

Marley - Another Family Success Story

by Annette Tomarken

Acknowledgements

This article owes much of its content and all its illustrations to a number of very knowledgeable people, to whom I am extremely grateful: Andrew Barr, who told me of his aunt Jean Barr's links to Marley¹ and lent me the all-important *The History of Marley* by Fred Wellings (Cambridge: Woodhead Publishing, Ltd.), the story of the company up until 1994: Ray Cannings, longtime Lenham resident who worked as Maintenance Manager at Marley for 28 years; Martin Porter, who knew the factory well, having been the medical officer there for many years. Martin had to examine every new employee and remembers going on guided tours of the factory². Three infinitely patient members of the current 'Marley' team, David Cassell, Michael Johnson, and Joanne Sims, have for weeks answered my many questions and provided the illustrations. And finally, Samantha Park from Marley Plumbing & Drainage, the present company on the site, has looked over the paragraphs that relate to her firm.

The Birth of Marley

Lenham is home to two well-known firms, Lenham Storage and Marley Tiles, both of which have decades-long links to the village³. Lenham Storage, founded by the indefatigable Reginald Tolhurst, dates back to 1946.⁴ Marley goes back further, to the 1920s, when a plasterer and occasional roofer called Owen Aisher, father of 'young Owen' (later Sir Owen) Aisher, decided to get involved in the building trade, booming in the aftermath of WW I.

¹ Andrew Barr's aunt, Jean Barr, was married to Richard (Dick) Aisher who died at the age of only 52. Dick had helped his brother Owen build up the business.

² See Martin's article: *Those were the days, or were they here*: https://cde37143-ed22-472c-a8f1-abc71483bfe5.filesusr.com/ugd/5cd011_7882fc1f595343739976aa2b871868ae.pdf?index=true

³ A third firm, Brake Brothers frozen food company, now a multi-national company based in Ashford, still has a depot on Rose Lane in Lenham Heath.

⁴ See our article under the business tab https://cde37143-ed22-472c-a8f1-abc71483bfe5.filesusr.com/ugd/5cd011_8df60ba115014707adcb09fa36945142.pdf?index=true e

Born at Godshill in the Isle of Wight, Owen was orphaned by the age of 10. He served in the army in the Boer War,

Having learned that the need for new homes was particularly acute in the South East, Owen moved to Charing Heath in 1919. He was fortunate at this stage in having financial backing from Arthur Blackman, whom Fred Wellings' History of Marley calls "the archetypal self-made Victorian businessman"⁵. A successful coal merchant who then went into local politics, Arthur joined Owen Aisher Sr in building the first three houses on the newly bought ten-acre



The Marley site in Harrietsham in 1959

Because the land was on the site of Marley Farm, the fledgling construction company adopted that name. In the early days, they focussed on building complete houses, and tiles were only one part of the materials needed.

⁵ See Fred Wellings, *The History of Marley*, (Cambridge: Woodhead Publishing, 1994), p. 5.

KENT:

Favourite Maidstone District.

FREEHOLD BUNGALOW RESIDENCE FOR SALE, SITUATED ON THE HISTORIC PILGRIMS' WAY, WITH 6 ACRES OF EXCELLENT PASTURE LAND, RICH LOAM AND GRAVEL, UNRIVALLED VIEWS, BEST AIR OUTSIDE SWITZERLAND. RATES 4s. 4d. IN THE £.



On the main London-Dover road, 500ft. up, close to village with main-line station, and all conveniences, one hour and ten minutes London, 'bus service passes the property, golf, fishing, and other social amenities. Substantially built brick and tile residence, constructed under the supervision of an architect, containing lounge hall, two reception, five bedrooms, bathroom (h. and c.), two w.c.s, kitchen and scullery, usual offices.

BRICK AND TILE GARAGE.

Company's gas and water, modern drainage. Select neighbourhood.

Price £1,850.

Substantial mortgage arranged.

Apply O. AISHER,
Builder and Contractor,
HARRIETSHAM, KENT.
Telephone: Lenham 28.

