

## **ODHAMS (WATFORD) LTD (1935-1983)**

Odhams (Watford) Ltd. was a pioneering printing company, established in 1935, situated in North Watford on the site where ASDA is currently located. When building started there in 1935, the area was mainly fields, and the coming of Odhams transformed not only the site, but also the neighbourhood, as houses, shops and schools were built to serve the expanding workforce.<sup>1</sup> Little more than 20 years after arriving in Watford, Odhams was described as “one of the largest and most modern photogravure factories in the world, standing as it does on a 17½ acre site and employing nearly 2,500 work people”.<sup>2</sup> It was established primarily to undertake high-speed colour photogravure printing of magazines, but it also had letterpress machines, which printed trade publications, magazines, catalogues, and books, published by its parent company, Odhams Press, as well as other publishers.<sup>3</sup>

Odhams (Watford) Ltd. was a subsidiary company of Odhams Press Ltd., and its story must begin with that of its parent company.

## **ODHAMS PRIOR TO 1935**

The founder of Odhams was William Odhams, who was born about 1812 in Sherborne, Dorset. He came to London in his 20s and worked as a compositor at the ‘Morning Post’.

He started up in business about 1847, initially in partnership with a fellow compositor at the ‘Morning Post’, William Biggar.<sup>4</sup> In 1847, the business obtained the contract for printing the ‘Guardian’, an ecclesiastical paper, which it held for over 75 years.<sup>5</sup> The printing premises were originally at Beaufort Buildings, Savoy, and then moved to Burleigh Street.<sup>6</sup> Other papers printed at Burleigh Street were the ‘Railway Times’, the ‘Investors’ Guardian’, and the ‘County Council Times’.<sup>7</sup>

In 1892, William Odhams sold the business, ‘William Odhams’, to his sons, William James Baird Odhams, and John Lynch Odhams. However, William Odhams senior did not retire, and interfered and criticized,<sup>8</sup> so, in 1894, the brothers set up a separate business, Odhams Brothers Ltd. in Hart Street, which became Floral Street, with W.J.B. Odhams as Chairman and Managing Director.<sup>9</sup> In 1898, William Odhams senior retired from ‘William Odhams’, and it was amalgamated with Odhams Brothers Ltd. to form Odhams Ltd. The Directors of this company were the two Odhams brothers, a solicitor, and Julius Elias.

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<sup>1</sup> Minnie, R.J., *Viscount Southwood*, 1954, p.273

<sup>2</sup> Editor, ‘Odhams (Watford) – One of the Wonders of the World of Print’, *Printing News*, 10 April 1958

<sup>3</sup> ‘Odhams Press, Watford’, *Cornerstone*, Jan 1955, p.78

<sup>4</sup> Odhams, W.J.B., *The Business and I*, 1935, p.3-5

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.5 & 12

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*. p.8

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.21

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p.20

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p.25

## Julius Salter Elias

Julius Salter Elias, later Lord Southwood, joined Odhams Brothers in January 1894 as a clerk, and by Christmas had become its Manager.<sup>10</sup> By the time that Odhams Ltd. was formed in 1898, he had proved himself sufficiently to be made a Director. Elias became the much-acclaimed leader of Odhams until his death in 1946, overseeing enormous expansion of the business' activities and premises. In 1905, Odhams moved into premises in Long Acre, where it later occupied buildings on both sides of the street.<sup>11</sup>

Under Elias' leadership, Odhams not only took on the printing of additional papers, and absorbed other printing establishments, but also became publishers of books as well as papers. This involved establishing "editorial staffs, advertising representatives and a picture processing department for making blocks in line and half-tone – a further enterprise he [Elias] had set up, with W.H. Parrack",<sup>12</sup> later to become Managing Director of Odhams (Watford) Ltd.

Space does not permit detailing all the activities of Odhams during this period, but some of the main ones should be mentioned. In 1906, Odhams took on the printing of 'John Bull', a paper owned by Horatio Bottomley. Unfortunately, Bottomley persisted in non-payment of his printing bills, resulting in Odhams first taking over the advertising and publishing of the paper, and in 1920, taking over the paper itself. Odhams Ltd. and John Bull Ltd. amalgamated to become Odhams Press Ltd., with Elias as Managing Director.

