applied for planning permission, but this was refused. This alerted the Local Authority to the possibility of itself buying the land, so near the town centre, and developing it. Within a month I received a compulsory purchase order for the site, which stated it was required for "Old People's Bungalows". The District Auditor fixed the absurd purchase price of £600 on it - Bernard and I felt we did mot have the resources to fight this order and the purchase was completed. Eighteen months later I visited the site and found on it, not Old Peoples bungalows, but a large block of prestigious offices. We were disgusted at the conduct of the Corporation.

My Co-Trustee, Bernard, took little part in all this business of selling, but was extremely useful when a problem arose in the interpretation of a sentence in regard to John Bakers Daughters' Trust. I have said his will was a complicated document and this sentence was ambiguous for two meanings could be read into it. A consequence was that Counsel's opinion had to be consulted to protect ourselves. It is interesting to observe that in this matter we employed John Baker's original solicitors, Messrs Nicholson of Wath-on-Dearne.

In 1979 John Baker’s youngest son, Thomas Geoffrey died and the beneficiaries of his Will, Geoffrey's children, were paid out and the final Trust closed.
Only from two of the numerous beneficiaries of John Baker's Will did the Trustees get a word of thanks for the hard work put into their interest by his Trustees and no expenses were ever charged against the Trusts.

Henry Baker Dec. /89.