

British Xylonite, Highams Park, Walthamstow

Hale End, London, E4.

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Like a number of other Walthamstow manufacturers, the story of British Xylonite starts in Hackney.

What is Xylonite?

Xylonite, is better known by its American equivalent name of *celluloid*. It was invented by an extraordinary Birmingham inventor named Alexander Parkes and first displayed at the London International exhibition in 1862 under the name of *Parkesine*. Derived from the nitro-cellulose and collodion processes, it was initially used for making domestic articles in substitution for wood, horn, ivory or tortoiseshell. Ironically, although today the world knows the product by the American name of '*celluloid*' in 1870 a judge ruled that, due to his original experiments, it was in fact, *Alexander Parkes* who was the true inventor of the product



Above Alexander Parkes

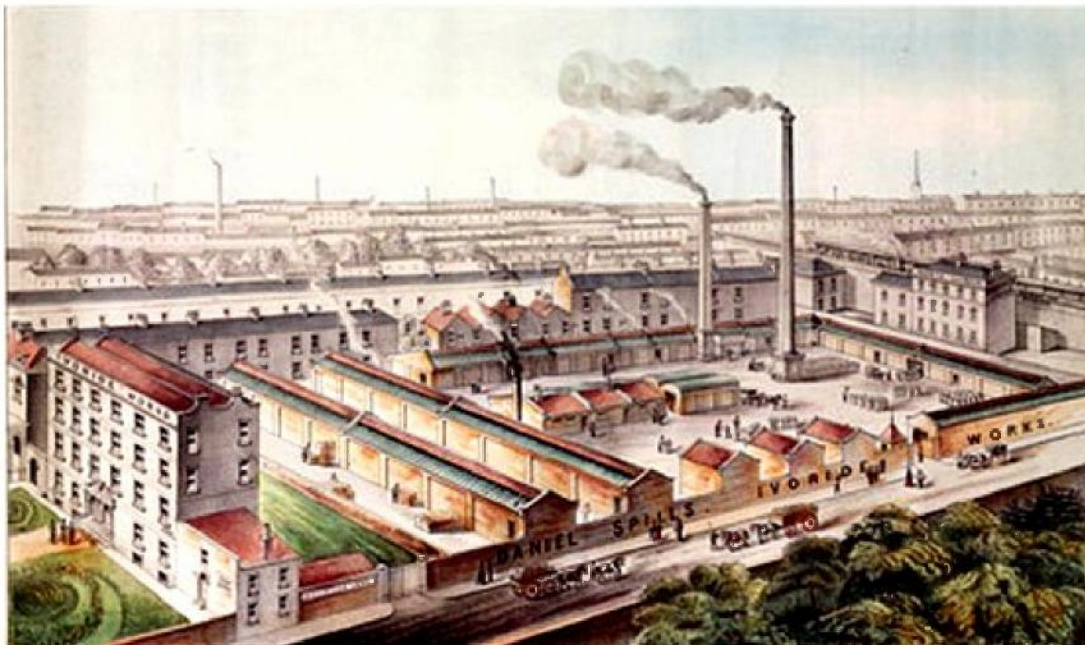


Although he trained as a doctor, *Daniel Spill* joined the business of his brother *George Spill & Co.* The firm manufactured waterproof textiles in Stepney Green, East London by spreading rubber onto cloth. The material was much in demand for capes and groundsheets for soldiers in the wet conditions of the Crimean War. He probably became aware of *Alexander Parkes* claim for the waterproof qualities of '*Parkesine*' at the 1862 exhibition. Negotiations led to an agreement not only to use it for waterproofing but also to develop '*Parkesine*' in his brother's works at Hackney Wick.

Above Daniel Spill

In 1866, the *Parkesine Company* was established with *Daniel Spill* as works manager and *Alexander Parkes* as managing director. Their intent was to produce low cost '*Parkesine*' in bulk. However, it was not a commercial success as '*Parkesine*' was expensive to produce being prone to cracking and highly flammable. The company did not prosper and was wound up in 1868 with *Daniel Spill* taking over most of the stock. He formed the *Xylonite Company* in 1869 to carry on the business but that did not fare much better and was wound up in 1874.

Daniel Spill's Ivoride Works at Hackney



Undaunted by these failures he established *Daniel Spill & Co.* in Homerton, Hackney and continued to make *Xylonite* and *Ivoride*. He then entered into a partnership with *Levi Parsons Merriam* who, previously, had tried to promote the American material '*Celluloid*'.

In 1897, the famous sociologist Charles Booth wrote: *'The British Xylonite Company is in the (Homerton) High Street. Xylonite is very inflammable being a species of cotton. The company has its own fire Brigade. Even when alight, they will allow no outside brigade to enter. The men were leaving work as we passed. Lighting their pipes at a flaring gas flame coming out of the outside wall.'*

The Division Of The Manufacturing Process

Spill & Merriam formed the *British Xylonite Company* and because of the manufacturing difficulties moved the dangerous manufacturing operations to a purpose-built premises at Brantham in Suffolk. They continued to make *Xylonite* and *Ivoride* at Hackney until 1897 when they moved the 'safer' manufacturing process to a purpose built factory at Highams Park, Walthamstow. The factory was

built on the 50 acre site of Jacks Farm and the products went under the trade name of **Halex**



The company was major local employer from 1897-1971 and the factory produced a large variety of goods mostly from plastic derived materials.

