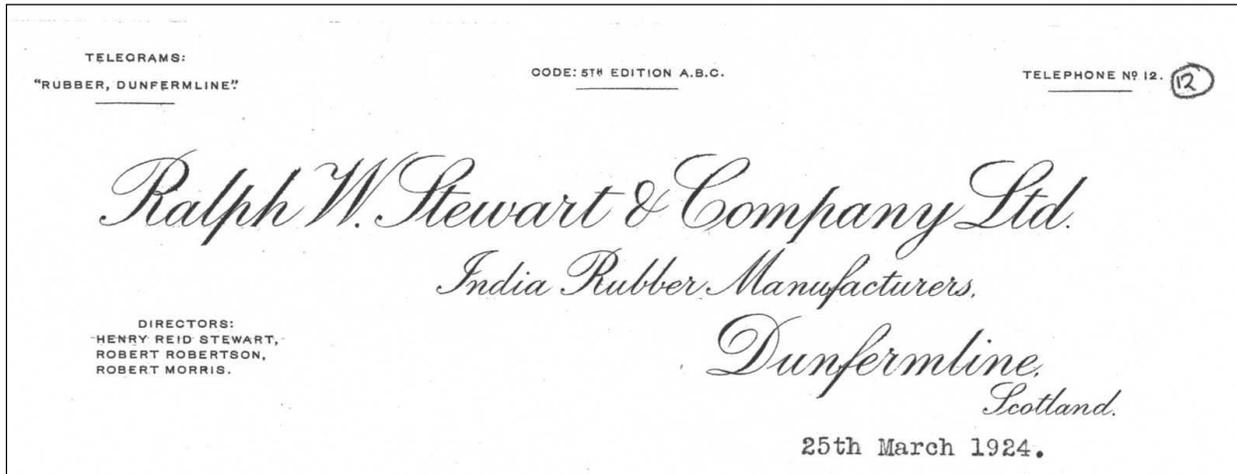


Dunfermline - Industrial Heritage

Ralph W. Stewart, Scottish Central Rubber Works, Elgin Street, Dunfermline



Because the younger son of the owner was a rubber planter in Malaya, a factory for the production of rubber materials was built at a Dunfermline Bleach Works. The owner was Mr Ralph W. Stewart, who had inherited the Elgin Beach Works from his uncle, Mr Thomas Walker of Thomas Walker & Co.

Thomas Walker & Co. was founded in 1860 at Elgin Bleach-field to purchase linen yarn, to bleach it and to sell it on. This the company did until the 1880s, when they also undertook the bleaching of woven linen and the finishing of it, mainly for local firms, but also from Ireland.

On the death of Mr Thomas Walker, in 1895, the company was left to Mr Ralph W. Stewart, who changed the name of the bleaching company to his own.

The late 1890's, however, proved to be a time when the linen industry in the town was passing through a period of serious depression. Most of the factories were working short time, and, in some cases there were dismissals of female workers on a fairly large scale. Local businessmen exercised their minds on the subject of creating alternative employment, especially for the female section of the community. Prominent among these was Ralph Stewart

whose yarn and cloth bleaching works was suffering from the general industrial decline.

With a keen appreciation of the necessity for safeguarding the industrial prosperity of his native town, Mr Stewart caused to be erected, alongside his bleach-works, a new factory, then known as the Scottish Central Rubber Works, in which from the outset was conducted a flourishing industry. It was in May, 1900, that production in the works began. The labour problem, of course, had to be solved before the plant could be operated, since rubber manufacturing processes were unknown in Dunfermline. In Edinburgh, the Scottish centre of the industry, Mr Stewart recruited his first staff of skilled workers. In all, fifty employees, females for the most part, came from Edinburgh to Dunfermline to inaugurate the new industry. Their job, in addition to producing, was to train the local girls who came forward in quite satisfactory numbers. Among the first male employees were several key men, skilled in all the branches of rubber manufacture.