An advertisement for an early Marley house - just look at those prices! (thank you to Sylvia Thorne for identifying the house as Serengeti, on the Pilgrims' Way up the hill behind the Marley site)

‘Young Owen’



‘Young Owen’ on his motor bike

Owen Sr’s son, often referred to as ‘young Owen’, was by all accounts a remarkable young man with a strong work ethic who soon became the driving force behind the company’s growth. A persuasive salesman, he would take packs of tiles and other building materials round to the various local builders - in the sidecar of the motor bike he first rode as a member of the Metropolitan Police shortly after the first World War. He always described himself as a tile manufacturer rather than an entrepreneur, a term he hated, according to his 1993 obituary in the *Independent*. He liked to get involved at all levels of the business, often going out on the road with one of his salesmen, for whom this must have been a somewhat anxious time. He later moved on to more luxurious modes of transport, and David Cassell remembers that by 1980 the company had a number of Rolls Royces and other exotic cars lined up outside the then Marley Head Office at Riverhead just outside Sevenoaks. They even had a company helicopter for some years.

But despite the increasing number and growing success of Marley's factories, it seems that (Sir) Owen's affections remained with the original Harrietsham venture: one of his last requests (he died at the age of 93) was that his coffin should spend the night at the plant the evening before his burial. The illustration shows the newest company lorry, a Volvo, carrying out Sir Owen's wishes. The workers stood to attention as the unusual 'hearse' left the factory: indeed, the event was unique enough to be featured on Meridian TV's evening news.



Sir Owen Aisher leaves Marley for the last time

The Aishers and the “Unloved” Concrete Tile

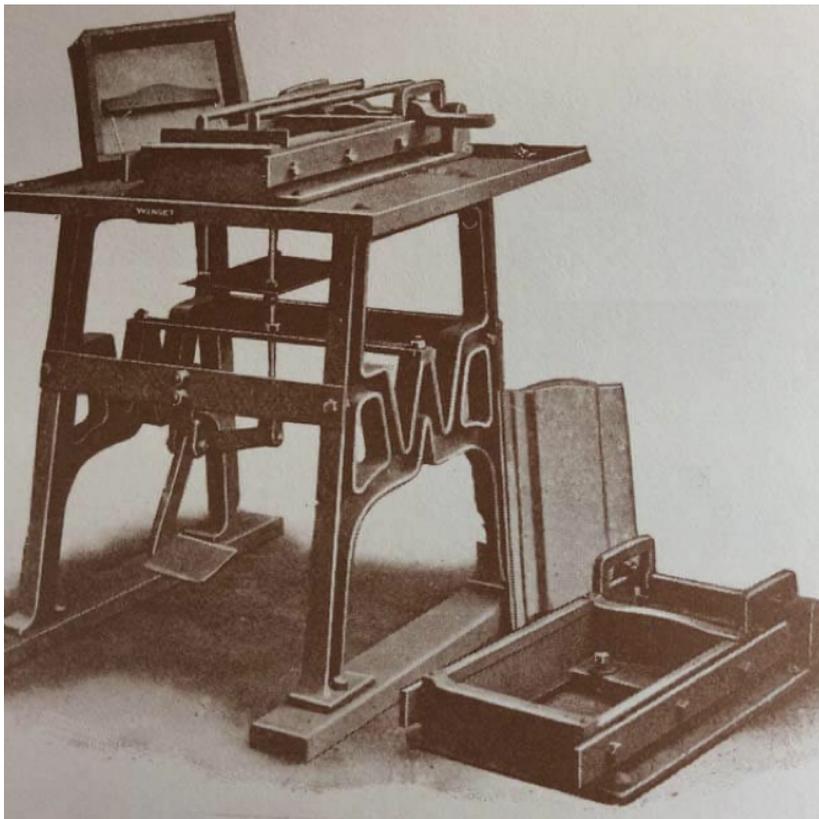
For most Lenham residents, the name Marley brings to mind ‘tiles’, probably roofing tiles, even though they made many other building products. In particular, their name is associated with concrete tiles, which have a complicated history.

