



Godalming's wool history and the Alan Paine story

BACK IN 1907, GODALMING was the birth place of one of the world's most famous quality knitwear brands – Alan Paine – and here we uncover Godalming's historical links with the wool trade and the highlights of the company's history right up to the present day.

Exactly when the woollen industry came to the town no one really knows, but in the reign of



Top: The first knitting floor in the 1930s
Left: The label found in George Mallory's sweater from his 1924 Everest attempt
Below: The first make up floor in the 1930s
Bottom: An aerial view of the factory – now the site of Sainsbury's



Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) its importance as a woollen centre was recognised by the inclusion of a wool sack in the town's coat-of-arms.

Alan Paine Knitwear started in Godalming in 1907 when William Paine bought a tailor's shop; he found two old hand-knitting machines in the back of the shop and taught himself to knit. Within a few years his hobby became a business with him developing some of the first cable-knit sweaters ever produced. He sold these to local cricket clubs, incorporating each club's colours into bespoke club sweaters and the style soon became famous throughout the UK.

Before long, he was doing such a thriving trade that he gave up tailoring altogether and concentrated on knitting, with a staff of 30 local workers to help him.

Some very famous patrons

After the First World War there was an ever-increasing demand for the white cable sweaters from cricket, tennis, rowing and other sports clubs. The Prince of Wales – later to become Edward VIII - even ordered some for his personal use, to be finished in his own regimental colours.

In June 1924, George Mallory made his now famous - and failed - attempt to climb the North East

ridge of Everest. When his body was recovered in 1999 he was wearing a Paine's sweater – with the label still intact!

By the outbreak of the Second World War, Paines had gained such an unrivalled reputation for the quality of its workmanship that the company was commissioned to make woollen sweaters for Britain's armed forces, particularly the Navy.

A new image for a new era

After the war, William's son Alan took over the business and the business took on its new identity – Alan Paine of Godalming. A true entrepreneur, Alan Paine's re-launched business became one of the first UK government-sponsored companies to embark on a post-war export scheme and, in the early 1950s, he travelled to the USA.

This was the first of many trans-Atlantic voyages for Alan as the business grew. This growth was rapid and by the early 1960s sound trading relationships had been established with all the major US department stores, notably Bloomingdales, Macy's, Neiman Marcus and Brooks Brothers. Today the business still knits an exclusive range for SAKS, Fifth Avenue.



HRH Prince of Wales – later Edward VIII – wearing an Alan Paine golf sweater

In the 1970s Alan's two sons - Richard and Nigel - joined him in the business and the focus moved to developing the European market. A unique partnership with a key

Scandinavian distributor was created, which continues to this day, and other agencies were established in Italy, Spain, France and Germany. The company continued to flourish, with its products and the 'Alan Paine' name being synonymous with quality and style.

A new riverside factory was opened in 1965 and, at its peak, four hundred skilled people worked there, with two hundred more in our other factories in Nottingham and Wales. Between them, they made over 700,000 garments each year. Not surprisingly, the business was awarded several Queen's Awards for Export.

In the early 90s, the Godalming factory site was sold off to Sainsbury's and the factory moved to Wales, leaving only the factory shop – the Alan Paine Outlet Store located in Brighton Road – as the final link to Godalming's ancient wool tradition.

A worldwide brand for the 21st century

During difficult trading times in the 1990s, the business was bought out by a series of retail conglomerates and, as a result, the factory shop in Brighton Road was



Local artist Kevin Gorton's newly-commissioned 'history of Alan Paine' watercolour

closed for a short while in 2004 when it was considered surplus to requirements.

Thankfully the shop's manager at that time, ex-Mayor of Godalming and long-time employee of Paines (47 years!), Colin Beattie decided it was too important a link with the past to be lost and he reopened the store with his business partner Vanessa Lanham. Together they have worked hard to bring the store up to date and to continue offering Alan Paine's outstanding range at rock-bottom prices to its local audience.

"We have a fantastic relationship with Alan Paine Knitwear and they still supply us as their factory outlet, despite being completely independent of them," explained

Colin. "I'm delighted to say that the main business is back in private ownership with one of my old colleagues from Alan Paine at the helm, which makes me certain that the brand is in very safe hands for many years to come and this important piece of Godalming's history remains intact."

To commemorate its strong links with the town, Colin & Vanessa recently commissioned local artist Kevin Gorton to capture its history on canvass and are delighted with the painting he has produced, the original of which can be found in the shop in Brighton Road and is available to buy in gift card form.

Today Alan Paine sweaters can be bought all round the world with 95% of its production being exported abroad – most notably to the USA and Italy. Using only natural fibres and knitted to shape (ie. not cut from knitted fabric as with cheaper brands) Alan Paine sweaters are the best you can buy anywhere – and in Godalming you can buy them at nearly half price in the factory shop.

The Alan Paine Outlet Store can be found in Godalming's Brighton Road, next to SCATS. www.ap-outlet.co.uk



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