One of those who came over from Edinburgh, as a young man to start in the rubber-works, was Sandy Howie (see Note 9) who made quick progress and, for many years, was the factory manager.

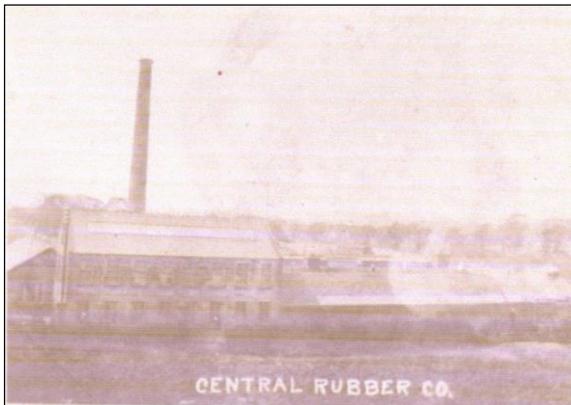
Other names making the move from Edinburgh included John Alexander, James Gilchrist and John Archibald. Mr Archibald, whose home was in James Street, remained with the firm until he retired in 1949.

The products from the factory in the early days included rubber sheetings, hoses, shoes and waterproof coat material, the latter being made up into coats by the company for the export market – mainly to China, until this market closed in 1914. Some 130 people were initially employed at the works.

In July, 1910, the rubber-works suffered a serious fire resulting in one of the drying sheds being destroyed. In the shed was a considerable stock of rubber most of which was rendered useless by the blaze. Fortunately the shed was in a relatively isolated part of the works which prevented more extensive damage.

The advent of Rosyth Dockyard, bringing as it did a large addition to the local population from the south of England, did much to change the characteristics of Dunfermline, but the process of change was really begun some years earlier when there was an influx of Edinburgh people who came to assist in setting up the new industry of Rubber manufacture.

During the First World War, the main production was waterproof groundsheets and coats, the latter continuing after the war, and the production of shoes. Shoe production steadily increased until it reached a peak of 13,000 pairs a day.



Central Rubberworks c.1918

When the linen trade started to suffer a decline in the 1920s the Elgin Bleachfield suffered also, and eventually the Rubber Works, which became a limited company in 1923, under the name of Ralph W. Stewart & Co. Ltd., expanded into the bleach-work premises.

All through its existence, the firm of R. W. Stewart & Co. Ltd. showed great enterprise, and rubber goods manufactured in Dunfermline became known, and were in high demand, both at home and abroad. There were times during the existence of the firm when as many as six hundred persons were employed at the works. The articles produced varied over the years depending on the demand, but large quantities of shoes were exported to the countries of the far-east. For many years, the Dunfermline made raincoats were in constant demand in the home markets as well as in markets overseas. Never averse to adapting their plant to satisfy the change which took place in the uses to which rubber was applied, Messrs Stewart found a ready market for hot water bottles, inner tubes for cycle tyres, toy balloons, and various other articles. During the South African War they executed a large contract for the supply of waterproof capes which were issued to the men of the mounted regiments on active service in South Africa. These garments became known in the works as the Baden-Powell capes.

In the 1930s, however, production consisted almost entirely of shoes. Those met with fierce competition from Japan until 1936 when trade tariffs prevented the importation to the U.K., of shoes from Japan. But Hong Kong competition increased at nearly the same rate as the Japanese diminished. This state of affairs continued until the Second World War.

Throughout the war the company washed West African rubber for the Government. This was dispatched to consumers throughout the country.

Production of footwear did not restart until 1945, when the demand for sports and gym shoes was very great. Over-boots also were in great demand.

In 1953, Messrs Stewart entered the Canadian market with winter boots with fur-lined tops

and over-boots. This appeared to be a lucrative market but in fact contributed to the firm's downfall some four years later. This was very much a seasonal trade, reliant on contracts being renewed each year. In addition the demand for rubber over-boots was badly affected by the introduction of plastic overshoes to the Canadian market.