In 1918, a bomb exploded in the bomb shelter in the basement of Odhams' premises in Long Acre, causing a fire, killing 35 people, injuring nearly 100, and destroying the warehouse, much of the machine rooms, and printing machines and paper.<sup>13</sup> Work continued by setting the type for Odhams' 40 publications in the composing rooms at Long Acre, then farming it out to other printers to be printed.<sup>14</sup> It took years to rebuild the building and replace the machines damaged by the bomb. Some money for rebuilding was raised by selling shares to the public, making Odhams a public company, and no compensation was ever received.<sup>15</sup>

In 1929, Odhams bought 51% of the 'Daily Herald', paper of the Labour movement, and in 1930, acquired premises in Manchester to print a northern edition. Much work was done to increase circulation, like offering sets of books, including a 16 volume set of Charles Dickens books,<sup>16</sup> at low prices to readers of the paper. In 1933, W.J.B. Odhams resigned as Chairman of Odhams, and Elias became Chairman, as well as Managing Director. By 1935, Odhams were printers of about 60 newspapers and employed over 10,000 people.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Minnie, R.J., *Viscount Southwood*, 1954, p.19 & 35

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.70

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p.138

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p.146-9

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.150

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p.150-1

<sup>16</sup> Printed by Greycaine Book Manufacturing Company Ltd, Watford.

<sup>17</sup> Odhams, W.J.B., *The Business and I*, 1935, p.43

## ODHAMS (WATFORD) LTD

### 1935-1960

Odhams (Watford) Ltd. was a subsidiary company of Odhams Press Ltd., established in 1935, primarily to undertake high-speed colour photogravure printing. Julius Elias, Managing Director of Odhams Press, wanted to improve the appearance of magazines by printing them in photogravure and colour, without compromising speed or cost.<sup>18</sup> Elias was impressed by, and acquired the British rights to, a new high-speed, four-colour photogravure process developed by the Alco-Gravure Company of New York.<sup>19</sup> This was on the recommendation of W.H. Parrack, Works Manager of Odhams Press, who became Managing Director of Odhams (Watford) Ltd., until his death in 1957.

A site was obtained in North Watford, and building began in 1935: “The site selected was waste land to the north of Watford. It was covered with weeds and was dominated by a gasometer...To start with one vast building was put up with 70,000 square feet of floor space and a further 50,000 square feet of basement. Wells had to be sunk for water. Power had to be brought in and air-conditioning plants had to be installed. Roads were made for vans and lorries to bring in paper, ink and other supplies and take away the printed papers for despatch to all parts of the world...There was a canteen for the workers and a car park was laid out for their use. Trees were planted. Flowerbeds were neatly set out. As the staff grew in number, houses began to spring up all round. There were in time nearly 1,500 new houses, with bakeries, greengrocers’ shops, butchers, chemists and schools for the children.”<sup>20</sup>

Printing began in the autumn of 1936, a year after building had begun. Periodicals printed at the Watford works in the early years included ‘Woman’, a new colour magazine, started by Elias in 1937, ‘Mickey Mouse’, ‘Picturegoer’, ‘Zoo’, ‘Mother’, ‘Illustrated’, and ‘Everywoman’.<sup>21</sup> The volume of work was such that another factory block was built, which was started in 1937, and in operation by 1939.<sup>22</sup>

During the Second World War, Odhams (Watford) printed millions of leaflets, including those dropped on Germany at the beginning of the war, and those produced for D-day,<sup>23</sup> plus the U.S. Army publication ‘Yank’, and magazines for the French, Dutch and Italian liberation forces.<sup>24</sup> Accommodation was also made available to the Ministry of Aircraft Production, who used it for repairing aeroplanes.<sup>25</sup>

After the war, Odhams (Watford) continued to expand its plant and activities. In 1954, work started on a massive new multi-storey building, known as ‘No. 4 building’. Around the same time, Odhams pioneered the introduction of pre-printed

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<sup>18</sup> Minnie, R.J., *Viscount Southwood*, 1954, p.271

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p.272

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p.272-3

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p.274

<sup>22</sup> Editor, ‘Odhams (Watford) – One of the Wonders of the World of Print’, *Printing News*, 10 April 1958

<sup>23</sup> Minnie, R.J., *Viscount Southwood*, 1954, p.331-2

<sup>24</sup> ‘The Rise of Odhams’, *West Herts and Watford Observer, Centenary*, 1963

