

Townscape Heritage Project

Building Timeline

149 HIGH STREET



INTRODUCTION

The research to create a timeline of the historic buildings of Stockton has drawn on resources such as trade directories, newspapers and census information. Whilst we have been able to construct some quite detailed pictures, there are gaps which we would like to fill. If you have any further information that could assist us, please contact Eleanor.blyth@stockton.gov.uk.

We would like to thank volunteers who have worked on the timelines.

BLAIR

George Young Blair was a prominent Stockton resident and the last to reside at 149 High Street before its conversion into Robinson’s Department Store, a building that many Stockton residents today would recognise as Debenhams.

Career

Born in Scotland in 1824, Blair was a talented engineer and left Scotland to take up a position as manger of Palmer and Co. Engineering Works in Jarrow. He later moved to Stockton to manage the Engine Works of Messrs Fossick and Hackworth. Around 1861 he moved into number 149- 150 High Street. Blair was involved in developing marine engines and became a partner in the company. Upon the retirement of Thomas Hackworth, Blair became the sole owner of the works.

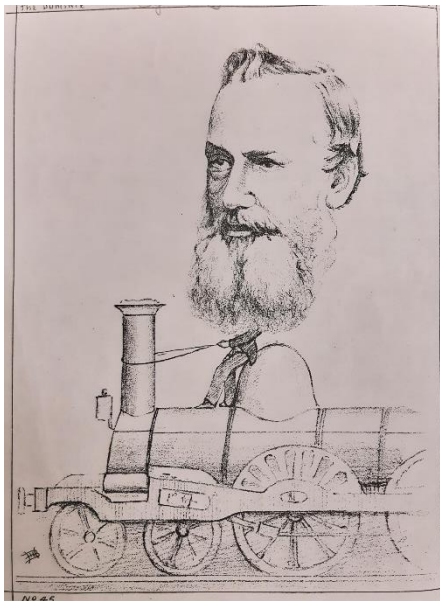
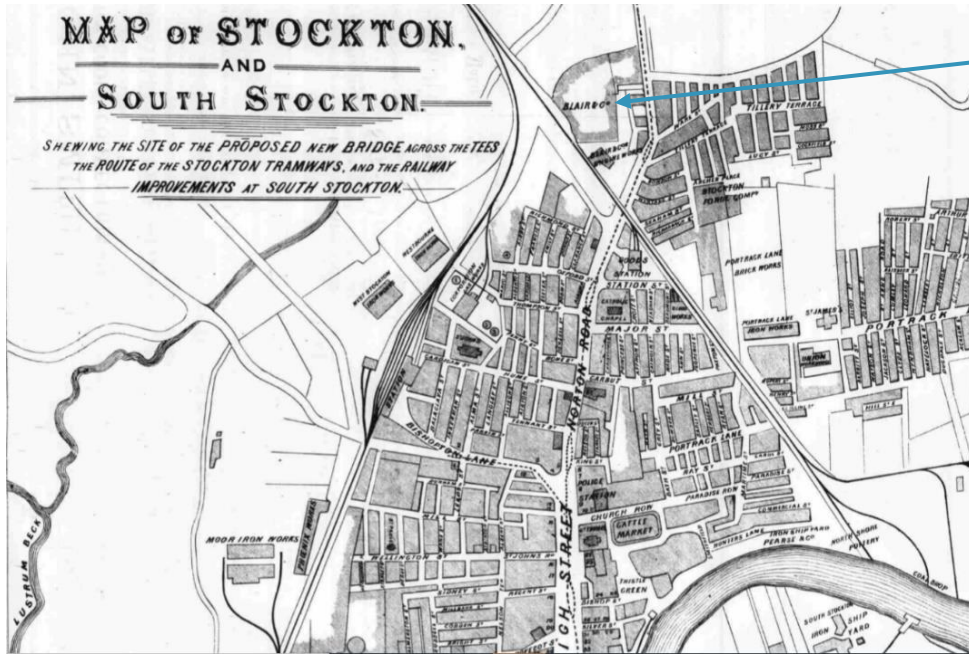


Figure 1 Photocopy of a sketch of George Young Blair Preston Hall Museum

The Dominie Magazine featured a sketch of George Young Blair on 18th March 1875 shown in Figure 1.

Blair became very wealthy and purchased a country home in Hutton Rudby, however the family retained 149-150 High Street as their town home.





