Our Portrait Gallery.

No. 13.—MESSRS. B. COLLINS & SONS.

A proof of what industry and patient perseverance may accomplish when properly directed, no better example could be found in the book-binding trade than the house of Messrs. B. Collins & Sons, the largest establishment in London, and one that had the smallest possible beginning.

Benjamin Collins was born in London on the 18th December, 1829, and may be said to have been born in the trade, his father being engaged at the Wesleyan Conference office and his mother being a bookfolder. In due course he was apprenticed to Mr. Norman, where he served his time. His experiences as a journeyman however were anything but satisfactory, for he was so constantly kept waiting and losing time that although he sometimes earned 50/- per week at piece work, he found that his average weekly earnings for a year was but 24/-, and with a young wife and child depending upon him for support he chafed at the enforced idleness and determined to strike out for himself some more constant mode of living. His father's connection with the Conference office had brought him into contact with the Book Room Steward, the Rev. John Mason, and to him Mr. Collins went early in 1857 with a request for work to do at home. Mr. Mason acted in the kindest manner possible, promised to provide him with work, and to help him in other ways. His parting advice on that occasion Mr. Collins has never forgotten, in fact he has written it upon his heart as a rule for his life: “Work hard and live hard, and by the blessing of God you will do well.” He went home and began to transform his underground kitchen into a workshop, his whole frame afire with the flame of a new purpose in life, and there he found relief from his horror of idleness. Day by day he obtained fresh supplies, until other rooms had to be added to the business department of his house, but this upstairs movement was only the commencement of a long and continuous upstairs movement which has never yet paused or received check throughout the whole of his career, and through it all it is his proud boast that no workman he ever employed had to leave his shop at the week’s end without his wages, though in those early days his own Sunday dinners were often limited through the struggle to do justice to his men.

In 1860, he was able to remove to the more convenient premises previously occupied by Mr. Weeymes, in Long-lane, where he had worked as a journeyman. Here, he was successful in getting up samples which secured him some good orders from Messrs. Eyre & Spottiswoode, and, under the kindly encouragement of Mr. Whitelaw, he launched out into the Bible trade. His first great success in the introduction of new styles of work was through the suggestion of one of his workmen—with whom Mr. Collins has always endeavoured to be in touch—when he obtained a series of large orders for ivory sided Prayers with coloured monograms and crosses on the side. The pressure of the inrush of work made it necessary to work very long hours—a common custom in the trade at the time, when ten or eleven o'clock at night was thought little of—but he found that long hours was an untwine and expensive system to pursue, since the longer men worked the less was their ratio of production, and, although it was impossible to at once put a stop to it, he set his face steadily against it, and has proved that shorter hours pay best.

In 1863, the business had again to be removed, and premises were taken in Bell-ally, Goswell-road, but only to be occupied for a short time, for at the close of the year 1865 Mr. Collins purchased the freeholds of some small tenement houses in Great Arthur-street, and commenced to build a place to suit his own requirements. In 1866 it was completed, and he removed to the new building, which was christened “Mason House,” in grateful memory of one who had assisted him in his earliest struggles. Mason House, however, would not long hold Mr. Collins, and in a very short time the builder was again called upon to push it out into the next street; then to extend the frontage; then the rear, in Little Arthur-street; while this year, another block of buildings has been thrown out parallel with the older ones, on the further side of Little Arthur-street, so that the ground-plan is in the form of a huge U, with a frontage and depth of 100 feet, and but little less in the centre and rear. All these alterations and extensions have been personally supervised by Mr. Collins, and his organising faculties have been brought to bear as much upon the details of that work as upon the more direct work of the house, in fact, he never seems happier than when upon the scaffold overlooking the progress of his growing workshops.

But while thus deeply engaged in developing his business, many a thought has been given to the welfare of those in his employ, and for some years a profit-sharing scheme was in operation, designed for their benefit. On July 8th, 1871, he issued a circular to his employées, proposing to “create a fund for appropriation among all employed in the building,” by setting apart a share of the gross value of the output, and a meeting was convened in the shop, when his propositions were explained and accepted. That first scheme remained in operation until the end of the year, when the fund was divided in proportion to the amount of wages earned during the six months by each and every person in the shop. With the assistance of an actuary, a more elaborate scheme of
profit-sharing was then propounded and accepted, with the result that at the close of 1872, a bonus of five per cent.—which amounted to £217 8s.—was paid in various sums, ranging from that of £5 8s. to the journeyman earning the largest amount in wages, down to 4/- as the lowest sum for a girl. Again, some slight modifications were suggested to meet difficulties which had cropped up in the administration of the scheme, and at the end of 1873 a still larger bonus was paid to the workers, Mr. Collins declaring that “events had proved that it (the scheme) was not only possible, but profitable, both to employer and employed.”