Traditionally, if Welsh slate was not used on a roof, then the tiles would be made of clay. But a popular alternative (probably because it was cheaper than either slate or clay) was the grey concrete tile, which began to be used in Britain in the 1890s. As Fred Wellings notes, however, these were “tried, tested but unloved and little used”⁶. Basically, they were

⁶ Fred Wellings, p.11.

ugly...How could their texture and colour be made less drab and more appealing? The process of colouring and using sand to give texture to concrete tiles had begun in Germany as early as the 1840s and was starting in England at the time Marley was launched. Ensuring the colour was durable and that the added surface texture did not gradually change or even wash away proved a challenge, but Marley solved the problem so successfully that by 1925 the company was selling some 747,000 tiles per year and Owen Aisher Jr could employ his five siblings as well as other staff. Brothers Dick and Jack were to be very active in the firm (3). By 1965, concrete roofing tiles accounted for 90% of pitched (sloping) roofing in Britain. To produce tiles by the thousand, the Aishers needed a reliable and specialised machine, and here we turn to the Winget machine that features prominently in all histories of Marley.

The Winget Machine



The firm's first Winget machine, bought by Owen Aisher Sr in 1923/24 for £27.10s (about £800 nowadays according to the online conversion site), made possible the mass production of concrete tiles and was thus crucial to the company's later growth. A British branch of the American Winget Concrete Moulding Company had opened in Hartlepool in 1908 and produced concrete

mixers, dumpsters and tractors in addition to the all- important tile-making machines.

However, when more machines were needed as the housing boom continued, they were made on site by Marley. Because the traditional slate and clay roofing industries had been in disarray since the war, the field was clear for the concrete tile industry to grow.



Tiling the old-fashioned way - photo from *The History of Marley*, p. 18

Success and Expansion

Once again, Arthur Blackman provided the necessary capital, in return for a larger share of the tile business. Thanks to this increased investment and a more clearly focussed approach, Marley thrived. The business was incorporated in 1926 as Marley Tile Limited and new factories, in Leyton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, and Storrington, West Sussex, were opened shortly thereafter. However, relations between Owen Aisher and Arthur Blackman soured, and a series of lawsuits and court decisions led to a final parting of the ways between the long-time partners.

Owen Aisher Sr was by now friendly with the executives of many leading house-builders, from Wimpey to Taylor Woodrow. By way of these connections, he met the Canadian entrepreneur James (later Sir James) Dunn. Thanks to Dunn and to Dean Finance, a

subsidiary of British American Tobacco, the funds for further Marley expansion were raised in a manner that still left the Aishers in control.

The new arrangement led to the construction of yet more factories and by the outbreak of WW II the firm ran a total of eight sites using much faster machines: Fred Wellings calculates that whereas the old hand machines could produce 1000-1200 tiles a day, the new machines were capable of turning out 4,320 a day! One of the secrets of Marley's success, Sir Owen believed, was that they not only supplied the tiles, but would also install them, unlike many other firms. Marley was challenged by a few competitors such as the Redhill (now Redland) Tile Company, but many other small producers failed during this period. Even Marley had to reduce both prices and dividends.

Marley in WW II: the Mulberry Harbour 'beetles'



Marley contributes to the war effort: a 'beetle' helps the Normandy landings

With the outbreak of war, house building stopped, some Marley plants (including Harrietsham), were requisitioned, and many employees joined the armed forces. Instead of building and tiling houses, the firm switched to supplying air raid shelters, concrete huts, and heavy-duty concrete 'mats' for lorries and tanks to park on. Probably their best-known contribution to the war effort involved the famous 'Mulberry Harbours', built to facilitate the D-Day landings. The floating pontoons on which the 'roadway' for the tanks to reach the beach rested were code-named 'beetles'. A sub-contractor in the venture, Marley made pre-

cast concrete panels for the beetles, panels that had to withstand weights of up to 5000 pounds per square inch.