Notwithstanding these problems, a new laboratory which contained the most modern experimental and testing equipment for the manufacture of rubber footwear, was introduced at Elgin Street in 1955.

In late November, 1957, rumours of trading difficulties at the rubber-works circulated in the town resulting in the subject being raised in the House of Commons by the M.P. for West Fife, Mr W. W. Hamilton. This brought a response from the then Chairman of Messrs Stewart, Henry Ralph Scott Stewart, to the effect that such rumours were unfounded and that there was no question of the factory closing down.

Only three weeks later, however, on Friday, 20th December, 1957, all 200 employees at the works received in their pay packets a letter advising them that the factory would be closing the following Friday.

The letter stated:- *"It is with profound regret that the Company must give you one week's notice as from today. This means that you will cease employment with the Company on 27th December, when you will be paid one week's wages. The lie time and holiday pay, amounting to two weeks wages will be paid at 5.30 pm to 6.30 pm on Friday, 3rd January, as it will not be possible to calculate the amount before then.*

The Directors would like to thank you for your very loyal support in the past, and particularly during the recent difficult times. They appreciate that the Company's reputation for good quality has been built on the high standard of workmanship which has been shown by you and your colleagues.

The Directors would like to emphasise that they have made a strenuous effort to keep the firm going in the face of strong competition and have tried to interest others to obtain outside support to bring about a merger, so

as to find a solution which would ensure our continuance. Unfortunately this has not been successful.

The Company has exhausted all its available resources in continuing trading up to the present time, but it is no longer possible to trade on. It would appear inevitable that liquidation will follow in a very short time. Naturally, everything possible will be done to assist in finding you other employment."

At a meeting of the Company's creditors on 9th January, 1958, it was disclosed that a last-minute offer to take over the Company had been made by Mr Harry Akers, on behalf of Modo Ltd. of London, who had premises at Inverkeithing and Newmills, and Dunbee This offer was turned down by Messrs Stewart and their creditors.

It was disclosed at the meeting that the slump in the fortunes of the Company occurred in 1955-56 when they ran into difficulties with their Canadian market orders, resulting in claims against the Company in both years. Canadian orders were cancelled in April, 1956, and efforts to make up orders on the home market that year failed. In 1957, the Company made a desperate effort to keep going and developed a new line in industrial Wellington boots. The Stewart family had pumped money into the firm but it was not possible to turn things around. At the time of closure the Company's buildings occupied 112,000 square feet and they also owned nine houses adjoining the works in Elgin Street.

Thus ended an enterprise which had started in times of economic difficulties in Dunfermline, and which had been a bold move at the time by its founder, Ralph Walker Stewart. The rubber-works had traded successfully at Elgin Street for over 55 years, providing employment for many people in the town over that period, but sadly, was forced to close at a time when unemployment in the area was again on the rise.

Note 1 – Ralph Walker Stewart was born at Limekilns on 11th October, 1845, the son of Alexander Stewart, a Customs & Excise Officer, and Helen, nee Walker. Helen was the niece of Thomas Walker, who owned the Elgin Bleachfield. Ralph married Rachel Reid, daughter of Henry Reid, Damask Linen

Manufacturer, at Abbey Park Place, Dunfermline, on 18th June, 1873. Rachel's father, Henry Reid, was co-owner of the Abbey Garden Linen Works, St Margaret's Street, Dunfermline. The couple had one daughter and four sons:- Margaret, (See Note 2); Alexander, (See Note3); Henry, (See Note 4); Ralph (See Note 5) and Thomas (See Note 6). Ralph died on 5th December, 1920, aged 75 years, at Abbey Park Place. In his obituary in the Dunfermline Press of 11th December, 1920, Mr Stewart was described as being 'not only a model employer but a businessman whose probity was universally recognised'. It went on to state that Mr Stewart had served the ratepayers for several terms on the Town Council and in that capacity he performed important work for the community, especially as Convener of the Water Works Committee, at a time when the condition of the city's water supply was giving serious cause for concern to the municipal fathers and officials.

