

Freemans Timeline

(source: freemans.com)

1905

Freemans & Co. starts life in a terraced house in the London suburb of Clapham. Its founders are A.C. and S.C. Rampton, W.E. Jones and H.A. Freeman. It employs just 12 staff, and a 'Celebrated Freemans made-to-measure suit' costs less than 30/- (£1.10 in today's money). Most goods are sold on credit, with wives needing their husband's signature to buy goods. Freemans uses Agents to sell goods from its 200 page, black-and-white illustrated catalogue; they are mainly men.



1906

Freemans moves to larger premises at 215 Lavender Hill Wandsworth. Company staff are soon nicknamed 'The Lavender Hill Mob'.



1914

Freemans' pre-war expansion stops, and the business focuses on buying blankets and selling them to the Government and the armed forces.



1922

Freemans has more than 200 staff, so moves into a converted cinema on Lavender Hill, formally known as the 'Gem'. Colour pictures are introduced into the catalogue on a regular basis.



1937

Freemans moves into an old printing works at 139 Clapham Road, and becomes a Private Company. Freemans now sells labour-saving devices such as vacuum cleaners in its catalogue.



1943

War shortages meant that no household items were available, only clothing. Coupon rates are introduced for the first time as a way to pay for Freemans clothes.



1945

Clothing coupons become the only way to pay for Freemans clothes. The number of staff working for Freemans drops to less than 300.



1950

Freemans expands rapidly with the post-war consumer boom, with many customers choosing to buy on credit. Freemans is now competing with the leading department stores of the day, selling a wide range of consumer goods in its full-colour, 1,000-plus page catalogue.



1966

Freemans expands world-wide with its new International Division, which eventually wins the Queen's Award for Export Achievement in 1995.



1963

Freemans becomes a Public Company, and installs its first computer.

1969

Freemans opens an automated Distribution Centre at Peterborough, and is the first company to post goods in plastic packaging. It is also the first UK company to generate heat from waste packaging.



1979

Freemans is the first home shopping company in the UK to introduce a telephone ordering service for its agents.



1984

Freemans introduces a telephone system to deal with customer and agent queries.



1988

Freemans is bought by Sears PLC and becomes part of one of the country's largest retail organisations. It now offers Sears' High Street brands (Miss Selfridge, Wallis, Warehouse, Richards, Adams) in its catalogue.



1994

Freemans produces an interactive CD for its customers, which wins several awards.



1997

Freemans launches its shopping website, www.freemans.com. Sears announces the sale of Freemans.



1999

Freemans becomes part of the Otto Versand group. It has upwards of 1 million agents serving 3 million customers, with many more direct customers.



2009

Freemans Distribution Centre closes its doors in Peterborough



What is the project all about?

Eastern Angles is uncovering the stories and memories from one of the largest workplaces in Peterborough - Freemans Catalogue Distribution Centre. Freemans was a British catalogue clothing retailer, founded in 1904, which opened a warehouse in Westwood, Peterborough in 1969.

This was the period when glossy catalogue shopping meant access to the latest fashions on a pay-per-week basis. But more importantly the stories from the people who worked there reflect the camaraderie and community spirit of the place, especially focusing on the Returns Shop and the Social Club.

This Centre, which at its height employed almost 2,000 people, not only shaped the city of Peterborough but was also nationally significant in the cataloguing and distribution trade - it wasn't just a job, it was a way of life.



Delivery lorries outside Freemans Distribution Centre in Peterborough



All Wrapped Up in Westwood cast in rehearsals

Delivered by Freemans Newsletter

October 2017

Supported by The Heritage Lottery Fund, **Delivered by Freemans** will follow on from the Forty Years On project and will include a new community play called **All Wrapped Up in Westwood**, a nostalgic exhibition of photos, clothes and news, and a chance to celebrate this unique strand of city history.

Read on to discover behind the scenes exclusives on the project and the community play...



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Script Writing

As part of the script writing process for **All Wrapped Up in Westwood**, director Poppy Rowley interviewed ex-employees of Freemans. Read some excerpts from two of the original transcripts here...

Poppy: Can you remember your first day on the floor at Freemans?

Employee 1: Well we had a bit of training for a start.

P: What were they training you to do?

E1: You were dealing with goods, quite high value goods and you had to deal with certain things in different ways. Then after the 6 weeks you were on a sort of a bonus so the more you did the higher your grade and the more money you got.

P: Were there different types of returns? Were there returns that you liked and returns you hated?

E1: It was a mixture all day. We liked having the curtaining because if you got say 20 metres, or 20 yards as it was then, 30 yards of curtaining went down as 30 items, so it helped your bonus. So if you got about 10 parcels like that a day it helped you.