Blair's Engine Works

Figure 2 Map showing location of Blair's Engine Works: Stockton Herald 25th December 1880

Figure 2 shows the location of Blair's Engine Works as at December 1880

By 1881 the census shows that Blair was a Justice of the Peace to Durham and Managing Director of Blair and Co, employing 1,560 men and 320 boys.



Figure 3 Photograph of workmen leaving Blair's Engine Works, Summer 1900: Preston Hall Museum



Family Life

George Young Blair married 3 times and had 7 children. Unfortunately only 3 outlived him. He had 2 sons, George Young and John and a daughter, Agnes to his first wife Jane Thom. Jane died in 1861.

George married Margaret Borrie in 1862 and they had a son called Peter Borrie and 3 daughters Mary Young, Florence Jean and Margaret Amy. There followed a tragic series of deaths starting with two of his children to Jane. Agnes died in 1862, followed by John in 1865. His son George died in 1877, aged 22 years old. George's wife Margaret died in February 1888.

His son Peter died of typhoid at the family home on High Street in January 1891. Typhoid was prevalent in the area at the time. The Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough - Saturday 20 September 1890 reported that the disease had reach epidemic proportions and Middlesbrough hospital was overwhelmed with cases so would be unable to take cases from Stockton. Typhoid was very common, but little understood in the early part of the 19th century. By the time of Peter Blair's death there was a growing understanding of the importance of access to clean water and food as the main way of controlling this disease.

Blair's Final Years & Sale of 149 High Street

In 1899 at the age of 65 years George married Mary Ann Bower, a friend of his daughter. He died in 1894. After Blair's death, the house was put up for sale along with some of its contents. The advertisement gives us an intriguing glimpse of the layout of the house and its contents before it was changed into the first Robinson's building in Stockton. The house must have been of a substantial size. The sale advert tells us it was a seven-bedroom dwelling. The extensive list of contents includes 3 pianos and a 12- foot dining table.

The North-Eastern Gazette of 8th June 1895 announced the sale of the house and the transition into a commercial premises: *"A Stockton Residence Sold- the residence of the late Mr G. Y. Blair, J.P, in Stockton High-street has been sold to Mssrs M Robinson and Co. of West Hartlepool, for £3,750. It will be converted into an extensive emporium for drapery and general furnishings. The head of the firm Mr M. Robinson, resides at East Hartlepool."*

ROBINSON

On 28th April 1896 the Stockton North-Eastern Gazette announced the opening of Robinson's Emporium:

"Messers M. Robinson and Co., of the Manchester House and the Coliseum, West Hartlepool, being about to open new premise at Nos. 149 and 150, High-street Stockton, as a general drapery and complete house furnishing emporium, entertained a select company to dinner yesterday in the Royal Hotel. The premises were formerly the town residence of the late Mr G Y Blair, J.P (of the engine firm of Blair and Co Limited) possession of which was acquired last June. The house has been completely metamorphosed and the garden behind has been built up into a four-storeyed building, covering altogether



673 square yards, while over 400 square yards of ground have been acquired for possible future extensions...”

The Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail - Wednesday 29 April 1896 describes a celebratory dinner at which Mr Robinson reflected on his humble beginnings 21 years previously in Hartlepool and the rapid expansion of his business. Mr Robinson describes the newly acquired High Street premises as being originally five storeys high. There are huge plate glass windows to the front of the building and along its entrance corridor which has a mirrored ceiling and a mosaic pavement. There are numerous electric lights.

Robinson’s Structure & Décor

We are fortunate to have access to the original plans for the conversion of 149 High Street into Robinson’s Store as well as to contemporary accounts that give an insight into its interior.



Figure 4 Plans for 149-150 High Street (Tees Archive)



