

Ballington Hosiery Mills

In August 1925 the Ballington Hosiery Mill opened in Fleetville on the site of the old Fleet Works. The factory was the first to mass produce silk stockings in the country and between 1925 – 1967 millions of stockings were made and sent out worldwide.

The story of Ballito starts in America with the Kotzin brothers, Alexander, and Charles. The brothers had an import business, bringing American silk stockings into the United Kingdom and selling them on. Their family had made its money through cotton mills, exploiting the cheap slave labour on plantations and child labour in its factories. By the time the brothers were working however their focus was on import and export.

In 1925 the Chancellor, Winston Churchill, announced new import tariffs on all silk and artificial silk materials and products. These new tariffs, based on the value of silk goods rather than their weight, would have hit the brother's business hard so they decided to start manufacturing the stockings in the United Kingdom themselves. They selected a site in St Albans, close enough to London for easy transport but away from other textile manufacturers so they could bring in their own experts from America and Ballito was born.

The early days

The Kotzin brothers' success started with the development of techniques to make fine gauged ladies' stockings from pure or artificial silk. These were developed in America after the First World War and the brothers brought fourteen experts over from Ballington Mills in East Tennessee to train their new, local, staff. Mr Edward McMillan was one and became Superintendent of the mill (others returned to America)

1929 the company went public as Ballington Hosiery Limited and within a few hours, shares were oversubscribed. The stockings were marketed under the name Ballito, taken from the original Ballington name.

The factory was equipped with state of the art machinery, including new machines for fully fashioned and seamless stockings as they were developed. There was an air-purifying plant on site so that a constant temperature and humidity could be maintained, and Ballito took pride in the inspection of all its stockings to ensure all their stockings were of a high standard.

In the 1930s there was another step forward with the introduction of nylon, and it was with this new material in fully fashioned hosiery that Ballito became a household name.

Selling the look

Charles Kotzin was a strong believer in the power of advertising and his focus is a large part of what helped Ballito flourish. According to his daughter, Berenice Mortimer, it was his wife Rose Kotzin who came up with the name and look of Ballito.

Rose took the company's original name, Ballington Hosiery Mills, and shortened it before elongating the double ll to look like legs. This strong image is visible on all the Ballito packaging and marketing material throughout the life of the company.

The company used newspaper and radio advertising, posters, shops displays and fashion shows to promote their goods but, knowing the connections between glamorous stockings and dancing, Charles Kotzin had a plan. In the late 1940s he commissioned Annette Mills to compose a new Ballito Tango called Slender Silken Ankles and the song was played on Radio Luxembourg and in ball rooms across the country.

The company also employed models as brand ambassadors including the locally born actress Anna Neagle (who can be seen in our Portrait of St Albans display)

Ballito at war

When the Second World War began life at Ballito changed completely. Over the course of a few days the factory was converted from a hosiery mill to an ammunition factory. Frederick Kellard remembered them knocking holes in the walls to remove the old machinery and a new service road was built to take the heavier deliveries of steel.

The Ballito site was converted to manufacture Oerlikon shells. These were used to protect merchant ships and naval fleets as well as by the RAF. They could be fired at a rate of over 400 rounds a minute.

The employees were encouraged to compete in speed and accuracy. A shell could be made and ready for grinding in around 25 seconds and one woman was able to make 400 shells in an hour. By July 1944 they had manufactured 10 million shells and by the middle of 1945 20 million.

Because the work was vital war work the work was non-stop. There were three shifts a day and even when the air raid sirens went work didn't stop. An observation platform was installed on the roof of the factory, and they would only head to the shelter when the planes were overhead, and a buzzer was pressed.

The factory floor

Dorothy Pullen started work at the Ballito factory when she was 14 and described some of the roles she did.

“ [At first] I was turning stockings. You had a long pole with a ring on the end and you put the stocking in and pulled it down and pulled it off. We did it before it went into the dyeing... Then I went on to invisible mending. When the stockings... were inspected if they got a ladder well, we used to have to mend those and little holes. And mend them so that they was invisible.”

At first stockings were made by knitting a flat design, the two edges then had to be carefully matched together to sew a neat seam up the back. These were called fully fashioned. As circular knitting machines became better the factory also made semi-fashioned stockings which were made in the form of a tube.

All the stockings were carefully inspected, and flaws could be repaired with invisible mending, before being paired and carefully packed in a warehouse before being distributed. The packets of stockings all came with full instructions on how to care for your stockings to make them last.

Ballito Sports & Social Club

From the start of the company the Kotzins focussed on the welfare of their employees believing that this would increase their care for the business and therefore productiveness. In one of the early building extensions in 1935 a new social hall, billiard room and canteen were added to the site.

The canteen became the centre of many different activities including roller skating, ballroom dancing and record evenings. The Ballito Sports and Social Club arranged activities for employees and their families including coach outings and all kinds of sport from tennis and cricket to rifle-shooting and keep-fit.

During the 1950s the management negotiated with St Albans Council for the purchase of the final plot of available land on its Butterwick Wood factory estate east of Lyon Way. This land became the Ballito Sports Field with its own pavilion and full-time groundsman. Team sports and athletics kept the site busy, but there was also the occasional gala day.

The Saturday evening dances were particularly popular. During the war they were attended by soldiers billeted locally but they carried on throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. The dances are still recalled fondly by those who attended them.

The final days

During the late 1940s and 50s Ballito continued to expand. Nylon was beginning to replace silk and the workforce expanded to over 1000 people. A new factory was even opened in Earl Shilton, Leicestershire.

However, in the 1960s the company began to suffer from increased competition and a lack of financial investment. In the early days of the company the Kotzins had tried to stay away from large contracts which could make or break a company, but new management did not follow the same plan. Marks & Spencers had become a major customer and when they pulled out it was one of many factors which put the company in danger.

In 1966 Courtaulds moved to takeover the company. During the bidding process they offered assurances that hosiery would continue to be manufactured “in the St Albans area” but it quickly became clear that this was not their aim. By 1967 the factory had closed and almost all its staff were made redundant.

Marconi Ltd had premises on the site since the Second World War and they took over the site with a plan to develop it, but they were refused planning permission and in 1979 the factory was pulled down. The site is now Morrisons supermarket, but the nursery built for Ballito mothers is still an important part of local life as the Fleetville Community Centre.