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*

colour into newspapers.<sup>26</sup> On the day of Princess Margaret's wedding, the 'Daily Herald' contained colour illustrations produced by gravure, surrounded by text printed by letterpress. In 1958, the main activities at Odhams (Watford) were summarised as follows:

"In addition to the huge photogravure periodicals production, running into approximately 8-million copies a week, the letterpress section of the plant produces periodicals and journals of a high quality as well as books. Among the gravure and letterpress publications produced in this plant are 'Woman', 'Woman's Realm', 'John Bull', 'Illustrated', 'Picturegoer', 'Zip', 'Everywoman', 'The Tatler', 'Modern Transport', 'Cabinet Maker', 'Mother', 'Building Equipment News', and gravure sections of 'Ideal Home'...

...I had been impressed earlier by the price and quality of the books produced by Odhams, which include the volumes for the Companion Book Club, The Popular Book Club, and other titles amounting to a total of 100,000 case bound books a week. But besides these cheaper editions Odhams also print more expensive works. I saw, for instance, a very fine book on world-famous paintings being bound. The bindery itself is probably one of the most up-to-date in the country utilising as it does semi-automation with the very latest machines."<sup>27</sup>

### 1961-1983

The period between 1961 and 1983 was one of enormous challenges for Odhams. For, during these years, it was subjected to a series of complicated takeovers by corporations which were prepared to sacrifice Odhams to their other interests. It was also a time during which new printing methods challenged the old.<sup>28</sup>

Between 1958 and 1961, Cecil King, Chairman of the newspaper group known as the Mirror Group, acquired 3 major magazine publishers, with the aim of rationalizing the magazine market – Amalgamated Press in 1958, which became Fleetway Publications Ltd., which in 1961, took over Odhams Press Ltd., which had itself recently absorbed George Newnes Company.<sup>29</sup> In 1963, King formed a parent company, the International Publishing Corporation (IPC), of which Odhams became a subsidiary. In 1968, IPC was reorganized into 6 divisions, including IPC Newspapers, IPC Magazines, and IPC Books, and King was deposed as Chairman. In 1970, there was a 'reverse take over' of IPC by Albert E. Reed, which became Reed International. In 1974, part of Reed International became IPC Magazines Ltd., which included magazines and comics, and part became Mirror Group Newspapers.<sup>30</sup>

Odhams Press was soon sacrificed. Following its takeover, it functioned as a subsidiary of IPC. Between 1964 and 1968, Odhams Press published a number of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Editor, 'Odhams (Watford) – One of the Wonders of the World of Print', *Printing News*, 10 April 1958

<sup>28</sup> Cox, Howard, & Mowatt, Simon, *Technology, Organisation and Innovation: The Historical Development of the UK Magazine Industry*, Paper 04-2003, Research Papers Series, Faculty of Business, Auckland University of Technology, p.11-16

<sup>29</sup> 'IPC Media', wikipedia.org

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Mirror Group Newspapers was sold to Robert Maxwell in 1984.

‘Power Comics’, including ‘Wham!’, ‘Pow!’, and ‘Smash!’. At the beginning of 1968, it was publishing 5 Power Comics, but with the economic crisis of 1968, the market could not sustain so many comics. During 1968, 4 of the Power Comics were closed, and absorbed into ‘Smash!’, which was transferred to IPC Magazines Ltd. IPC thereby contained the losses within Odhams Press Ltd., at the cost of making it financially unviable.<sup>31</sup>

However, at Odhams (Watford), in the 1960s, there was expansion and modernisation. In the early 1960s, another extension, called ‘No. 5 building’ was completed. In the mid 1960s, a modernisation programme started, during which presses were extended, making it possible to print colour on both sides of the paper and enabling more colour pages to be printed in the periodicals.<sup>32</sup> There was also investment in new Helio-Klischograph electronic engraving machinery. In 1966, Odhams (Watford) was said to be “one of the largest installations in the world”, with over 6½ million gravure periodical copies produced per week, including ‘Woman’s Realm’, ‘Fabulous’, ‘Look and Learn’, ‘Treasure’, ‘Jack and Jill’, ‘Woman and Home’, ‘Everywoman’, and ‘My Home’.<sup>33</sup>