The *Halex* company had a virtual monopoly on manufacturing table tennis balls. Indeed, practically all the ping pong balls in the world were once made at the *British Xylonite, Halex* factory in Highams Park.

The picture on the left (Courtesy of the Science Museum) shows some of the vast range of products that were made from *Xylonite* and *Ivoride*

Ping Pong Land - The Development of Hale End/Highams Park



Unlike the area around the stations at Wood Street, Walthamstow and St James Street, that grew at an amazing rate after the coming of the railway, this didn't happen at Hale End. Although the railway came to the area in 1873 there was little development of the area. The station was surrounded by open farmland and the hamlet of Hale End was about three quarters of a mile away. In an effort to attract railway use by day trippers to Highams Park lake and Epping Forest, the railway operators changed the name of the station from Hale End to that of

Highams Park (Hale End) but this did not solve the problem. However, there was some development in the area of larger houses bought by prosperous city gents.

The reason for the lack of interest in smaller house development was simple cheap workmen's tickets to London could not be bought from Hale End station. This situation didn't change until the British Xylonite Company came with most of its workforce from Hackney in 1897.

After the arrival of the British Xylonite Company, affordable houses, shops and schools were built near the station for factory workers. City clerks, journalists and printers, also came to live in the renamed urban village of Highams Park and used the trains into London, which ran throughout the night. A lively community had been created and by 1949 the factory employed some 100 people.

Company Development & Change

The company became one of the foremost developers of *Celluloid*, *Acetate*, *Bakelite*, *Xylonite*, *Ivoride*, *Casein plastic*, *Lactoid* and synthetic resins and made a huge range of products from these materials. These included: Celluloid Toilet Articles; Brushes; Mirrors; Combs; Trays; Boxes; Manicure, Jewel and Dressing Cases; Baby Sets; Balls; Rattles; Knife Handles; Washable Collars; also Sheets, Rods and Tubes, Combs, Brushes, Mirrors, and other Toilet Articles in Xylonite. Also *Xylonite* in sheets, rods, and tubes, and *Lactoid* (casein) in sheets and rods.

The timeline below shows how it expanded and in turn got eaten up by bigger and bigger companies:

- 1931 it bought a company called Cascelloid that it later renamed as Palitoy (Their products included: *Action Man*, *Action Force*, *Tiny Tears*, *Pippa*, *Tressy*, *Star Wars figures* and the *Care Bears*)
- 1938 British Xylonite became a holding company with three subsidiaries: *B. X. Plastics* making xylonite and lactoid; *Halex Ltd* making finished goods, and *Cascelloid Ltd* (Palitoy) making toys and bottles at Leicester and Coalville.
- 1939 *Distillers Co* negotiated a 50% interest in ***British Xylonite Co.***
- 1961 *Distillers Co* bought the entire Group in 1961
- 1963 ***British Xylonite Co*** became part of a new grouping called *Bakelite Xylonite Ltd* established jointly with Union Carbide, and including plants at Birmingham, Aycliffe and Grangemouth.
- 1966 sites at Brantham & Aycliffe were sold to British Industrial Plastics (A subsidiary of Turner & Newall Ltd.
- 1971 the Halex factory was closed and production transferred to Brantham in Suffolk.
- 1977 British Industrial Plastics was sold to commercial rivals Storey Brothers of Lancaster

The British Xylonite Memorial



In 1914, 425 workers from the factory joined to fight in WWI and many women were recruited to carry out the work left by the absent male workers. Sadly, 40 men didn't return and a War Memorial was erected in the grounds to honour their memory. After WWII, a further 7 names were added to the memorial.

When the factory was closed the memorial was sent to Brantham. A recent campaign relocated the memorial and had it returned to Highams Park. It is now located in Hale End Library in Castle Avenue, Chingford.

The Higham Park Tesco Development



An artist's impression of the development.



Opening of the new store

Some of the land in the area, including much of the former *Halex* factory site, was acquired by supermarket chain *Tesco* who wished to develop the site as a super store, shop and housing development. Initially, Waltham, Forest Council refused them permission for this and after a protracted process of planning applications, this position was endorsed in 2007 by the Local Government Secretary. The reasons cited for the refusal involved the size of the proposed store and that the building was not in keeping with local Victorian and Edwardian buildings. However, despite the efforts of some local residents to stop this from happening, in 2009 a revised planning application was passed.

The new development comprises a 5,523sq metre 24 hour store . 253 new homes, 7 independent shops, 350 underground parking spaces, offices, work-shops and start -up units. As I write this, the store is open and much of the development is near completion.

Bill Bayliss
January 2013

Addenda

British Xylonite

Some sources and products:

Mary Dunhill A History of Hale End & Highams Park

<http://www.highamparkforum.co.uk/history.html>

<http://hera.krystal.co.uk/~urbexfor/showthread.php/8830-British-Xylonite-Essex-June-2010>

<http://www.mernick.org.uk/zylonite/history.htm>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celluloid>

http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/British_Xylonite_Co

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/records.aspx?cat=173-hc410&cid=0#0>

<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=22708>



Above Dustpan (Victoria & Albert Museum)

Above Dressing Box & Cover (Victoria & Albert Museum)