

## **ASPRO HISTORY**

### **The beginning of Aspro**

It all began as an explosion with a stunned and shocked body staggering from a backroom of a small chemist's shop. It was in Windsor, not in England, but in a suburb of Melbourne, Australia during the first few months of World War 1.

The man was George Nicholas. With the dangers of the first experiment, George was relieved to regain his sight and not be blinded for life. The second attempt led him to be badly gassed and still he survived.

The quest to invent a safe, effective pain reliever and healer had been set because of 2 factors:

1) patients taking salicylic acid had sensitive stomachs and complained of gastric discomforts and nausea. Salicylic acid a comparatively simple derivative of phenol, containing 2 active principles of willow extracts and the oil of wintergreen, which was a traditional embrocation for relieving muscular stress.

2) at the outbreak of World War 1, the Germans had patented Aspirin with over 2 years to run. However the war brought a release from this situation, it was a time of emergency and men were forced to take what they needed and balance the books when peace was restored.

The priorities of other Western European nations, including Britain, were the deficits of their organic chemical reserves, the ones that went 'bang'. In the meantime producing enough Aspirin for their own needs, with no surplus, was proving a hard struggle.

### **Aspro's key men**

#### **George Nicholas**

Born 1884 in Majorca, a small gold mining town, Victoria, Australia. His father was an enterprising Cornish miner and after a pit disaster in 1861, he emigrated with his family to Australia. George's childhood dream to qualify as a doctor was thwarted by illness and the early death of his father. The family finances were low and being one of 6 children, George's goal was reduced to an initial apprenticeship to a printer but later entered pharmacy to finally qualify and possess his own pharmacy. He was a great public benefactor, mainly educational but probably exceeded by his private and often anonymous gifts. George never forgot old friends, however lowly their station.

#### **Alfred Nicholas**

Born 1881 in the same town as his brother George. He too started work early and his studies were also interrupted by illness. His jobs varied as grocers' errand-boy, piano salesman, suburban shop manager, brick layer (an open air job for health reasons) and travelling salesman. In Melbourne Alfred established his own import agency, which he maintained until he united with George full time in the Aspro venture.

He was shy, teetotal, strictly principled, optimistic, ambitious, single-minded, a dour administrator and converted kitchen chemistry into a business. Alfred joined his brother in many benefactions, his own special interests being education, the Methodist church and the Seaman's Mission.

During the depression years, he undertook a project that provided employment to hundreds. This was the building of Burnham Beeches, named after the Burnham Beeches in Slough that we know so well

[http://www.parkweb.vic.gov.au/1park\\_display.cfm](http://www.parkweb.vic.gov.au/1park_display.cfm) a luxury home in extensive grounds, 25 miles east of Melbourne. In 1955 it was converted into the Nicholas Institute for Medical and Veterinary Research.

He was a keen gardener and developed one of the best orchid collections in Australia. His pride and joy, however, was his herd of Jersey stud cattle, which he also developed at Burnham Beeches, Australia.

### **George Davies**

Born 1882 in New Zealand of immigrant parents from England. They unfortunately died young and George was brought up by his uncle and gave him a first job in his draper's shop. Very soon George was working independently, with varying degrees of success and finally moved to Melbourne taking a job selling printing.

In 1917 he met Alfred and entered the world of the Nicholas brothers and remained to handle publicity. They gave him a contract to advertise Aspro with a commission of 1% on sales which was honoured throughout his active life. With the success of Aspro, George Davies earned a large income and spent with ease.

As an unknown outsider he made a marked impression on the world of pharmaceuticals, with another big bang. He was a high-energy advertising man, ablaze with ideas of a crazy genius, brash and almost uncontrollable. A rarity in his own time.

### **George Garcia**

Born in Melbourne, he was of Spanish and Jewish descent. He fought for Australia in the 1914-18 war and then became an officer in the Victorian tax department. He was of great intelligence and as a financial adviser gained specialised knowledge of company taxation. George Garcia joined F J Davey to found an auditing and financial advisory partnership, which soon became involved in helping the Nicholas brothers with early investments and organising their company structure.

