

Introduction

When I was ten I went away on a weeklong school trip. Into a pocket deep within my little suitcase my mother put fourteen rolls of *Refreshers*, a special stash, two rolls a day, to sustain me through this longest ever separation from family. I still think sometimes of those smooth, sweet cylinders. Back then, the early 1970s, my parents remained keen on rationing: no fizzy drinks, no TV on schooldays except Blue Peter and one treat out of the sweet tin after meals. So imagine my awe at A) being granted two whole rolls of *Refreshers* every day for a week and B) being given them all at once. Now I would have to manage my own rationing.

For many children, sweets are their first brush with conscious desire. Sweets shape their sense of longing. And, let's not forget, sweets deliver. Unlike a lot of things for a child, they provide what they promise. They give the hit. While later, much later, you learn the sluggard cost of that early rush, as a kid this means nothing. All that counts is the hit, the buzz, the fizz, the joy.

No wonder, then, that people revel in remembering their childhood sweets. They relish a rollcall of *Fruit Salad*, *Woppa Chews*, *Topps* and *Curly Wurlies*. Those old enough will talk of visits to the sweet shop, the wall of large jars, the tough choices thrust onto tiny shoulders, the twist on the paper bags to contain the delights decanted therein, the lovely lumps those bags formed in your school trouser pockets. Yes, this is nostalgia pure and uncut, but it's also a rekindling of that flame of desire, the lifeforce which adulthood is dedicated to coralling.

But as a child I had a secret up my sleeve. My uncle ran a sweet factory. In fact he ran several sweet factories – and he was the man who made the *Refreshers* and the *Black Jacks* and those huge Sharps Easter Eggs that arrived every Spring. My uncle John was not Willy Wonka, but he might have been. He was John Marks and his grandfather Sydney H Marks was one of the founders of Robertson & Woodcock, which became Trebor. My parents weren't of that family, my mother's sister had married into it, but I had a connection.

This doesn't mean my childhood was flooded with sweets. But I did get to visit the Trebor factory at Woodford in Essex, a glorious day of smells, haircaps and As Many Sweets As I Wanted. I only went there once – even factory visits were rationed – but I always thought I'd go back. And now I have, in a way, as I've written a book about it.

The story starts in 1907 when four bold men set up a small venture to boil sugar and make sweets. They lived in an economic wild west, a young city which had recently arisen on the marshland across the River Lee from the old East End of London. This new East End, around the boroughs of East Ham and West Ham, was ripe turf for plucky venturers. The young firm of Robertson and Woodcock pulled ahead of its many competitors by doing clever things: buying machinery from Germany, ditching horses for motorised delivery vans and grabbing the opportunities of wartime. It expanded constantly, first by building

more factory than by acquiring other firms. By the late forties it was a major confectioner. By the seventies it was Britain's biggest maker of sugar sweets. The family of one of its founders, Sydney Marks, steered most of this growth and controlled the firm. Then finally, in 1989, the Marks family sold Trebor to Cadbury. Though the brandname survived, the firm was finished.

As a company, Trebor has good tales to tell. How a mighty business emerges from tiny, uncertain beginnings. How a few ambitious people can shape the lives of many thousands. How its progress, like most progress, is haphazard, leaning on luck as much as guile or industry. How one family manages to keep its business private, and virtuous, even as it totters under the challenges of growth, competition and inner discord.

Beyond these personal stories, Trebor is also a story of Britain's industrial past. Its founders rode a wave of new technology, explored fresh ways of working, and pioneered new sales techniques and export activities. They coped with two world wars. They coped with the ensuing peace. They coped with times of plenty and times of poverty. And when it became hard for a private company to compete with global competitors, they sold the business, as decently as they could and much more decently than they needed.

