

A Brief History of the Firm of

L. A. Ratcliffe
Printer and Stationer

in Rotherham, South Yorkshire



Cover Picture: For over 50 years the business had a commanding position in the Chantry Buildings at the far end of All Saints' Square. In this picture taken around 1950 the sunblind over the shop window can be made out with the print works on the first floor.

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Formation and Early Years:

The exact date of formation of the firm which became known as “Ratcliffe’s” is uncertain, but its origins can certainly be traced back to the early part of the 19th century. A book on Yorkshire Industry & Commerce published in 1893, *The Century’s Progress*, tells us that the founder was a Mr. Abraham Gilling, but in fact the earliest reference is in 1837 to Andrew and Michael Gilling in High Street.

In 1841 we find the name of Abraham Gilling alongside Andrew, and they had by then moved from High Street to No. 11 Church Street. The premises known as the “Albion Office” consisted of a two storey building with a “spacious and well appointed” stationery showroom on the ground floor. To the rear were the printing works with a composing department on the first floor. The premises stood just at the bottom of Church Street which wound round into Bridgegate where Upper Millgate has now cut through.

Printing in those days had changed little from the times of William Caxton, being produced from hand-set type on manually operated presses. Illustrations were printed from woodcuts produced and cut by skilled craftsmen, and the composing room would employ many such craftsmen. The shop would sell bibles and other books along with simple items of stationery, paper, envelopes, invitation cards, dip-in pens, files and desk-ware. Familiar items such as the fountain pen, typewriter and calculator had yet to be invented.

Abraham Gilling died in 1881 and the business was purchased by Charles Morgan Ratcliffe who had previously been fifteen years as

printing works manager with the Rotherham and Masborough Advertiser. During his ownership it is recorded that Charles Ratcliffe was “very progressive with a modern outlook on the printing trade.” The presses were now mechanically driven from a gas engine, though the sheets were still hand-fed.

Percy Wadsworth started work as an apprentice with Charles Ratcliffe in 1886 at the age of 15. We are told that one of the first tasks he was given was to go round to one of the other printing works in the town with a large wheelbarrow to collect a “Nonpareil hair-space.” Imagine his surprise when he was handed a small piece of lead weighing about 1 gm. However he stayed with the firm and became a craftsman. Charles Ratcliffe in his later years spend an increasing amount of his time and wealth in local hostelries and left the running of the business to Percy Wadsworth, now printing manager, and to his daughter Lillian Ann Ratcliffe who was in charge of the stationery side. When Charles died in 1911 these two formed a partnership in the name of L. A. Ratcliffe, a name that was to survive in the town for nearly 100 years.

Under the new management the business developed into a thriving and prosperous concern with an expanding commercial trade: printed forms, works and office records, local government printing, ruling and binding were playing an ever larger part in keeping the printing works busy.

In 1922 Lillian Ratcliffe, who had been in failing health for some months, died and in her will (having no family of her own) left her share of the partnership to Percy Wadsworth who decided that the name of L. A. Ratcliffe, with a now established reputation, should be retained.

The Wadsworth Era

Three years later Percy invited his two sons Harold and Cyril to join the firm. About this time they were notified that the premises in Church Street were to be pulled down for road widening, but new premises were made available nearby in Corporation Street in the newly constructed Chantry Buildings. It was a busy time and the firm could not afford to close down during the move. It was decided to take the opportunity to install all new machinery, type racks and cases in the new premises so when the move was made in 1928 there was no disruption of work.

The printing works were on a specially reinforced first floor, and stairs led to the small stationery shop below. The shop was run at various times by three of Percy Wadsworth's daughters: Winnie, Jessie and Ethel. It would have looked very old fashioned today, with a large heavy wooden counter and black painted cupboards with glass doors to display the stock.