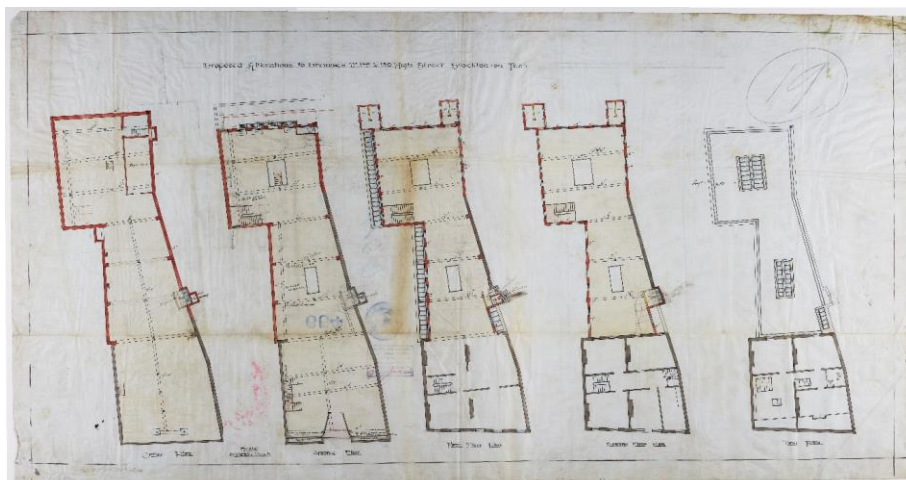


Figure 5 Floor Plan 149-150 High Street (Tees Archive)

The monumental scale of the redevelopment of Blair's former home is evident in a feature in the Northern Echo of 28th April 1896. The original building is said to have been comprised of 5 storeys including attics and basement. The writer marvels at the size of the new construction measuring 150 feet long and 50 feet wide which dwarfs the older building.

The writer provides a 'walking tour' of the building which gives valuable detail on its style, the technology used and the companies that were engaged its construction. Robinson's décor is described as sleek and bright with white-painted pine, white Lincrusta and mirrors. Lincrusta wallcovering, was first manufactured in 1877 and is still made today using the same technology and materials. It became immensely popular because it was attractive as well as washable and durable. Lincrusta designs were used in a wide range of contexts from royal homes to railway carriages, as well as notable buildings throughout the world, including The White House. Lincrusta is associated with quality and taste. Picked out in pink, blue and gold, it is used on Robinson's upper floors where the 'higher classes' of goods are displayed. The decorating was carried out by Messers Boanson and Sons of West Hartlepool.

We are told in the press that Blair's garden was removed to make way for a flat roofed extension which is accessible from the top floor. It is said to be the first of its type in the North East constructed of vulcanite and covered with sand and cobbles, giving the visitor the feeling of being by the seaside. The writer goes as far as to say that the view over Stockton from the roof may, in itself, become an attraction.

The Grand Opening

Robinson's grand opening took place on 29th April 1896. The Stockton store was known as the Coliseum like its Hartlepool counterpart. The Northern Guardian (Hartlepool) of Thursday 30th April 1896 Robinsons claims that, at 673 square yards and four storeys, the premises is the largest area covered by a drapery in the county, or even in the North of England.



GOOD NEWS FOR STOCKTON AND DISTRICT.
REVOLUTION IN THE DRAPERY TRADE.

OPENING OF EXTENSIVE NEW PREMISES
149 & 150, HIGH-STREET, STOCKTON-ON-TEES.

M. ROBINSON AND COMPANY,

THE

GREAT DRAPERS AND HOUSE FURNISHERS,

OF

THE MANCHESTER HOUSE AND COLISEUM, WEST HARTLEPOOL

Have recently purchased the large Dwelling-House recently occupied by G. Y. Blair, Esq., J.P., 149 & 150, High-street, Stockton. They have entirely gutted the building, and also built upon the whole of the large garden behind. The site is 673 square yards, and this has been covered four storeys high, giving a floorage of 2,692 square yards. This is much the largest area covered by any Drapery Establishment in the County, or even in the North of England, with one or two exceptions.

M. ROBINSON & Co. have great pleasure in stating that the extensive Alterations are now practically completed and that they

WILL OPEN ON WEDNESDAY (TO-MORROW)

APRIL 29th, 1896,

With an enormous stock of Drapery and House Furnishing Goods of every description. At least worth of New Draperies, Dresses, Cabinet Furniture, Carpets, Linoleums, Bedsteads, Mattresses, Fenders, Fire-irons, Wringing Machines, Blankets, Quilts, Silks, Gloves, Laces, Ribbons, &c., &c., will be offered at prices hitherto quite unknown in Stockton.

The whole building is specially adapted to this trade, and no effort will be lacking on M. Robinson & Co.'s part to deserve success.

The Premises are lit up with the electric light. Cash Railway System has been introduced. Also Cafe for benefit of customers. Everything "Up-to-Date" in every way.

TRAIN FARES will be paid to Country Customers on purchase of Goods over £2 to £5, according to distance.

REMEMBER THE OPENING DAY, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 29th.