His friendship with Alfred had been close however it ended because of Alfred's abnormal fears about money, even though the company was successful.

### **1924 – UK Aspro market launch**

George Garcia sets sail from Australia to investigate the American and British markets, on instruction from the Nicholas brothers. Although America was the priority, he stopped off in England and during this time arranged a display of the Aspro product at the Empire Exhibition in Wembley and researched the UK market. The prospects looked good and he relayed this back to Australia. Alfred and George agreed, the first big push would happen in the UK.

It was a time of depression for Britain, with 2m people on the dole and millions of others on low income. Aspirin, was popular and widely sold at low prices and trading laws were strict. These difficulties did not deter George Garcia.

Launch regions were established in Lancashire and Yorkshire with a headquarters in Manchester and large stocks of Aspro were shipped into England. The launch did not go well so George Garcia suggested pinpointing to a town and Hull was chosen. In the meantime Alfred Nicholas joined the struggle and moved to Bromley, Kent with all his family.

Prices were as follows:

- 1<sup>st</sup> pack in UK – 25 tablets for 1s 3d (6p) became too much for ordinary people
- 2<sup>nd</sup> pack in UK – 10 tablets for 6d (2.5p)

George Davies promoted the Hull campaign and it was a complete success, so much so there followed one in Leeds. However it was not all smiles, the hardships continued. Competitors were annoyed and Customs & Excise officials invoked an old Stamp Duty Act, which required a levy to be paid on medicines sold through outlets other than chemist shops.

This meant a 50% tax – a 3d stamp (1.25p) for every 6d (2.5p) packet sold.

The campaign carried on and extended nationally with a permanent HQ established in London.

### **1927 – Slough Aspro Production Commences**

Customs & Excise officials eased the stamp duty to only be paid on each wholesale packet instead of the 6d across the counter.

Then a bizarre fortune struck in the form of influenza and sales rose. This caused unrest with the Australian employees working in the UK, who were homesick and missing their families.

George Garcia returned to London on a semi-permanent basis and became Chairman and MD. He had 2 important policy decisions to make a) to find and rent a factory b) to end Australian made Aspro imports and start production in the UK. He chose a factory site on Slough Trading Estate and sent for George Rowson to install the machines.

On 11<sup>th</sup> August the first Aspro tablets came off the production line and on 22<sup>nd</sup> November UK sales were ahead of Australia, staging a market 10 times bigger. That winter another epidemic attacked the population, this time the viral Asian flu. Slough factory stocks were drained and an extra 12 million tablets a week were needed with much overtime for the employees

At this time, patented medicines were increasingly open to public criticism. Key newspapers became wary of their advertisements being false and including doubtful claims. One of Aspro's earlier ads was refused, however with the speedy reaction of Aspro management inviting the press to despatch their own experts to the Slough factory, all tests resulted in favourable reports. Needless to say there were no future problems of this kind, the confidence of the Aspro people surpassed.

### **1958 – Bath Road Factory**

George Garcia acquired a piece of land on the Bath Road pre World War 2. Plans and models were drawn up for a new and innovative factory. Whilst the war was raging all development came to a halt as the 'non-essential' business classification prevailed. Aspro managed to extend their existing canteen facilities as they were providing even more lunches for employees from other smaller factories on the Trading Estate. Because of this Aspro were entitled to extra food rations.

It was to be long after the war the new factory was built. John Jamison (known as Jack in Australia) took on the job and overcame many difficulties. A public right of way crossed the site and there were legal arguments to move it to the side. There followed planning investigations and delays. Plus Dr Francis Chilson, an American Consulting Engineer, was not on good terms with the architect. The Board grew restless and doubted whether it could be afforded.