Note 2 – Margaret Fisher Stewart was born on 24th September, 1874 at New Row, Dunfermline. On 24th September, 1901, Margaret, then 26 and residing at 26 Abbey Park Place, Dunfermline, married William James Inglis, (27), Damask Manufacturer, then residing at 27 Abbey Park, Place, Dunfermline. The wedding took place at Abbey Park Place, presumably at Margaret's home. The witnesses were Archibald G. Reid and Chrissie Reid. Margaret died, aged 57 years, on 30th August, 1932, at 13 Abbey Park Place, Dunfermline.

Note 3 – Alexander Stewart was born on 3rd May, 1876, at 66 New Row, Dunfermline, the eldest son of Ralph and Rachel Stewart. On 20th June, 1904, at Venturefair Terrace, Dunfermline, Alexander, then aged 28 years, a bleacher, residing at Abbey Park Place, Dunfermline, married Christina Reid, (30), residing at Venturefair Terrace, Dunfermline. Christina was the daughter of George Reid, Damask Manufacturer, and his wife Rachel Fisher. The witnesses to the marriage were Jenny Reid and Henry Reid Stewart. Alexander died, aged 35 years, on 23rd December, 1911, at his home, Millhill, Dunfermline. The death was registered by his brother-in-law, William Reid, Comely Park Place, Dunfermline. William's widow, Christina, died on 12th March, 1929, at

Brucefield, Dunfermline. She was 55 years of age, the cause of her death was pulmonary thrombosis and the registration was made by her son, A.W. Stewart.

Note 4 – Henry Reid Stewart was born on 9th April, 1878, at New Row, Dunfermline. Married with a son (Henry Ralph Scott Stewart – see Note 8) and two daughters, Henry owned Keavil Estate, Crossford, and was heavily involved in the local community. He was a generous contributor of funds to the Dunfermline and West Fife Hospital, of which he was a trustee. He was also a trustee of the Dunfermline and District Savings Bank and a life member of the Carnegie Dunfermline Trust. As a young man he was prominently identified with the Territorial movement and he retired from the local company of the Black Watch with the rank of Captain. For many years he was a member of the Dunfermline Amateur Orchestra, being one of the clarinet players in the combination. In his latter years Henry, and his wife, spent the winters abroad and he died suddenly, whilst on holiday in Johannesburg, on 5th March, 1937. Henry's widow, Ethel May Stewart, the daughter of Samuel Scott, Customs and Excise Officer, and his wife Elizabeth Jane Thomson, continued to reside at Keavil, but had moved to 14 Comely Park, Dunfermline, by the time of her death on 6th April, 1954. Ethel's death was registered by her son, Henry, then resident at Linburn House, Linburn Road, Dunfermline.

Note 5 – Ralph Walker Stewart was born on 24th August, 1880 at Comely Park, Dunfermline. Ralph was killed in action on 2nd September, 1918, in France, during the First World War. He was a Captain in the Black Watch and his memorial is at the Peronne Communal Cemetery. His obituary in the Dunfermline Journal of 14th September, 1918, gave the following information, "*News reached Dunfermline on Saturday last, and was confirmed early in the week by the War Office authorities, that Captain Ralph W. Stewart had fallen whilst taking part in an attack on German position. Before the outbreak of war, Mr Stewart had entered upon a prosperous business career which afforded him a congenial opportunity for the exercise of those business qualities with which he was so liberally endowed. In various spheres his genial gentlemanliness attached to him many*

warm friends. For a number of years he found in the discharge of the duties of an Officer of the Fife and Forfar Yeomanry his chief recreation, but though in this connection he displayed an exceptional capacity for military leadership, he had no thought of devoting himself to a soldier's life. When, however, the curse of German Militarism broke loose upon the world, and the Territorials were mobilised, he went into training with his regiment in the south of England. After a period of preparatory training the regiment was ordered abroad and saw service in the Gallipoli Peninsula, followed by campaigns in Egypt and Palestine. Whilst in Egypt the Yeomanry were attached to the Black Watch, and a few months ago the Battalion was transferred to France. Through all these trying times in the East, Captain Stewart passed scatheless and never had a day's illness. Conspicuous in the devotion which his character evoked was that his servant, Private Robert Alexander, a former employee of Captain Stewart. Alexander went over the top with his Captain, and remained beside him after he was wounded until the end, himself receiving a wound to the arm."