DRESSMAKING by most experienced Artistes on the Scientific Principle. M. Robinson & Co. absolutely guarantee every satisfaction.

MILLINERY UNDER MOST EXCELLENT MANAGEMENT.

LATEST PARIS FASHIONS.

Visitors are cordially invited to step inside and inspect the Stock and latest Fashions without being under any obligation to purchase.

TELEPHONE 4890

Figure 6 Robinson's Opening Northern Echo April 28 1896

A Devastating Fire

In December 1899, a terrible fire ravaged the Robinson building. It must have been a dreadful sight. It was reported that the plate glass windows melted like treacle. The press reported that the vulcanite flat roof (mentioned previously as a key feature of the building) was particularly combustible. There was also damage to some of the nearby buildings, notably Armstrong's Painter and Decorators and Clarke's Chemists as well as two dwellings.



The Reverend Martin, living at the vicarage next door offered support, as did many locals.

**GREAT FIRE AT
STOCKTON.**
ENORMOUS DAMAGE.
COLISEUM BURNT DOWN
MESSRS ROBINSON & CO'S
HEAVY LOSS.
"A SCENE OF AWFUL
GRANDEUR."
PLATE GLASS MELTED LIKE
TREACLE.
OIL AND VARNISH STORES
ABLAZE.
NARROW ESCAPE OF THE
HIGH-STREET.
TWO BRIGADES AT WORK.
FIREMEN'S ARDUOUS DUTIES
KINDNESS OF CANON MARTIN.

A New Coliseum

Robinson's quickly proposed a temporary building be erected in Wellington Street, a proposal that initiated considerable debate- understandably, perhaps about measures to reduce the risk of fire. By May 1901 the temporary building at Wellington Street- 'The Temporary Coliseum' - was for sale by auction, the new premises on High Street having been completed by building contractor Mr. Harry Smith of Stockton.

The new building – the building we know today as the former Debenhams- was reported to be even bigger than the original, with 6 floors including the basement. The structure is described as a steel skeleton encased in plaster. The sketch of the building frontage from 1901 is still recognisable today.

Customers would find a range of goods including cloth, china, clothing and carpets on the ground floor. The ground floor also contained a saw-mill at the rear facing onto East Street. There is reference to the presence of cabinet makers, polishers and upholsterers at the rear of the building, reflecting an increase in this area of business.

The upper floors offer a range of goods but also fitting rooms, a café, gentleman's smoking rooms and lavatory facilities for both ladies and gentlemen. Even after public conveniences were popularised after the Great Exhibition of 1851 where flushing toilets were available for a small fee, public conveniences for women were a rarity. In 1889 a women's convenience opened at Piccadilly Circus, in the heart of London's West End shopping district. The availability of conveniences in



proximity to fashionable department stores made business sense as this meant prosperous middle-class women could spend more time browsing and spending. Large stores like Robinsons followed this example, providing facilities so that ladies did not have to leave the store.

Unsurprisingly, after recent events it is stated in descriptions of the store that there is a sprinkler system in case of fire. It is also noted that the cash railway system of the original building has been replaced by a compressed air cash transport system. The shop is heated by radiators and there is a sophisticated lighting system with fail safes so that no area of the store can be plunged into darkness.



M. ROBINSON & SONS, LTD.

LARGEST FAMILY DRAPERS AND HOUSE FURNISHERS IN THE PROVINCES.

"CORONATION" SHOPPING WEEK! SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS AT THE COLISEUM.

During the Stockton Coronation Shopping Week the 50 Departments of the Coliseum, open for public inspection, will present an unrivalled Exhibition of **Mantles, Millinery, Blouses, and Ready-to-Wear Goods** ever seen in the provinces. A cordial invitation is extended to all our numerous patrons and visitors.

SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS.

Mannequin Dress Parade IN THE MANTLE SHOWROOM.

Living Models, exhibiting Exclusive Styles of English and Continental Millinery and Dresses. The Mannequins may be seen parading—

MORNING, 11 A.M. TILL 1 P.M. AFTERNOON, 2 P.M. TILL 5.

CLOCK GUESSING COMPETITION.

AN 8 DAYS' CLOCK FREE TO ALL OVER 18 YEARS OF AGE.

Any person who guesses the correct time the Clock will stop becomes the recipient of the same. To enter the Competition—enter your name and address, also time in the book provided for same in the "MODEL HOUSE"

Model House

fully furnished with the most up-to-date Furniture.



