

In 1996, John McCabe and Paulette Burns set about on research on the former Chivers and then Reckitt and Colman factories – fondly known as The Jam Factory – that were located at today's WIN Business Park in Newry. Mr McCabe recalls one of the town's biggest employers and its eventual demise.

Looking back at Jam Factory life

Known locally as the Jam Factory, when it closed in 1974 it represented the end of an era for hundreds of local workers at the Canal Quay site. Sadly, the factory owners pulled out of the town at the height of the Troubles.

For over 40 years, first Chivers, then Reckitt and Colman, produced mashed potato powder, baby food and jellies for export. Ironically, the jam that gave the business its local nickname, was never made in Newry.

Hundreds of people gained direct or indirect employment thanks to the factory.

Chivers originally came to the area in 1945 because a neighbouring firm from Histon, Cambridgeshire, Thompson and Norris Packaging, operated in Warrenpoint later to supply the Jam Factory.

Following the end of WWII, Berlin was surrounded by Russian forces and food in the German capital was scarce.

The Newry factory's main contract was to supply Germans with mashed potato powder that was dried on the premises with steam powdered machinery and exported to the continent.

Englishman Donald Horner was manager at the factory at this stage.

He died suddenly in his Rostrevor home in the early 1960s and was replaced by a Mr Brunning.

While management was brought from England, the bulk of workers came from Newry and Mourne, resulting in many close friendships formed through the years.

Newry woman Eileen Reavey nee Murphy worked in the factory for over 20 years, first on the factory floor, then as wages clerk.

One of her then-colleagues was Marie McCormack, whom went on to marry former SDLP councillor Jim McCart.

Eileen recalled in our interviews in 1996 that the factory women had to take hygiene precautions by wearing hair bands known as glamabands – at one stage they also had to wear clogs!

Mary Gibbon nee Conlon worked for the factory for most of the time it was operating in Newry.

Her job was personnel and welfare officer and she revealed that the factory had a rest room and surgery with three nurses on stand-by at that doctors Flood, senior and junior, visited the factory every month.

Mrs Gibbon's job also entailed employment of staff. The workers were on a three-shift system; either 6am-2pm, 2pm-10pm or 10pm-6am.

A total of 33 women and 10 men worked on every shift along with foremen, boiler men, canteen workers, laboratory workers, electricians and greasers.

Many Newry workers learned their trade at the factory, PJ Fegan, for example, joined the company around 1947 and served his time as an electrician under his seniors Bert Clarke from Killowen and Tony Carlin of Drumalane.

They were able to fulfil their duties with the help of local farmers who supplied the factory with the 150-200 tonnes of potatoes needed every week.

Between June and September attention switched to collecting fruit for use in baby food, jellies and sweet mince.

Temporary workers were employed to gather strawberries around the Kilkeel area.

During its time in Newry the factory had steadily expanded, but as the Troubles took its toll, Reckitt and Colman took the decision to pull out of the town, a major blow to the local community.

It is thought that the company lost at least one lorry a week because of hi-jacking and other incidents.

The cost was about £15,000 per lorry and the financial loss and spiralling insurance costs were the main reason of the company's decision to pull out.

Their decision, announced in May 1974, became effective on August 30 that year.

At the time, Newry and Mourne had a growing reputation of being a depressed, unemployment black spot, although a then shop steward called Tom McCoy was quoted as saying the workers had no complaint against Reckitt and Colman. Their concern, he said, was that the building might be used merely as storage space and that the hope of future employment would be lost.

At one stage in fact the workers had thought they might continue on the same site with a pet food company called Wayne Food Ltd.

The transfer of employment with continuity of benefits form many Reckitt and Colman workers was publically announced.

In the event, Wayne Food Ltd couldn't provide their continuity and it was reported that many of the employees were laid off and felt too ashamed to go to the Labour Exchange and for the first few weeks 'signed on' at the factory. After almost 40 years, the Jam Factory was closed.

Former employee Jim Brady, who sadly passed away a number of years after we interviewed him in 1998, first became involved with the factory after he settled in Newry following WWII.

He was to work there throughout the factory's life, becoming involved in the Pension Scheme that was introduced in 1961 when Reckitt and Colman bought over the business.

He had fond memories of his life at the factory, which had a cross-community nature.

Jim said: "We had Catholics and Protestants working there, mostly from Newry and Bessbrook, but it never became an issue and everyone seemed to get along."

The good atmosphere even stretched to relations between the employees and staff.

Commenting on manager Donald Horner, Jim added: "The bosses never looked down at anyone. If Mr Horner met a worker outside the factory he would always ask about their family and their health."

"Inside the factory he was always approachable and had a great sense of humour about practical jokes."

Jim remembered characters such as Jim McAlpine, who was known as the whistling Irishman, Big Daddy and the late John 'Sonny' Casey.

He was full of praise for Mary Gribbon the welfare officer and jokes about the glamabands the women had to wear.

Following the closure of the factory, fears that the Canal Quay site would fall into permanent disuse prevailed, in the event the Newry and Mourne Co-operative Ltd formed two years earlier in 1972 proved to be a saviour of sorts.

The co-op launched ambitious plans to buy the Jam Factory, later creating there the first managed workspace, not only in the UK, but also in the world.

A total of £100,000 was needed to purchase the 72,000 sq ft site and subsequent fundraising efforts witnessed almost the whole community rallying together in a campaign entitled WIN (Work in Newry).

A total of £65,000 was raised in a share capital with 600 local people and former factory workers subscribing between £100 and £1,000.

The Allied Irish Bank and LEDU provided the rest of the cash to ensure the co-op could buy the site.

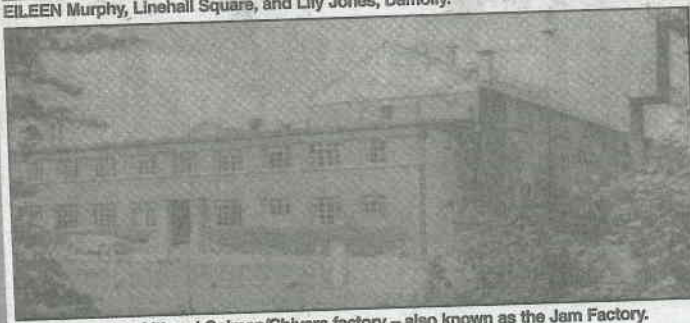
The sub-divided units on the premises have since proved attractive for many small businesses and the successful WIN Business Park story continues to this day.



EILEEN Murphy, Linehall Square, and Lily Jones, Damolly.



BILLY Balintine from Bessbrook with two former employees.



THE former Reckitt and Colman/Chivers factory – also known as the Jam Factory.



CHIVERS' employees.