P: And what did you fear? What was the dreaded parcel?

E1: Well we used to get the frying pans back what were supposed to be non-stick and the ladies would send them back saying these aren't non-stick and they would have the eggs and that all in them and you can imagine how they had been in the post for about a week – wasn't very pleasant. We used to get everything back in those parcels. (laughs) Some were very embarrassing...



P: What were your favourite bits of working at Freemans?

Employee 2: Favourite bit was definitely the shop. Definitely the shop.

Employee 3: Yeah.. when you got that pay on Thursday and there would be a HUGE queue and when you got the special offers it would go in from the catalogue at a third of the price and then you might have a special day when it was not only a third but it would be 50% off that third. Very rarely the 50%, but you would get it. I mean, if you put your stuff down in that shop someone would pick it up and try it on! That happened to me once – I went "That's mine!" They were trying my jacket on! Mum was like "Told ya! Don't put ya stuff down!"

E2: They used to get in fights.

E3: Oh god yeah. Yeah. They would literally have fights, pulling, pushing.

P: Did people get hurt?

E3: Not so much hurt but it was just like animals. Animals. I was never like that I'd think "if it's that important, 'ave it. 'Ave it!"

E2: You'd walk in and it was all neat, everything was hanging on shelves ...by the end it were all on the floor. Those poor ladies that worked in the shop, what they used to have to put though – you know. But yeah it was, yeah it was, when it was half price that were amazing weren't it?

E3: Word would get that it was 50% off in the shop...

E2: Them smokers couldn't half run!
[They laugh]

E3: Did you skip your dinner and go in the shop? I did, loads of times.

E2: Yeah, I did.

E3: I'd have a fag for me dinner!



Behind the Scenes...

Set Design for All Wrapped Up in Westwood

Designer Fiona Rigler has worked with Eastern Angles before on **The (Fletton) Railway Children** which played at The Undercroft in November 2016 and most recently designed the set for **Everything Must Go!**

Fiona has returned to the company to design the set for **All Wrapped Up in Westwood** which begins on 26th October and runs until 5th November at The Undercroft.

We asked Fiona about her design and how she came about creating it...

"We were lucky to be able to talk to and hear stories from ex-employees of Freemans and the vibrant memories they had of working there. One of the things that came up most was the sheer



Fiona Rigler's set design for All Wrapped Up in Westwood

needing a bike to get from one end to the other. The other was the importance of their tea breaks and lunch breaks as this was where they could catch up with one another and gossip

Freemans was a family and a community. The set tries to reflect the huge scale of the warehouse, creating a panoramic stretch of space, allowing trolleys and bikes to whiz past. The central area of

the stage however, focuses on the heart of the place and the employees, in the amenity room where much of the narrative unfolds between their shifts. The highlight for me, was creating a space that has become a playground for the cast and not only transforms into different areas of the Freemans warehouse but also the Houses of Parliament or the picket line!"

Thoughts from the Director Poppy Rowley in Rehearsals



Poppy Rowley, Director of All Wrapped Up in Westwood

One of the exciting challenges in rehearsing **All Wrapped Up in Westwood** will be doing justice to the original stories we've collected from ex-Freeman employees! And what stories they've been: strikes and disputes; parties, competitions and socials; extreme weather and dodgy machinery; partners met and lifelong friends made; and don't forget the shop!

The play will span 15 years, focusing on 1978 and 1993. Like with one of our previous plays, **Parkway Dreams**, there will be a mix of a fictional narrative supported by elements of documentary theatre. Documentary theatre can take a number of different forms but essentially it involves using transcripts of interviews, government reports and newspaper articles as source material for the script, ideally without altering the original wording. This allows us to ground our story about the Freemans distribution warehouse in facts.

When it comes to interviews, there is always a debate about how much one can rely on an individual's memory, but actually having a range of anecdotes and stories about a particular time can really add to the flavour and human element of an event. This can then be juxtaposed with reports or media representations. One thing we're particularly interested in is the Equal Pay dispute that ended up being of national significance – importantly making the distinction about equal pay for equal value work.

The Undercroft – where the show will be performed – is a really exciting large and versatile space. As part of the early rehearsal process we've been looking at how we can use the space to its full effect and really represent the distribution warehouse. Freemans was a huge place (at one point it had almost 3000 people working there and employees used to cycle to get around it!) and getting a sense of its enormity (both in terms of people as well as space) is actually really important. This will be explored both in the design and in the movement elements. We're working with a movement director to get a grip on what the day-to-day work was – and I can tell you, there was a lot of heavy lifting and fast-moving machinery, not an easy job!

All Wrapped Up in Westwood
plays at The Undercroft from
26th October -
5th November 2017.

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