At a meeting held in the workshop on February 1st, 1873, a surprise was prepared by the workpeople for their employer. The nine hours movement of the previous year had induced Mr. Collins to assist the men by giving, without solicitation, the reduction of hours they wished for, and, without his knowledge, a handsome testimonial was engrossed and illuminated on vellum, which read as follows:

“Presented to Mr. Benjamin Collins, bookbinder, Mason House, by his employées, as a token of their esteem and respect and in consideration of his having, without solicitation, been the first employer in the trade in London who granted to them the great boon of the nine hours as a day’s labour, and likewise granting, unabated, the full terms of the memorial presented to him on the subject.

“No employer of distributing a portion of the profits of his business amongst those employed thereon, thereby cementing the great principle that at all times ought to exist between employers and employed, namely, that their interests are identical; upon which principle is founded all that constitutes permanence and success in business, the example of which in its operation, in their opinion, is the most important event that has taken place in the trade.

“This testimonial, from the whole of his employées, is presented to him with their best wishes and fervent hopes that he may enjoy many years of uninterrupted prosperity and happiness.

“Signed on behalf of the employées: Annie Green, Jane Middlebrook, Elizabeth Raymond, Esther Small, James Cameron, Charles Goddard, William Penn, Edward Edmunds, Chairman. February 1st, 1873.”

This testimonial was presented by Mr. Edmunds to the surprised and deeply moved employer, and at the same time a gold locket containing the portrait of her husband was presented to Mrs. Collins, who had always associated herself with her husband’s work.

In 1875 some further changes in the profit-sharing arrangement were made under which the employées were invited to invest their savings in the business by taking up small shares, to bear interest in the same proportion as those held by the employer, and in the following year it was made necessary to be a shareholder to participate in the bonus. At the close of 1877 Mr. Collins became dissatisfied with the bonus system and abolished it, but the interest on money invested in the business has been continued up to the present time. By means of this profit-sharing scheme many of those who cared to save their money were enabled year by year to put aside a considerable sum which is now yielding a handsome dividend, many hundreds of shares being still held by the employées.

To Mr. Collins, more than to any other man in the trade, the credit belongs for having raised the bible trade of London to the degree of importance it now assumes. By the bible trade we do not mean merely the binding of bibles, but also that of prayers, hymns, and other devotional work, and in this branch the development has been both very great and very rapid, mainly owing to the fecundity of his own brain or his quick perception of the public taste and ready adaptation of anything and everything which would lend itself to the purpose desired. In his earlier years the commoner class of this work consisted of little else but embossed roan or sheep, and very few books had anything like the tasteful ornamentation which is to be seen in the shop windows of any of our main thoroughfares. The roan embossed gave place to bevelled boards and antique patterns, or to limp English calf; then to ivory sides; then to plain moroccos and smooth persians; then to russias and German calf. It was the difficulty of preserving the beautiful surface of this latter leather that caused him to introduce loose sides, and paddings soon followed. Imitation ivories have had a most remarkable success for years, and are still in constant demand. In 1879 he introduced plush work, and the novelty took so well that, during the whole of the winter season 1879-80, scarcely any other work was in the house, and thousands of yards of this material were worked up. Later on a special feature of the work of the house has been the fancy grains blocked on various leathers in many combinations. Of these we have selected four from the stock of the Oxford University Press, for whom Mr. Collins has long been a binder; they are not specially prepared samples, nor even new, but they illustrate one of the styles in which thousands and tens of thousands have been produced and sent to all parts of the world. Nothing comes amiss to Mr. Collins; he has bound in everything, silk, satin, curious hides and facsimiles, wood, cork, furs, velvet, ivory, paper, metal, glass, and many various compounds and combinations, not forgetting one style, known as the “Dado’s,” which consisted of two different coloured leathers pieced together, and a collection of all his various bindings would make a very large exhibition. Whatever the style, from leatherette to the finest hand-tooled morocco, the policy of the house is “Value for Money,” both in what he gives to his customers and what he expects from his employées, and he makes it his personal business to see that it is both received and given.