Such stories are usually nostalgic. This, I'm afraid, is no exception. Back in 1936 Trebor sold 452 different lines. No wonder shopping was slower then; with products like *Harlequin Balls*, *Rhubarb Custard* and *Raspberry Dab Suckers*, it took ages just to read their names. Today the Trebor brandname has a higher share of the confectionery market than in 1936, but it achieves this with just four products: *Extra Strong Mints*, *Softmints*, *Softfruits* and *Extra Strong Mint Gum*. There's little excitement or desire in those names. They're plain, 'does what it says on the tin' sort of names. That is how today's Trebor brand is configured – a no nonsense mint brand designed primarily for adults.

Little surprise, buying sweets is less fun today. The supermarkets that control shopping and the global conglomerates that control food production prefer to limit choice. It's less work for them. So there are fewer names to choose from. And shopping for sweets is less a thoughtful process of selection than an efficient collection of the product pre-selected by our sub-conscious from the branding and marketing to which we've been subjected. Where once you waited for sweets to be weighed out, now you grab them while standing at the till. You don't think, you take.

And the latter story of Trebor the company is, in some ways, a mirror to this limiting of options, this coralling of desire. For where Trebor today is simply a brandname for mostly breath-freshening devices for adults, it was once so much more. No longer are there Trebor factories, Trebor employees, Trebor depots, Trebor sales vans, Trebor newsletters, Trebor works outings, Trebor darts teams or Trebor annual reports. Now Trebor is part of Cadbury, which is itself a bit of the global food behemoth Kraft Foods.

That said, the Marks family did their fair share of acquisition. Trebor bought up other sweet firms like Sharps, Clarnico and Maynards, each with their own

heritage, some which still exist as brandnames but none as industrial entities. So in one way there's nothing unusual about Trebor in the economic foodchain: it swallowed some others then got swallowed itself.

But what's lost today are the ideals of family ownership. Without public shareholders to satisfy, the Marks family could make decisions unthinkable today. As late as the 1980s they forbade night shifts at their new Colchester factory so workers might have better family life. They repeatedly reinvested profits rather than harvest them as dividends. And when they sold the company, they hunted down many ex-employees to give them, unbidden, a share of the gain.

As always, it's wise to resist rose-tinted spectacles. The great Sydney J Marks, father to my uncle John and his brother Ian, and the architect of much of Trebor's success, was an autocratic boss. He ran the firm like a fiefdom, with loyal consiglieri to provide advice but few external directors to get in his way. Sydney did not like trade unions and resisted their involvement in Trebor factories. Yet this wasn't simple union-bashing; rather, he didn't want anything to come between him and his beloved employees. As a result, working conditions – and loyalty to staff – were better than in most unionised plants. The despotism was benign.

Moreover, for a family so firmly in control, the Marks were strangely keen on exposing themselves to external scrutiny. They loved consultants. As early as 1936 they invited organisations such as The Institute for Industrial Psychology to probe their workings. Through the sixties and seventies Trebor pioneered management thinking from innovators such as the Tavistock Institute in London. In the 1980s their new Colchester factory gave more responsibility to workers on the production line, and flatter management structures, than most British industry had ever seen: no clocking in, no charge hands and one canteen for all.

This echoed a tradition across the confectionery industry, particularly within Quaker firms like Cadbury, Rowntree and Fry. Quakers try to set every decision within a moral context. They also tend to think long term. Cadbury's Bournville village, started in the 1890s to provide workers with decent housing and community, still sits more sturdily a hundred years later than many developments from the last decade or two. But Cadbury went public in 1962, Rowntree a lot earlier. By the time John and Ian Marks took over from their father Sydney in the 1970s, Trebor was one of few major British firms still under family control.

Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so corporate capitalism negates any perspective beyond profit. It also destroys anyone unwilling to mortgage themselves for growth. As a debt-averse, organically-focused family firm, Trebor could not survive in this new world of titanic global corporations. In 1989 it sold to Cadbury – already far from a family firm and later unable to resist being sucked into Kraft Foods.

If Trebor's four founders were young today, it's unlikely they would be attracted to the confectionery industry. They might rather work in digital media or some other field where there's still scope for enterprise and style. But back in the bustle of Edwardian London, it was an easy, exciting thing to boil some sugar, handwrap some sweets and then hustle them to local shops.

Which is where our story begins...