By the summer of 1958, the Bath Road factory was completed and it did not resemble in any way the original ideas. It had modern, up-to-date concepts with a similarity to the Dublin site and the Chadstone factory in Melbourne, Australia., however it wasn't a carbon copy. The factory was larger than 250k sq. ft. with the front wing consisting of more glass than wall, a reception, conference rooms and

executive offices. The Slough factory became one of the first British examples of a 'windowless' factory, relying to a large extent on artificial light and ventilation. Aspro created a room of beauty that was the fitter's shop. It was called the 'deep blue room' and housed the building and overhauling of the production machines. Additional services included lighting, air conditioning, sound-proofing, thermal insulation and telephone points, with the imaginative use of decorative materials all around

An important part of the Nicholas philosophy was to always care for its staff. Everything was planned to integrate convenience with great flexibility and to give the feel good factor. Aspro wanted a place of work that was physically and psychologically conducive to its employees. They introduced sports fields and incentive schemes from a very early stage. Conventional canteens, cafeterias and locker rooms existed however those facilities were expanded to spacious, happy and relaxing staff lounges, flowers, fountains, courtyards and lawns. The architectural press gave rave reviews.

Before any groundwork started on the production lines, carefully planned models, with attention to every detail, were created. The lines were U-shaped and proved to be highly efficient. This allowed orderly, one-level flow from the raw materials to the finished products, with a single warehouse and single production area. The raw materials, the main being acetylsalicylic acid, were not manufactured at Slough, that belonged to the specialists. The focus was on the before and after e.g. R & D, purity control, packaging, distribution and most importantly tableting. It has been quoted "An Aspro Plant is of a hailstorm of healing"

The Slough factory was making an impressive contribution to the national economy by its high productive capacity. Drug exports were no small item in the national balance sheet. As in the Australian factory in Chadstone, Aspro visions of expansion of up to 100% were provided for in the original designs. The growth was dependent on the research department.

### **Oswald Quinn**

Ossie, as he was popularly known, came to Slough from Chorley, Lancs, in 1926. He joined the Bucks Constabulary as a police officer and eventually worked for Aspro in 1934 initially as a chief investigator and during his 15 years there, was promoted to assist the MD, Mr F S Allwright.

Whilst working for Aspro his drive and energy and amazing organising ability, contributed greatly to the establishment of the annual Slough & Windsor District Holiday Carnival. This was part of the summer event, Holidays at Home with Mr Allwright, forming the first committee. Ossie was the secretary and continued till 1954 and was also one of the founders and secretary for the All Good Causes Fund. One of his work colleagues, Norman Blackman once said, 'Ossie Quinn was a chap with a wonderful flair for organisation and one who could get on with a job and ensure it was done'.

Ossie was awarded the British Empire Medal for his services as chief of the Navy, Army and Air Force Institute (NAAFI) Investigation Branch.

The prime responsibility of the organisation was to stop the stealing of supplies allocated to the forces. Shortly after Dunkirk, unfortunately severe amounts of goods destined for the troops and various depots in the UK made their way onto the black market causing the NAAFI to expand rapidly.

Ossie had worked for the NAAFI in peacetime and now his services were desperately needed. So the NAAFI approached Aspro for his loan. Aspro agreed and the NAAFI Investigation Branch was created. Ossie's team of men were at ports or

covering journeys of valuable loads from manufacturers, not only in the UK but also in N Africa, Egypt, Italy, Iceland and NW Europe. Another of Ossie's wartime activities was as a lieutenant with the Trading Estate Home Guard unit. After Ossie left Aspro he went into farming for some years at Winkfield and Brock Hill Farm, Warfield. He died, aged 61 at his home in Albert Street, Slough.

## **The memories of Eileen Lightfoot – nee Eustace**

### **Working Life**

Having left school at an early age and before World War 2, Eileen went directly to work at Aspro. She worked as a junior office clerk and was able to use her typing skills learnt at school and shorthand from the evening classes she had attended. When the war started, as people were taken away for service, more employment opportunities arose and Eileen moved to the director's office as an assistant secretary and subsequently promoted to the MD's secretary, working for an Australian called Mr F Allwright.

In her time she had the privilege to meet Maurice Nicholas, one of the owners' sons. In 1943 when George Garcia died, Eileen has a clear recollection, as she was on holiday in Wales and was notified by letter at the place she was staying.

As time went on Eileen became involved with the Aspro Sports & Social Club events that were staged and contributed with front of house and box office duties. The initial shows, before the war, were small reviews called "Aspro on Parade". They included members of staff presenting their hidden talents with two pianists accompanying, in the staff canteen. What splendid amusement for all.