LYNN HOUSE, WEST HARTLEPOOL.

Reception Hall for the use of visitors situate in the Model House.

AFTERNOON TEA SERVED



This Splendidly Furnished House is situated on the Top Floor of the Coliseum at Stockton-on-Tees, and Visitors must not miss walking through. A Tea Room has been fitted up adjoining.

FURNITURE SHOWROOM

is replete with a Choice Selection of Sideboards, Cabinets, Suites, etc., beautiful designs, original and reproduced, perfectly constructed of chosen woods.

SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS.

"AMATEUR" PHOTOGRAPHING COMPETITION.

The Front Windows of our Premises are open for Amateur Snapshot Photography. A Prize (exhibited in window) will be given by the Directors to one whom they consider produces the best result. Name and address to be written on the back of Photograph.

IRISH PEASANT GIRLS

Engaged in EMBROIDERY and DRAWN-THREAD Work may be seen in the Centre of the Coliseum. Come and have your Autograph embroidered on any Handkerchief purchased from this Section FREE OF CHARGE.

MILLINERY OF REFINED TASTE IN CHOICE VARIETY.



MANTLES, AFTERNOON TEA, COVERS, WAISTING, DRESSING IN ENGLISH VARIETY.

50th MARSH, WEST HARTLEPOOL.

CORSET DEMONSTRATION DAILY

A conversation with the demonstrator presents a golden opportunity to ladies who experience a difficulty in procuring correctly fitting corsets most suitably adapted for the present style of dress.

CAFE SPECIALITY:

5-COURSE DINNER for ONE SHILLING.

LADIES' TAILORING.

Costumes Fashioned to Ladies' own requirements. Made and finished by Men Tailors. Our stock is up-to-date with a fine range of Materials and Trimmings. Patterns and Estimates Free.

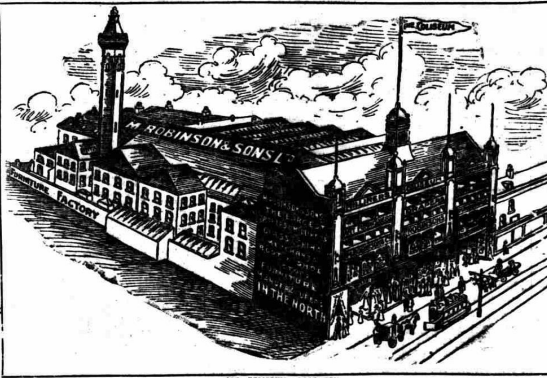
Mr G. B. Robinson's Military Band will play Selections of High-class Music during Show Days.



MANCHESTER HOUSE, WEST HARTLEPOOL.

See the Man with the "Moccasins"

Furniture in process of Manufacture.



THE COLISEUM, STOCKTON

Demonstrations of the Knotless Veilholder in the Lace Dept.

Conducted Tours of Inspection

During the day at intervals of 30 minutes guides will be provided for conducting party of visitors through the 50 departments of the Coliseum pointing out the various items of interest. A splendid chance to see through one of the most

UP-TO-DATE DRAPERY EMPORIUMS.

High-class Dressmaking at Moderate Charges. Correct Style and Fit Guaranteed. Consult Miss Machin.

Prompt Attention Given to Special Orders.

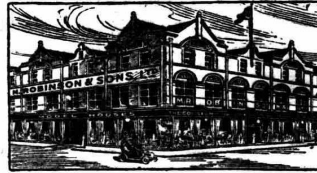
THE CHARITY SWEET STALL

Visitors are invited to PATRONISE the Charity Sweet Stall, part of proceeds given to the STOCKTON AND THORNABY HOSPITAL.

ELECTRIC LIGHT.—Our own Installation of Electric Light—Three Engines of 50-horse power each—can be inspected by interested visitors.

CAFE. RESTAURANT.

Gents' Smoke Room—1st Floor



COLISEUM AND MODEL HOUSE, WEST HARTLEPOOL.

Ladies' & Children's Underclothing in immense variety.

SOFT FURNISHING DEPARTMENT.

Consult our Expert for advice on all ideas and requirements concerning all kinds of Casement Decorations. Designs submitted and Estimates Free.

THE TOWER—situate at rear of the premises, commanding a magnificent view of the surrounding district—can be ascended by permission.

M. ROBINSON & SONS, LTD. STOCKTON-ON-TEES.

TELEPHONE 130.