His spacious workshops are fitted with every modern improvement in machinery that suits his purpose, but it is not altogether upon machinery that he relies; he has found that it is by a judicious combination of machine and hand work that the best effects are gained. Some machines fail because brain power cannot be transmitted through their working, and then the human machine is best. No sewing or folding machine can execute bible work properly, so human hands do it. No finisher could turn out the beautifully delicate, though usually simple designs,
which ornament many of his books, at the rate of speed which would ensure their sale at a low price, so the blocking press is an important factor, and a 100-f. floor is filled from end to end on both sides with hand-presses besides some in the centre, because here brain power must be transmitted, and the worker must feel the pressure required for the varying thicknesses of leather in a manner not possible on steam presses. Sub-division of labour is an important factor of production, but, sub-divided as the work undoubtedly is, nevertheless there is in his books a thoroughness generally observable which signifies how much each stage has been fitted, the one into the other, by one controlling mind. It is this organising faculty that has pre-eminentiy marked the character of Mr. Collins, and enabled him to use his resources with such success. Short, slight of build, florid, and restless, up and down his five floors he goes with the speed and gait of a much younger man, his eyes taking in all that he passes; pausing now and then for a moment’s conversation with his workmen, and quick to discern if anything is wrong; he never seems tired, though any one can tell if he is annoyed; and there are few jobs that want doing that he will not put his hand to, apron on and shirt sleeves up like any of his men. His business is his life and soul, and his assiduity to it is intense; he has made it and it has made him, and the two are inseparably united, but the careful observer may know where tender passions lie, and the memory of his lost wife stirs the gentlest chords of his nature; his children best know the depths of their father’s love.

Five times since 1883 he has gone across the Atlantic to the United States, where he has won for himself a reputation that causes his extensive workshops to be so filled with work for that country that he shortly expects to have to double the number of his employees. He has recently purchased a large building, No. 39 Clerkenwell-road, to which all the women have been removed and accommodated in the light and lofty upper floors. The hydraulics and cutting machines are placed on the ground floor, worked by a 9-horse-power engine in the basement, where the gear is also placed. Here the work will be got on and sent out to the gilders, when it will be sent into the older premises to be forwarded, finished, and despatched to its destination.

Since 1879 Mr. Collins has been assisted in the management of his huge business by his sons, Benjamin and John, whom he then took into partnership, and he speaks highly of their skill and energy. Both seem largely endowed with the business ability and indomitable perseverance of their father, and both have had the best of training in his shop.

With such a record there is little doubt as to the future of the house. From the kitchen where Mr. Collins first engaged a workman to assist him, up to the present establishment with its staff of 120 journeymen and 150 women besides learners, he has always succeeded in obtaining the best workmen in the trade for his branch by the simple policy of paying the best wages possible, and the fruit of such a policy has been not only a uniformly good quality of the work produced, but its natural corollary, abundance of employment. It is exceedingly difficult to estimate the annual output, but the turnover is about £50,000, and the wages bill averages £500 weekly. The effect of such an establishment upon the trade of London is enormous, for a great quantity of work is brought here in consequence and much prevented from going elsewhere by the knowledge of the almost absolute uselessness of competition. Mr. Collins is constantly besieged with work which he cannot or will not execute, and it finds its way to other shops. At one time he was offered a contract to turn out 500 large quarto Bibles per week for twelve months, but he declined to saddle himself with the obligation, and at other times many thousands of pounds’ worth of work has been refused. The great difficulty to be coped with just now is the short supply of competent men, yet he is so convinced of the improvement which a reduction of hours would make that the firm have expressed their willingness to immediately grant the desired alteration if some modification of the apprentice regulation is conceded to prevent reduction of the output; but their hope is that the men will insist upon the time limit and not make the whole movement a mere wage lever; the principle is too good to be spoiled by mere money grubbers. Of competition Mr. Collins does not seem at all afraid, it only stimulates him to fresh efforts, acting like a tonic upon his system; nor is he to be led into any combination against the interests of the workmen in whose ranks he once stood, believing rather in “the wisdom of goodwill existing between employer and employed.”

A work of great historical interest and peculiar value will shortly be deposited in the British Museum. It will come through the Asiatic Society of Bengal, which has succeeded in procuring it under somewhat singular circumstances. Through the agency of a native emissary, and after many years correspondence, the society has secured from Thibet a copy of the Jangyum, a monstrous encyclopaedia of Thibetan Buddhism. It comprises 225 volumes, each of which is two feet long by six inches thick. Three thousand rupees was the price for the work, which was formerly in the possession of a Buddhist monastery in Thibet. The amount has in great part been provided by the Government of India out of the usual grant to the Oriental Translation Fund. There are, it is supposed, only two other copies of the work outside of Thibet, one of which is in the Secretaries’ library at the Indian Office, and the other is in the possession of the Russian Government.

Berlin writers report that an important discovery has been made in the art of engraving, especially in photogravure. As usual, the design to be engraved is placed on a zinc plate, either by photography or by an artist; this plate, backed by a coating of asphaltum, is then placed in an acid bath. In the new process the plate is put into connection with a dynamo machine, and the current is led away by a wire placed in a bath. As soon as the circuit is established the acid attacks the metal with astonishing rapidity, and a few moments are sufficient to bite in several millimètres deep.
BINDINGS BY B. COLLINS & SONS.

Printed on Grosvenor, Chater & Co.'s "Acme" Printing Paper.