Note 6 – Thomas Walker Stewart was born on 4th July, 1881, at Comely Park, Dunfermline. He remained single and spent most of his working life running a successful rubber planting business in Malaya. During the First World War, Thomas returned to the U.K. and served throughout the war in the 2nd Black Watch. On the conclusion of the war he returned to Malaya where he continued several business interests connected with the rubber trade before returning once more to the U.K. and taking up residence in London. He died there on 22nd February, 1930, following a protracted illness. Thomas also owned the Morefield Estate at Ullapool, Wester Ross.

Note 7 – Ralph Walker Stewart was born on 3rd July, 1908, at Brucefield Road, Dunfermline, the son of Alexander Stewart and Christina Reid. On 8th April, 1933, at Blackfriars Parish Church, Glasgow, Ralph, then aged 24, a Rubber Manufacturer residing at 20 Appin Crescent, Dunfermline, married Margaret Moncur, (22), Inverlochy Nolt? Loan, Arbroath, the daughter of David Moncur, Aerated Water Manufacturer, and his wife,

Jane Douglas. The witnesses to the marriage were John G. Watson, 6 Methven Drive, Dunfermline, and Eleanor D. Dunlop, Arbroath. Ralph died on 13th May, 1987, aged 78 years, at 10 Hospitalfield Road, Arbroath. He was described as a retired company director and had been pre-deceased by his wife Margaret. The death was registered by A.M. Dunlop, Solicitor, Brothockbank House, Arbroath.

Note 8 – Henry Ralph Scott Stewart was born on 31st January, 1918, at 12 Snowdon Place, Stirling, the son of Henry Reid Stewart and his wife Ethel May Scott. At that time (during the First World War) Henry Reid Stewart was a Major with the Reserve Highland Cyclists Battalion. His normal domicile at that time was Davaar, (Grieve Street) Dunfermline. Young Henry's Birth Certificate indicates that his parents were married at Burton-on-Trent, England, on 5th March, 1912. Henry married but later divorced Barbara Jean White. Henry died, aged 83, on 30th May, 2001, at Lomond Vale, Nursing Home, Falkland, Fife. His usual residence at that time was Gleneden Mill, Gateside, Fife. His death was registered by his son, H. Stewart, 112 Ramillies? Road, Chiswick, London, W4 1JA.

Note 9 – Alexander Joss Howie was born at Inglis Green, Colinton, Edinburgh, on 15th May, 1873, the son of James Howie, Drill Instructor, and his wife Anna Marie Howie m/s White. On 2th July, 1895, at 1 Magdala Crescent, Edinburgh, Alexander (or Sandy as he was known), then 22 years of age, an India Rubber Worker, residing at 9 White Park, Edinburgh, married Annabella Johnston, the 21 year old daughter of George Johnston, Coachman, then residing at 5 Coltbridge Avenue, Edinburgh. Sandy died on 2nd April, 1947, at 20 Buchanan Street, Dunfermline (the Garthdee Nursing Home), his usual residence being 71 Elgin Street, Dunfermline. He was 74 years of age, the cause of death was cardiac failure following chronic myocarditis, and the death was registered by his son, James, then residing at 21 Cranmere Drive, Sale, Cheshire.

Sandy Howie was for many years factory manager at Stewart's Rubberworks.

Note 9 – Enq. Required re marriage of Henry

See Note 8. Also family (a son and two daughters of Henry).

Note 10 – In the Fife County Valuation Roll for 1948/49 the owner/occupier of Keavil House is Ethel M. Stewart (likely widow of Henry).

Note 12 – Check DJ of 23/7/1910 for result of fire.