Post-War Recovery: More Products and the Marley Shops

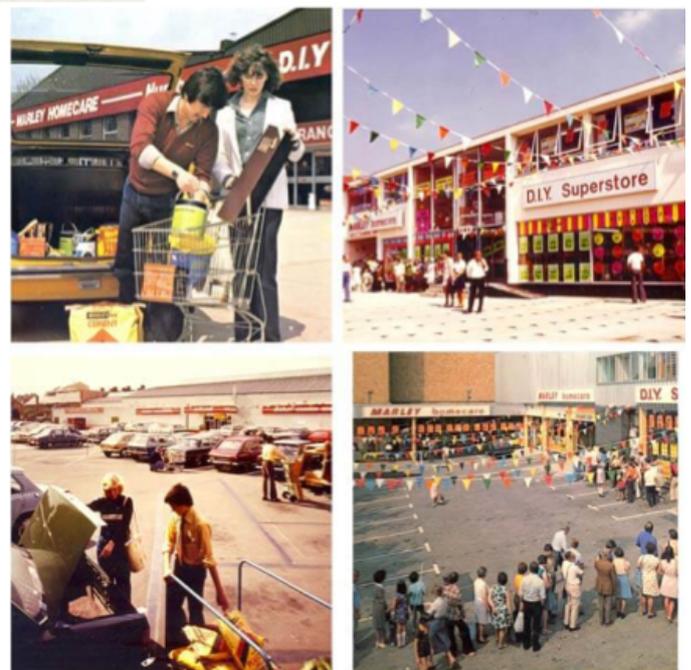
In 1945, Sir Owen became Chairman of the Marley Board of Directors, and the company drew upon its wartime experiences to begin manufacturing new products such as garages.



The illustration shows one of the most famous purchasers of a Marley garage!

Also in the 1950s, Sir Owen decided to sell his products directly to the public, and set up a series of Marley shops in the UK and overseas.

So successful were these that by the end of the 1960s, the company had no fewer than 184 shops catering to the growing popularity of the then relatively new concept of 'DIY'. Their own staff received a discount at the shops, a clever move that must surely have encouraged staff to try DIY themselves and thus learn how best to advise customers. This



growth was helped by the building boom under Harold MacMillan and the development of techniques that increased production speed. Wisely, Marley still offered customers the

complete 'supply and fix' package that had proved so successful in the past. They had learned the value of seeing the job through from start to finish.

The Range of Products Grows: From Steering Wheels to Hula Hoops

To meet the growing craze for DIY-style home improvement, new tile patterns, sizes and colours were introduced. Flooring, plastic pipes, even car steering wheels and dashboards further enlarged the range. Because many Marley machines used a method called 'extrusion', whereby the soft pvc or other mix could be forced through a specially made mould or die, they could produce lengths of continuous piping that required fewer joins and were thus more durable and easier to install. They could also be given far more complex shapes once the initial die had been made. Marley used the process to make a range of items - skirting boards, handrails for stairs, etc. So successful was this venture that by 1955 the new part of the business was registered separately as Marley Extrusions, Ltd. It continues under this name at Dickley Lane, Lenham. A particularly successful product from Marley Extrusions was their 'Dry Fix System', an alternative way of finishing the edges of roofs that avoided using the less durable mortar. In 1958, they even began making hula hoops, the latest craze imported from America - Sir Owen was always very open to new ideas and went regularly to the USA. He had seen how popular the hula hoops were there and wanted to bring them to Britain. The company simply made a new die to the right dimensions and 'extruded' between 4,000 and 5,000 hoops of many colours, which initially sold very well. When the craze abruptly died, Sir Owen was stuck with great numbers of hoops that he ended up donating to schools so as to empty out his warehouse.

Marley Vehicle Leasing

As a large company, Marley had provided cars for many of its employees ever since the 1950s. Having a 'company car' was a sought-after perk in the 50s and 60s. As early as 1965, records show that they were running as many as 1600 cars, some of which might later be offered to employees at very good rates. Realising the potential of this kind of operation, the company in 1982 launched Marley Vehicle Leasing at their Head Office at Riverhead near Sevenoaks.



David Cassell recalls that, in order to promote the leasing business, Marley hired Silverstone racing circuit and invited prospective customers to come there and test drive the latest models. They even arranged for famous racing driver Stirling Moss to be on hand as a guest celebrity to give rides round the circuit.