During the latter years of the war, a certain portion of Eileen's working day was given to typing confidential reports for the NAAFI. This was her contribution to the war effort. She supported Ossie Quinn, previously a policeman in Slough, who came to work for Aspro and eventually was presented with a Queen's Award for being a detective for the NAAFI.

Eileen also belonged to the WRVS, based at Baylis House and was regularly required for fire watching duty on Slough Trading Estate. It was always in the middle of the night, accompanied by her colleague Jan Beevor, adorned with stylish tin helmets and the echoing sounds of guns being fired. They were both scared and as Eileen states 'I wouldn't think of doing it now for all the tea in China'

### **Slough Unity during World War 2**

How different the businesses ran during World War 2. All the factories on the Slough Trading Estate worked in conjunction with each other. Senior directors from companies such as Aspro, Horlicks, High Duty Alloys and Coopers Mechanical Joints all were very friendly with each other with no sign of competition around. They helped support the Aspro Sports & Social Club, however the latter remained a complete unit in the production of shows.

As the war progressed more men and women enlisted, and many had to leave the Aspro. Eileen was fortunate as she was still too young. c1941 the powers to be decided that Aspro would be classed as a 'non-essential' business. The Aspro directors were to make themselves invaluable to Slough as a town and community. They had to satisfy the Board of Trade and Ministry of Labour (not existent in present day UK) that they were gainfully employing people who were useful to the community.

Generally people involved with amateur dramatics were of a progressive nature and once the intentions of Aspro were announced, workers who could sing,

dance, or play an instrument were clambering to join and be employed by the company. Aspro Sports & Social Club also attracted workers drafted in to companies such as Satchwells, High Duty Alloys and P B Cow, who were 'essential' businesses to the war, to come and rehearse after they had finished work. It was even known that some of these women, after the war, came back to work for Aspro.

On reflection Eileen Lightfoot felt the war had made a difference to people, to help them move forward with their lives and with a greater capability. Joint co-operation and friendliness between the employees and the owners of the companies became a natural way of life.

Aspro wasn't the only entertainment provider; the Community Centre played a great role, for example concerts in their big hall; Horlicks, another key employer of the town, had their own dramatic society and specialised in Gilbert and Sullivan productions. All communicated with each other to avoid any overlapping of performances.

### **Aspro Pantomime**

During the early part of 1941, war having broken out, the Aspro Sports & Social Club produced their first pantomime in the Public Hall in Slough High Street, opposite the Post Office. This was already a central place of different forms of amusement including wrestling, provided by James Elliman, a person truly supporting Slough. Eileen recalls, as a young person in her teens, 'it was very dusty and primitive' however it was popular and successful.

The Aspro Sports Club, sited on Buckingham Avenue where the original factory was built, had two hard, tennis courts, a pavilion, two squash courts with shower facilities. There was use of further sports fields in the surrounds of Furnival Avenue. The Club was a very strong element of Aspro and all staff were obliged to join and contribute in any way possible, definitely with the annual pantomimes, that eventually moved to the new, improved staff canteen.

### **Aspro Holidays at Home**

In 1942, World War 2 in full force, it was decided by the Aspro Sports & Social Club to organise a new summer idea called 'Slough & Windsor, Holidays at Home'. Ossie Quinn was appointed to undertake the lead with the assistance of Norman Blackman, the Club Secretary, an active member who easily encouraged Aspro employees to participate.

Dances were arranged in all parts of Slough, including the Adelphi and local village halls, in the endeavour to find and crown a carnival queen. About six young ladies were chosen to compete and introduce themselves, as in a traditional beauty contest. Unfortunately Eileen was not permitted by her parents to attend, she was too young.

The result was a carnival procession through Slough on August Bank Holiday with the incoronated queen and local tradesmen joining the display. It was not just the Aspro employees supporting, all the residents of Slough and the Mayor and Town Hall staff shared the responsibilities of enjoyment, at a serious time in history, where lives were being continually lost and families torn apart. The carnival was a tremendous success and the real underlying purpose was to raise funds for Slough Hospital, as in those days the NHS was not in operation. From this the 'All Good Causes Fund' was created.