In the 1970s, Odhams (Watford) was still the largest gravure printing plant in the UK. It was IPC’s main printer, with a turnover of approximately double that of all IPC’s other printers combined.<sup>34</sup> Odhams printed 3 of the 4 top weekly magazines and some major monthlies, and was the only plant in the UK with the photogravure capacity necessary for such print runs.<sup>35</sup> In 1974, it employed 2,800 people, and magazines printed there included ‘Woman’, ‘Woman’s Realm’, ‘Woman’s Weekly’, ‘Popular Gardening’, ‘Goal’ and ‘Farmers’ Weekly’.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, Odhams made losses throughout the 1970s,<sup>37</sup> and newer printing methods, like web offset lithography, were challenging the old. In 1974, IPC decided that 6 magazines then printed at Odhams – ‘Popular Gardening’, ‘Petticoat’, ‘Ideal Home’, ‘Woman’s Journal’, ‘Mother’ and ‘Sewing & Knitting’ - would be switched from gravure to litho printing, which was cheaper. Alex Jarratt, Chairman and Chief Executive of IPC, explained the decision thus: “It has become crucial to the continued existence of a number of magazines that their printing process be changed to litho because they can no longer bear the much higher costs of gravure in which they are currently printed. It has long been the case that gravure is not competitive with web litho for anything other than mass circulation magazines.”<sup>38</sup> This switch involved these magazines being printed elsewhere, with the loss of hundreds of jobs at Odhams.

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Smash! (comics)’, wikipedia.org

<sup>32</sup> ‘The National ‘Mags’ Go Into Print’, *Hertfordshire Topic*, Vol 1, No 2, April 1966

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> House of Commons, Parliamentary Papers Online, *Price Commission, IPC Magazines Limited Increases in Cover Prices, 1977-78* (481), p.21

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.14

<sup>36</sup> *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Dispute at Odhams (Watford) Ltd*, 1974, p.2-3

<sup>37</sup> House of Commons, Parliamentary Papers Online, *Price Commission, IPC Magazines Limited Increases in Cover Prices, 1977-78* (481), p.21

<sup>38</sup> *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Dispute at Odhams (Watford) Ltd*, 1974, Appendix J, p.30

Problems at Odhams (Watford), identified by the Price Commission, which reported in 1978, included limited investment and industrial relations difficulties: “Over the last decade investment in printing equipment has been more or less restricted to the maintenance of existing machinery, some of which is now more than 25 years old. This is particularly true in the gravure printing operation carried out at Odhams... There was a serious dispute in Odhams in 1974 which had a significant effect on profitability of both printing and publishing. Also, in 1975, proposals to merge Odhams with Sun Printers of Watford were defeated, only to be followed by some 200 redundancies.”<sup>39</sup> However, the Price Commission concluded that industrial relations had improved, and should not be regarded as a bar to the major investment needed in the plant.<sup>40</sup>

In 1981, there was jubilation at Odhams (Watford) when it won the multi-million pound contract for the new Sunday Express colour magazine.<sup>41</sup> But disaster was just around the corner. In 1981, Robert Maxwell bought a controlling interest in, and became Chief Executive and Deputy Chairman of, British Printing Corporation, which owned Sun Printers in West Watford, a competitor of Odhams (Watford). Meanwhile, despite the new Sunday Express Magazine contract, Odhams was in serious financial trouble, with a trading loss of £5.5 million in 1981, and there were hundreds of job losses.<sup>42</sup> At the end of 1982, Robert Maxwell bought Odhams from Reed International for £1.5 million. This included not only the factory, land, and machines, but also print orders, including IPC titles and the Sunday Express Magazine, worth £30 million per year.<sup>43</sup>

As soon as Maxwell bought Odhams, he boasted that he would close it in 9 months,<sup>44</sup> and this he proceeded to do, a process completed in September 1983, with the loss of hundreds of jobs, albeit achieved by voluntary redundancy. About 400 Odhams’ employees transferred to Sun Printers, which now officially became ‘Odhams-Sun Printers’, in Whippendell Road, but within a few years, this also closed. But that is another story.

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<sup>39</sup> House of Commons, Parliamentary Papers Online, *Price Commission, IPC Magazines Limited Increases in Cover Prices, 1977-78* (481), p.17

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p.18

<sup>41</sup> Greenhill, Peter, & Reynolds, Brian, *The Way of the Sun*, 2010, p.216

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p.233-4 & 238

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p.238

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p.238