

Made in Walthamstow



From 1908 to 1954, there was a very large camera making factory in Fulbourne Road, Walthamstow. It was known as the *Ensign Works* and was on the opposite side of the road to the ASEA & Fuller factories.

By 1949, the company employed some 800 workers and claimed to be was the biggest camera manufacturers in Europe. The factory made some of the finest cameras ever made in the UK.



The History of Ensign Cameras

The history of *Ensign* is the story of a business partnership and working collaboration between two remarkable men. These were George Houghton, an English Glass merchant and Antoine Claudet, a French developer and inventor of photographic techniques who got together in 1834 to form a company selling optical glass called Houghton-Claudet.

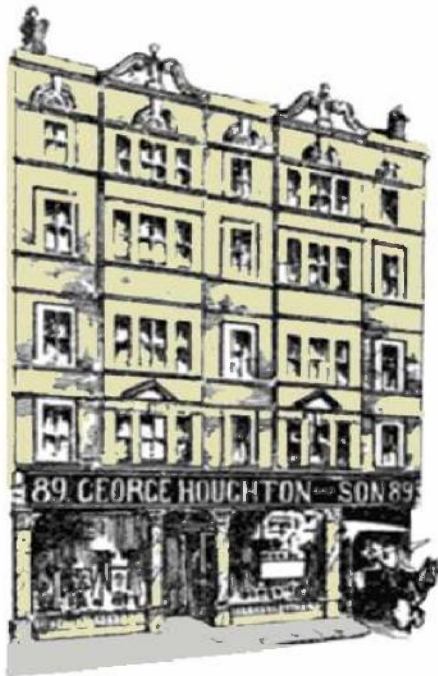
Daguerreotype Images

The real beginnings of the camera & photography business started in early 1839 when the new *Daguerreotype* photographic process developed by Louis Daguerre was announced to the French Academy Of Sciences. Although the general principles of the process were described in general terms, the specific details were withheld.

A Daguerreotype image essentially was formed by coating chemicals on onto a thin silvered sheet. After the image was produced and because of the instability of the chemicals, the image plates were usually encapsulated in thin sheets of glass to preserve them.

In 1840 Antoine Claudet obtained a Licence to produce Daguerreotypes and opened a photographic studio to produce his own Daguerreotype plates and to develop the process. By 1851, George Houghton was operating a large business premises selling speciality glass products and Daguerreotype accessories from his home at 89 High Holborn. In 1852, George Houghton's son joined the company which was renamed as Claudet, Houghton & Son.

From 1840 until his death in 1867, Antoine Claudet carried on experimenting and developing photographic processes. For his work he was made: a Fellow of the British Royal Society, a Chevallier of the French Legion of Honour and Photographer Ordianry to Queen Victoria. One of his inventions was a machine for cutting cylindrical glass that is still used today.



After his death the company's name was changed to George Houghton & Sons and the business expanded by the acquisition of the next door property. It sold a full range of photographic goods

Mergers & Expansion

From 1895 onwards the story of George Houghton & Sons is a story of company takeover and mergers. In 1901 the High Holborn business premises was renamed as *Ensign House* and in 1903 they were selling a film roll called *Ensign*. In 1904 the company absorbed another

company called Holmes Brothers (Makers of the *Sanderson* cameras), AC Jackson, Spratt Brothers and Joseph Levi & Co. The company was renamed as Houghtons Ltd and in the

early 1900's they built a factory for the manufacture of cameras in Fulbourne Road, Walthamstow. By 1908 this was the biggest British camera manufacturers.

In 1915 there was a significant development when Houghtons entered into partnership with another well established photographic company (W Butcher & Sons) and formed a new company called Houghton-Butcher Manufacturing. (This manufacturing role was critical to W Butcher & Sons who didn't have their own manufacturing capacity and traded in European (Predominantly German) cameras. However, the two companies continued to trade separately and maintained their own brands until 1926 when they finally merged to form Houghton-Butcher (Great Britain) Ltd.

Ensign



Ensign Ltd was set up in 1930 to be the selling arm of the company. However, although the factory was popularly known as *Ensign*, the Walthamstow camera manufacturing factory retained its name as Houghton-Butcher Manufacturing Co Ltd until 1945. But.. the mergers went on. In 1945 the company associated itself with the film maker *Elliott & Sons* (Maker of the film brand name *Barnet*) and became *Barnet-Ensign*. In 1948 they linked with *Ross Ltd* (A specialist lens maker) and became *Barnet Ensign Ross* and in 1954 changed the name again to *Ross Ensign Ltd*.

The End

In 1940 the headquarters of the trading company *Ensign Ltd* was destroyed by enemy bombing in WWII. The assets of the company were taken over by *Johnson & Sons* but the trademark *Ensign* was kept by the *Houghton-Butcher Manufacturing* company.

In 1954, following constant declining sales, camera manufacture was transferred to *Johnson & Sons* factory at *Hendon* and production ceased at *Walthamstow*. The empty factory was taken over by *Fullers* (Who had a factory over the road)

By 1961, the company had faded away and finally ceased manufacturing.

Present Day



The above pictures show the present day *Ensign* factory. Essentially, the existing building has been clad with modern panelling and all that visibly remains of the old building is the doorway.

Bill Bayliss

October 2012