'Holidays at Home' continued for fifteen years and was conducted on Agars Plough playing fields at Eton College with additional support of the college's authorities.

### **Troop concerts**

They were either accommodated at Aspro's staff canteen, where barrels of beer were obtained as refreshments for the men. Or as small teams of selected artistes formed concert parties, they would travel out to surrounding army camps, straight after their working day. Norman Blackman, the social club secretary, liaised with the army officer, ushering him into Aspro's offices and swiftly closing the doors, ordinary mortals kept at bay. These venues were top secret and not to be spoken about, although everyone knew they were close by. Possibilities were Dorney Wood on the Beaconsfield Road and Burnham Beeches. Army buses were a frequent sight on Slough roads as were the existence of aircraft batteries.

Eileen remembers an Aspro employee called Freddy Knope, who eventually took film shows for the troops to watch.

### **Slough Social Fund & Social Centre**

Slough Estates were as prominent in Slough during Eileen's time as they are now. Since the 1920's workers from the Slough Trading Estate had been living in an area known as Timbertown, located off the Farnham Road. The residents were applying pressure for a social centre to be built.

In June 1936, Sir Noel Mobbs of Slough Estates founded the Slough Social Fund. He realised success of the Trading Estate depended upon the well-being of its workers as well as its industry. Monies were gathered to support Slough Council Social Service, who also worked in conjunction with the Slough 'All Good Causes Fund'. All the directors were very approachable and amalgamated their ideas.

In April 1937, the Social Centre was opened, a great innovation and one of the first and best in the country, bringing all the residents of Slough together. The official opening took place with a visit from King George VI and Queen Elizabeth (The Late Queen Mother).

The social centre had a Latin motto. It reads 'alter ipse amicus' which translates 'another friend is another self' and illustrates the friendly and caring nature on which the social centre was founded. The more well known statement and principle is 'People of every creed and every walk of life are welcomed'. The Centre of the current day continues to use this and identifies with Slough today. History was brought full circle when it was opened by Sir Nigel Mobbs, grandson of Sir Noel Mobbs, in July 1998.

### **Sports activities**

However this new plot of land did not go to waste. Aspro set-up super sports fields with grass and hard courts and a bowls green. People from miles around came to play there.

A cricket club was formed and the team consisted of important players. The grounds man, previously a county cricket player, was expert in green maintenance.

One lady provided all the teas for all the male players in a large white marquee that had been erected. However certain girls including Eileen wanted tea as well. They literally had to pull their weight by hauling a massively heavy roller up and down the pitch, to earn their refreshments and sit with the men in the marquee.

## **End of an Era**

Eileen left 10<sup>th</sup> May 1950 and still possesses her letter of resignation. She had been married for a couple of years and it suited her purpose to leave. She feels that her time at Aspro, in spite of the war, had been the best times.

## **The memories of Cynthia Kite nee Smith**

### **Working Life**

It was 1950 and Cynthia was 15 years old. She was introduced to Aspro by her sister Evelyn and started work in the mailroom on Buckingham Avenue, where most young girls commenced working life. It was common for families, especially the females, to work at Aspros. During her first year she was taught how to type, as well as opening, sorting and delivering the post to all the departments. Cynthia found it interesting and a quick way to get to know everybody. It was a long day with an 8am start and finishing at 5.30pm.

Cynthia eventually moved to the accounts department of about 5 women, through the encouragement of Evelyn who had previously worked there. Pat Graham was the manager in charge and lived in Stoke Poges. They did the wages, sales and purchase ledger, typing cheques and using National Cash Register machines (NCR). Aspros canteen had continued its high quality standards, run at that time by Stan Haines and Cynthia recalls the NCR engineer always planning his visit at lunch times to get a free meal. A man named Freddy Knope, who was in charge of the mailroom would accompany Cynthia to the bank on the Trading Estate, to collect the cash for the wages.

Cynthia met her future husband, Tony Kite, at a works Cricket Club event, he too was working in the accounts department.