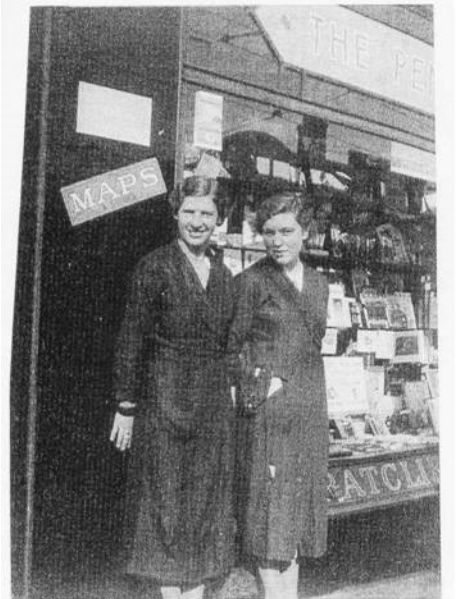
By 1931 Percy Wadsworth had reached the age of 60 and started to ease off, leaving most of the management to his two sons who were now partners in the business. They retained a skilled and conscientious staff, and it was a period in the history of the firm when they made many new business friends, and, as a result, were very rarely short of work.

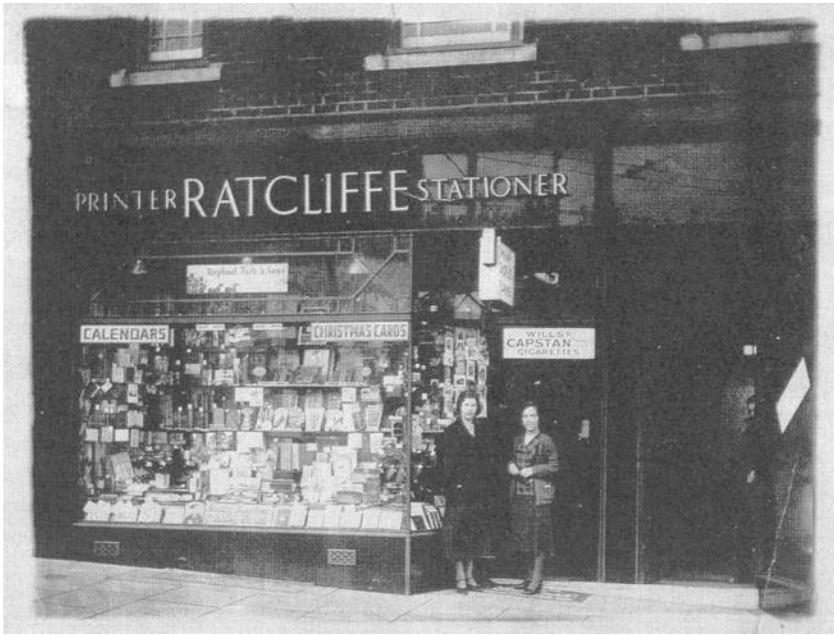
The firm carried on during the 1939-45 war years, printing much of the necessary work for local government and industry. Percy Wadsworth died in 1947 after having worked for 61 years in the printing trade. He left his share of the business to his two sons Cyril and Harold who still retained the trading name of L. A. Ratcliffe.

More modern automatic machinery was being introduced into the



Above: Charles Ratcliffe and his print operatives at the Albion Office in Church Street, Percy Wadsworth front left. Below left:: Albion Office shop front. Below right:: 18 Corporation Street. The doorway on the left led up to the print works on the first floor.





Above: Shop front at 18 Corporation Street. Ethel Wadsworth is on the right.

Below: Two more pictures at the front of the shop. The window was packed with goods that were probably not on display inside the shop. A greeting card display, location unknown.



printing trade at this time to speed up production, and a new automatic letterpress cylinder machine was installed, and a few years later this was complimented with an automatic typesetting machine. These enabled large gains in productivity as wage costs soared from pre-war levels and the printing works stayed profitable through the final years of the letterpress era.

The post war years also saw a build up in the need for stationery, both commercial, with many new businesses being formed, and retail with the increase in consumer affluence. Jessie and Winnie had continued to run the shop in similar fashion to the pre-war era with very few goods on display and prices committed to memory. Around 1950 Jessie became terminally ill so she and Winnie retired. Cyril Wadsworth took over responsibility for the shop together with his wife May. After a difficult period they soon realised the potential of the retail trade and had the shop completely re-fitted with modern display units in light oak in 1953, and a new matching counter and pen display cabinet were later added. "The Pen Shop" name was used to market the specialisation in writing instruments which with the birth of the Parker 51 became a profitable line for many years to come.

Both sides of the firm continued successfully in the 1960s providing a complete printing and stationery service to the small businesses of the town and still doing much printing for the local authority. By 1969 however both partners were in their sixties and the future of Ratcliffe's looked uncertain; but John Wadsworth, Cyril's son, was persuaded to leave a career in microelectronics and moved back to Rotherham to join the firm as a partner in 1970. He took over the running of the shop, at the same time taking a course on printing administration. This enabled his father to concentrate on the print side which was his real interest.

