

Chapter XV - John Bell's business interests in the 1870s.

IN 1873 John leased more land near the Pottery to Norman & Copeland (97) and in 1874 the Govan Tube Company took sasine of land in Ibrox, next to the railway line. (98) This is in the south side of Glasgow in the parish of Govan which presumably accounts for the name. The reasons which induced John Bell to take this step which led so far off the track he had trodden up to now will probably never be known but it must be remembered that founding the Pottery had been a similar step into a new field. A possible help and adviser for him would be his cousin by marriage, David Corse Glen, who was an engineer in the pipe-founding business of Glen & Ross. John Bell's manager in the new business, Mr. Jeffrey, seems to have been very efficient also. In January 1875 all the other partners of the Govan Tube Company withdrew leaving John Bell as sole partner and he carried the works on until his death. (99) The manager made innovations in the techniques used which made tube-making easier and less expensive.

Alexander Moore, the trustee on John Bell's sequestrated estate after John Bell died in 1880 was to claim that the Govan Tube Works had lost a lot of money over the years and had cost John Bell dearly. It seems unlikely that John Bell would have carried the company on for so long if his losses were large and it was noticeable that Moore was able to make money from it though the sale, which was easy, did not cover the debts of the business, mainly on the capital for founding it, which had been borrowed. It is possible that Moore was simply trying to make his administration look good. He certainly tried to do this deliberately in his reports to the commissioners on the estate in order to influence them into increasing his pay, but they were skeptical and he was unsuccessful. The Govan Tube Works brought £21,000 into the realised estate after John Bell's death but all of this went to the Union Bank.

In September 1876 two Glasgow businessmen called John Innes Wright and William Scott, both general merchants, who were already in business as partners in Glasgow as John Innes Wright & Co., formed a commission business in London under the same name. They were traders in a variety of goods, muslins being a speciality. In March 1877 John Bell joined them in partnership in the London business only and the three formed a new firm in Rangoon under the name William Scott & Co. (100) The co-partnership was due to last for five years. An article in the contract stated that in the event of any of the partners becoming insolvent or bankrupt then the business would devolve upon the partners who remained solvent.

In October 1878 the City of Glasgow Bank crashed and both Mr. Wright and Mr. Scott, banking with it, became insolvent and they withdrew from the businesses in London and Rangoon, again leaving John Bell as sole partner. He immediately renamed the Rangoon business as Bell & Co. and removed the London firm to Glasgow and called it J. Bell & Co. The City of Glasgow Bank immediately made claims which John Bell resisted and the case was sub judice when John Bell died. It is probable that John Innes Wright and William Scott had made the joint firm liable for some of the debts of their own firm without John Bell's knowledge. His estate trustee carried the case on however and won and the City of Glasgow Bank got nothing.

The Rangoon business was fairly large, over 12 acres. The premises were called Dunnidaw and included a shipbuilding yard and a sawmill and timber yard, a tannery and several elephant houses with elephants and coolies. Mr. John Binning was the resident in Rangoon. The trade carried on was general but included hides from Burma and muslins from Scotland and the business was prosperous.

From the year 1830, by a lucky chance, we have some information about Bells' export trade as well as that of a one or two other Glasgow potteries. In that year the Pottery Gazette printed a list of pottery and glass exports from the Port of Glasgow, in addition to those from the Port of

London. Most of these exports came from retail firms but J. & M.P. Bell & Co. is well represented, though sometimes as J.P.Bell or J. & P. Bell! The '1' in each entry may represent lb. wt. rather than sterling. In December 1679 the destinations were: Buenos Aires (£357), Monte Video (£251), Rangoon (£230) and St. Kitts. In February 1880 destinations were Mauritius (£60), Rangoon (£475), Rio Grande de Sul (£60) and Singapore (£355). In April the destinations are: Bombay (£72), Genoa (£17) and again Rangoon (£920). In June: Batavia (£609), Bombay (£85) and Penang & Singapore (£263). In August: Adelaide (£142), New York (£59) and Singapore (£267). In December: Batavia & Sourabaya (£606) and Rangoon (£990). After this the entries stop. The unique entry for Adelaide emphasises the fact that there is very little evidence for any Scottish exports to Australia. But the trade to the whole area of South-East Asia and the Indian subcontinent seems to be very well established both for Bells' and the Cochran potteries.

It is clear that although well over sixty years of age and suffering from the disease that eventually killed him, John Bell was not expecting to retire and take things easily. In fact from the scope of his collecting in his last years, It is perhaps legitimate to see him as fairly frantically trying to increase his income so as to increase his collection.