By the late 1980s, however, the leasing business was sold to a competitor, Cowie leasing.

Marley Flooring - tiles and sheet flooring

When we think of tiles today, we think not only of those on our roof, but also of those around our home, in kitchens, bathroom, conservatories and so on. The Aishers were swift to realise back in the 1950s that indoor tiles of all sorts would be popular and profitable. Ever pragmatic and open to acquiring new skills, Owen Aisher Jr went to the USA to learn about developments there. He returned full of enthusiasm for introducing a new option into the Marley range.

Many readers will remember the 1950s craze for laying one's own tiles - the tile cutters, the endless grouting and measuring, not to mention the delicate matter of how many extra loose tiles to buy at the beginning to be sure to have enough on hand to allow for mistakes or breakages....



For Marley, flooring, whether tile or sheeting produced in large rolls that could be cut to fit any size of room, became yet another success story right up until Etex sold that part of the business in about 1999 after their acquisition of the company.

The Marley Symbol - the Kneeling Man

Like most companies, Marley advertised widely, for instance in the tiling advert above, and also had a logo - in fact, a series of logos that were modified over the years.

My favourite of the company's many ads features the outline of Stonehenge along with the optimistic title "Not for an Age but for All Time"! Others, such as the tiling ad above, were more conventional.

The Marley logo evolved considerably over the years. But it consistently featured that essential Marley product, a tile, with a tiler kneeling to lay it, drawn in such a way as to suggest either a roof or a floor tile. Not as ubiquitous as Amazon's 'smile' logo, perhaps, but it was clearly effective enough to have been retained in the more modern, stylised version for many decades.

The early Marley logo followed by the modern version:



Marley Limited post-2000

1986, Sir George Russell (who at one time was in charge of ITN News) became Chief Executive and the company ceased to be run by the Aisher family. It was at this point that they commissioned Fred Wellings' book. By now their businesses extended beyond Europe to Africa, New Zealand, and Brazil. As a highly successful and now worldwide company, Marley was very attractive to investors, and went through a series of changes in ownership and management. The biggest change came in 1999, when the Belgian-based Etex Group bought the entirety of Marley enterprise. David Cassell explains: "They bought ALL of Marley (which comprised lots of different companies, making lots of things) but they only really wanted to keep the roof tile & plastics companies. Other Marley group companies were sold off, including Marley Floors, but the purchasers of these companies were allowed to carry on using the Marley name (obviously it was a strong brand). This inevitably caused confusion too. In effect you had a company making and selling a product called Marley, but it wasn't Marley!" The roofing part of Marley was merged with the UK roofing & cladding part of Etex Group (known as Eternit) to become Marley Eternit in 2005. Marley Extrusions, renamed 'Marley Plumbing & Drainage', was initially joined by other Etex plastic companies in a group called 'Aliaxis'. Eternit Roofing & Cladding UK merged with Marley Roof Tiles in 2005, becoming Marley Eternit. In 2018, Etex split the business again, forming Etex Exteriors to sell their fibre cement roofing and cladding ranges. A new 'Marley' was formed to sell roof systems with concrete and clay tiles. Finally, in 2019 Marley was purchased by Inflexion Private Equity Partners. The Harrietsham Marley site is now home to several companies, including Marley Plumbing & Drainage: a December 2020 post on their web site

announced that they had been awarded the Best Plumbing and Drainage system or product from Buildit awards for their “Foundry Finish Rainwater System”. As the website puts it: “The Marley brand is recognised throughout the world, offering innovative solutions for the construction industry”. Sir Owen would have been delighted to see that the name he coined from the Harrietsham farm his firm stood on has continued for almost a century.

Conclusion

The history of Marley is dominated by that of a single family, as indeed are so many of the background stories we have been tracing for our web site. A mixture of hard work, keen business acumen, determination and perhaps a measure of old-fashioned good luck enabled the first Owen Aisher and his descendants to create a thriving company that was so successful that it became very desirable to major international investment companies. However, as the quote from the current company’s website shows, the retention of the Marley name through all the changes in ownership and management is proof of the respect in which the original Marley-made products were held. We look forward to their centenary in 2024!