Changing Times

The 1970's were to see a revolution in the printing industry. Firstly the letterpress process of printing from metal type directly on to the paper (dating from William Caxton) was being superseded by offset lithography where the image is transferred from a litho plate to a rubber blanket and then to the paper. Secondly the new technology enabled the introduction of economical photo-typesetting, which saw the end of the old craft skills of setting metal type. J.W. oversaw the introduction of these new methods into the firm with the purchase of a first small offset press in 1973 and a larger press and photo-typesetter in 1976. However the new methods also encouraged the growth of in-plant and instant printers which inhibited further development of the printing side of the business.

Unfortunately Cyril Wadsworth suffered a bad heart attack in 1975 enforcing his retirement from the business and his brother Harold also retired leaving J.W. in sole charge. He was fortunate to inherit good and loyal staff, and his mother continued to play a small part in the running of the shop for a while.

In 1983 the firm was offered new premises in All Saints' Buildings as the Council could not guarantee the future of the lease on the Chantry Buildings. The printing works however were retained on the first floor of the old premises. The new larger shop premises enabled a greater degree of self-service and an expansion of copying services which would eventually replace the print side of the business. Most of the old wooden fittings were transferred from the old shop thus retaining some of its character, and the old values of service over the counter still favoured by many regular customers. New shelving units and suspended ceiling contrived to give the shop a modern feel as well.

Sadly Harold Wadsworth died in 1983 and his brother Cyril in 1986, having worked in the business for over one hundred years between them.

Under John Wadsworth, the retail stationery side of the business flourished in the 1980s together with a substantial commercial account trade in office supplies. However the printing industry was undergoing massive changes with new technology requiring large investment to remain competitive, and in 1992, with most of the long serving staff having moved on, John took the decision not to renew the lease on the Chantry Buildings premises. The firm also became a member of the Office Club marketing group, enabling the shop to remain competitive in a changing market.

It was these changes in the retail market from around 1993 that were to bring about the decline of many small independent retailers. The Meadowhall shopping centre had opened in 1990 and had some initial effect on trade. However it was the change in Sunday Trading laws in 1994 that spelt the decline of Rotherham's town centre. People swapped Sunday Worship and a walk in the country for the Temple of Mammon and pounding the marble of the malls. Rental values on the other hand were still buoyed by the increasing popularity of pubs and clubs in the town, and staff costs by the introduction of the minimum wage, leading to a squeeze on profits.

A partial refit of the shop and diversification into art materials helped to keep the business going into the 21st century. With his daughters having carved out their own successful careers, John was now thinking about retirement and selling the business, but it was now a difficult time to sell it as a going concern. Sadly he lost his wife Mary to cancer just before the turn of the millennium and decided to keep on with the business for a few more years.

John had been active in the Rotherham Chamber of Trade for some years, and became its last President in 2003. A main issue was the struggle to get the local authority to improve car parking for shoppers, and the lack of success was a major factor in Marks and Spencer closing their town centre store in favour of one at Retail World with its plentiful parking. This and the worsening car parking were the last straw, as most of Ratcliffe's traditional customers now rarely visited the town. Rather than just close down, the business moved into a smaller unit back in Church Street (just above where it first started) with the emphasis more on office supplies and photocopying.

The business was still not profitable, but it did attract the attention of an acquisitive office supplies business in Barnsley, BOS Office Supplies, and in July 2006 after discussions with its directors, BOS acquired the stock and commercial trade, retaining the valuable services of John Wadsworth for a few years. They kept the Church Street shop open, but in the following year the landlord, Rotherham MBC, gave notice that the lease would be terminated as the site was destined for redevelopment as part of the Rotherham Renaissance Project. The shop was therefore relocated to the Mexborough branch in June 2007.

John was pleased that after three generations of his family, and nearly 200 years of history, that the business of L. A. Ratcliffe did not disappear into oblivion but would continue under its new guise of BOS.



Above: the large corner shop at 31 Corporation Street., which also had a large basement. The Chantry buildings can be seen to the left of picture.

Below left: the inside of the shop with a mixture of self-service and counter service and a wide range of goods on display.

Below right: the front of the last shop on Church Street with John Wadsworth in the doorway.