Aspro proved to be an equal opportunities company by employing a telephonist, called Les, who was totally blind. He received special training by St. Dunstons, for Aspro's very antiquated telephone system. When someone rang in a disk would descend, Les would feel this and then plug into a socket. Cynthia and her friend, Marion, would be the lunchtime relief. Les recognised everyone's voices and when attending the dances would say 'Is that Cynthia', followed with a cuddle, which he enjoyed with all the young girls. He was a popular man and Les's wife, who worked in the factory, was quite tolerant and happy. When Aspro updated the system consisting of lights, obviously Les could no longer operate. However they redeployed him to the typing pool surrounded by females, so he was even more in his element.

Time keeping was monitored closely and when Cynthia and her colleagues arrived in the morning they would have to pass Mrs Newman. If you happened to be late, she would give you a form to complete. Tony Kite was always late and would create the 'silliest of excuses', eg caught in traffic in Eton High Street. Although it was one way over the bridge and it did get congested, but Tony always started his journey late, so he was never going to combat. The form was little, but Tony was able to write a short story front and back. Tony had his own car, whereas Cynthia relied on the bus. Mrs Newman would say 'You're always late, Tony, not like your girlfriend, who's always early'. It was not just for work, Tony many times kept Cynthia waiting for a date and her mother was always quick to remark.

During Cynthia's time, she moved to the new site on the Bath Road. She had thought it would be quite chaotic, however the organisation and precision was fantastic. On the Friday, all the office staff were asked to label all their belongings and on Monday morning they arrived to find everything in its place.



After 12 years of working at Aspro, Cynthia left as she was pregnant with their first child. She hadn't enjoyed knitting and remembers one of the girls making a shawl for the baby.

### **Social Events**

Cynthia recalls pantomimes, Xmas and New Year dances, sports competitions, individual office parties and block bookings for London shows. On one occasion they saw Bob Hope at the Palladium and one of the staff got 'tiddly', and proceeded to fall asleep and provide a musical accompaniment of snoring loudly. At the dances, the focus remained on actually dancing with a proper band playing. Before Cynthia worked at Aspro she was attending these events as Evelyn would sell programmes and bring home tickets.

Cynthia remembers:

Middleton Burn, was a conjuror and when on stage, he appeared immaculate donning a white suit with bow-tie. In the office, working in statistics, his dress code was somewhat different and wore large horn-rimmed spectacles. He was always rubbing his hands, possibly keeping them supple for his magic tricks. His wife, Kathleen, although not working for Aspro, would appear as principal boy on stage.

There were summer cricket matches with teams from the factory and office staff. There was a certain amount of rivalry between the 2, however all remained friendly. Albert Hayhurst, the grounds man would take time out to coach the ladies, who were allowed to bowl underarm. Albert was a professional cricket player and played for Warwickshire.

The main Aspro cricket team consisted of a majority of Bucks county players with only about 3 company employees. The pitch was in excellent condition, fit enough for the Slough team to play on.

Summer outings were a plenty and on one occasion Cynthia recollects going to Bournemouth for the day. Everyone would meet at Slough train station and this included employees from other Slough factories. The men took easily to drinking beer at the beginning of the trip and the rattling of bottles could be heard in many corridors. Unfortunately the British weather was miserable and the focus remained on eating and drinking. A photo appeared in the regular Aspro newsletter with the caption of 'Is everyone happy – obviously not'.

Another time, 1958, they went to Torquay. All the girls were able to sit with the married male engineers, exchanging innocent, light-hearted banter and fun. They decided to visit Babbacombe by bus and happily forgot about the time. It was late and instead of a return by bus they took a boat round the bay. Cynthia sat in the back and got absolutely soaked. There followed a very long walk or rather desperate running, to catch the train home.

At lunchtime one could play table tennis. Tony Kite, Cynthia's husband, and his friend Ted Foreman, proved to be fine players. They found Cynthia not to be as good and couldn't resist having a laugh at her efforts. Also there was a piano and Dave Alderman would tinkle the ivories whilst people sat and ate their lunch.