TELEGRAMS: COLISEUM

Figure 7 Robinson's Coronation Shopping Week: North Eastern Daily Gazette 9th June 1901



The scale of Robinson's store meant it was a prominent feature of the High Street. This 1911 sketch gives an impression of the extent of the building.

AFTERNOON TEA SERVED

FURNITURE SHOWROOM CORSET

is replete with a Choice Selection of Sideboards, Cabinets, Suites, etc., beautiful designs, original and reproduced, perfectly constructed of chosen woods.

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THE COLISEUM, STOCKTON

FEET STALL Ladies' & Children's Underclothing in immense variety.

SE the Charity Sweet

Figure 8 Robinson's: North Eastern Daily Gazette 9th June 1911



Here is a selection of photographs and sketches of Robinson's over the years.

This photograph shows the later Robinson's building decked out for a celebration.



These articles in the Northern Daily Mail shows the different branches of Robinson's across Teeside in 1907.



& SONS, LTD., PROVIDERS, & STOCKTON-ON-TEES.



THE COLISEUM, STOCKTON-ON-TEES.

The new Coliseum, which has been erected on the site of the old one, is a fine example of modern architecture. It is a large building with a high roof and a wide frontage. The building is surrounded by a large area of ground, which is now being used for a variety of purposes. The new Coliseum is a fine example of modern architecture, and it is a credit to the town of Stockton-on-Tees.

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VALUE FOR MONEY AND FAIR TRADING, AND THE RESULT.



BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF WORKS AT STOCKTON-ON-TEES.

The works extend over an area of 100 acres, and are one of the largest in the North. They are a credit to the town of Stockton-on-Tees, and are a fine example of modern architecture.



LYNN HOUSE, 1800.

Lynn House, 1800, is a fine example of Georgian architecture. It is a large building with a high roof and a wide frontage. The building is surrounded by a large area of ground, which is now being used for a variety of purposes. Lynn House is a fine example of Georgian architecture, and it is a credit to the town of Stockton-on-Tees.



BON MARCHE, LYNN STREET.

Bon Marche, Lynn Street, is a fine example of modern architecture. It is a large building with a high roof and a wide frontage. The building is surrounded by a large area of ground, which is now being used for a variety of purposes. Bon Marche is a fine example of modern architecture, and it is a credit to the town of Stockton-on-Tees.

LYNN HOUSE, & BON MARCHE, & HIGH-ST., STOCKTON-ON-TEES.





M. ROBINSON

THE GREAT FOR HARTLEPOOL



THE ORIGINAL PREMISES IN THE YEAR 1874



MANCHESTER HOUSE, LYNN-STREET, TODAY.

STORY OF THE FIRM'S PROGRESS.

AN INTERESTING ACCOUNT.

A TOUR ROUND THEIR COLOSSAL PREMISES.

The history of Messrs. M. Robinson and Co. is a story of progress and achievement. It is a story of a firm that has grown from a small shop in the town of Hartlepool to a vast empire of buildings and business. The firm's progress is a testament to the hard work and vision of its founders and the success of its products.

The firm's progress is a story of growth and expansion. It is a story of a firm that has built a reputation for quality and reliability. The firm's products are sold in every part of the world, and its name is known to all. The firm's success is a result of its commitment to excellence and its dedication to its customers.

The firm's progress is a story of innovation and leadership. It is a story of a firm that has always been at the forefront of its industry. The firm's products are constantly being improved and new products are being developed. The firm's success is a result of its ability to anticipate the needs of its customers and to provide them with the best possible products.

The firm's progress is a story of perseverance and determination. It is a story of a firm that has overcome many challenges and setbacks. The firm's success is a result of its unwavering commitment to its goals and its refusal to give up in the face of adversity.



THE COLISEUM, LYNN-STREET.

The firm's progress is a story of vision and ambition. It is a story of a firm that has always had its sights set on the future. The firm's success is a result of its ability to see the potential of its market and to act on it before its competitors.

MANCHESTER HOUSE, COLISEUM, LYNN-ST., WEST HARTLEPOOL.

The Later Years

Robinson & Co. Draper remained recorded in the Ward's Directory until 1938-1939. After the death of Matthias Robinson in 1929, his sons took over the running of the business with his son Cyril running the Stockton branch until he retired. The Stockton branch was then run by Lionel, Matthias' grandson. Debenhams acquired Robinson's stores in 1962 but traded under the Robinson name (Newcastle journal 29 September 1962).

