

**U DX339**

**Needlers Ltd,  
Chocolate Makers and Confectioners**

**1913-1954**

**Historical Background:**

The Company owed its existence to Frederick Needler, who was born at Arnold, Skirlaugh, near Hull, on 12 December 1864. The family name appears to have been mis-spelt, as Frederick was the son of George Needley, a paint factory employee, who died from typhoid in September 1872 aged 37. Frederick attended St John's School, Newland, in Hull. His first job in about 1878 at the age of 14 was in a tea and coffee warehouse in High Street. In the 1881 Census he is described as a grocer's apprentice. At the age of 18 he became a bookkeeper to Edward Buckton, who had a small manufacturing confectionery business near Paragon Station in Hull. In about 1886, using money from his mother, he bought this business for ?100. He moved the premises to Anne Street, where he is known to have had two staff - a sugar boiler and a boy named Watson. They had a horse and cart for making deliveries.

There were many firms of this type in Hull at the time, usually operating within a geographical range determined by the stamina of their horses. Frederick Needler soon moved into wholesaling, occupying various premises to the north of Paragon Station until he bought 9 and 11 Spring Street in 1898, which is when company records started to be produced.

In 1899-1900 there was a turnover of about £15000 and profit of £781 (about 5%). Production had reached about 10 tons per week. There were 10 female and 23 male employees producing over 200 different products, chiefly boiled sweets and toffees. The company also acted as wholesalers for other brands, such as Cadburys, Frys and Rowntrees. In marketing terms, growth was greatly helped by the switch from green to clear glass jars, thereby improving the appearance.

The Company was incorporated on 27 October 1902 as Fred Needler Ltd., when the directors were Fred Needler (at £250 per annum), Alfred Thorpe (£160), and Joseph Cooper Wilson (£140). There were 6000 shares, of which 5416 were owned by Frederick Needler, and 1 by his wife. The first minute books also date from this time. In 1906 new larger premises were built on Bournemouth Street off Sculcoates Lane in Hull. The move was accompanied by a change in name to Needlers Ltd. An increasing demand for sweets led to a decline in the wholesale operation, which ceased by 1912. By this time the product range included 576 lines, including 74 in chocolate. A new chocolate plant began operations on the same site in August 1916. Turnover, which was £95,000 in 1913/14, peaked at £664,000 in 1920.

By the early 1920s average turnover was £570,000, representing 650 tons of chocolate and 1500 tons of sweets, with a range now including Christmas boxes and Easter eggs. There were 1700 employees, mainly female, with many more employed on a seasonal (especially pre-Christmas and pre-Easter) basis. However, although the Company was large, it was not a truly national firm, and never had more than about 1% of the market. In 1927 the factory packing areas were air-conditioned, enabling sweet packing to continue in all weathers. Sweet wrappers were introduced in the early 1920s, but this process was undertaken by hand until the first wrapping machines were introduced in 1928.

Until 1918 goods were delivered locally by horse and cart or van, and nationally by rail. Increased volume necessitated a fleet of delivery vans working from Hull, and from rail depots in London, Manchester, Nottingham and Grimsby. There were 40 vehicles by 1927, each with a chocolate brown livery for advertising purposes. In 1950 rail distribution was abandoned in favour of road following the decision by British Railways to move into lump

shunting (which resulted in large-scale breakages of chocolates). In 1965 there were still 50 vans and drivers.

Needlers were badly hit by the depression, the worst year being 1931 when turnover was £328,000 and profits just £5000. This coincided with Frederick Needler's deterioration in health with Parkinson's Disease, from which he died on 30 September 1932 aged 67. He had become well known as a strong supporter of the Liberal cause, and as a local benefactor - including the gift of a house in Cottingham to be used as a student hall of residence (Needler Hall) for the newly-established Hull University College. He was succeeded as Managing Director by his son Percival.

In 1938 the Company's chemists found a way of producing clear or Glace fruit drops - an area in which Needlers were to have little or no competition until the mid-1960s. Consequently, the emphasis of production shifted away from chocolate (where Cadburys, Rowntrees and Mars dominated) towards sweets. Sweets (and their raw materials) were rationed between 1941 and February 1953. Thereafter demand, particularly for Glace fruit drops, shot up.

In 1958 Needlers became a publicly quoted company, although the Needler family retained a controlling interest. Percival Needler retired in 1970, aged 70, and was succeeded by his son Raymond as Managing Director. He immediately bought the London-based toffee manufacturers Batgers, known for their 'Jersey' brand, and for producing Sainsbury's own brands. Chocolate production, which was heavily loss-making, was ended in 1976, when production was concentrated on Glace fruits and toffees. In 1980 Dickson Orde and Co., a small confectionery manufacturer based at Farnham in Surrey, was purchased. In the early 1980s export markets (particularly the United States and the Middle East) were opened up for the first time.

The Company was well known for its fair treatment of employees. Profit sharing was introduced as early as 1911, there were good social and sports facilities and a mixed voiced choir, Needlers Music Society, was established in 1925.

In 1986 the Company was bought by Hillsdown Holdings, a large meat company diversifying into other products, including the purchase of Bluebird Toffee. Raymond Needler retired in 1987. Needlers was soon sold to NORA SA, the largest food group in Norway. They continued operations on the Sculcoates Lane site, making boiled sweets under the Needler brand name, together with supermarket own brands.

**Custodial history:**

Donated by Mrs Willis whose mother Violet Pickering worked for Needlers.

**Description:**

Small collection includes history of Needlers and other printed ephemera with a small number of photographs including Frederick Needler, groups of staff and the football team.

**Arrangement:**

U DX339/1 Printed Material, 1932-1954

U DX339/2 Photographs, 1913-1922

U DX339/3 Miscellaneous material, 1924-1935

Hull History Centre: Needlers Ltd, Chocolate Makers and Confectioners

**Extent:** 13 items

**Related material:**

U DNE Records of Needlers Ltd. (1863-1993)

**Access conditions:**

Access will be granted to any accredited reader

<b>U DX339/1</b>	<b>Needlers Ltd - Printed Material 4 items</b>	<b>1932-1954</b>
U DX339/1/1	[Needlers] Outlook Journal Number 7 Volume 1 1 item	Nov 1932
U DX339/1/2	[Needlers] Outlook Journal Number 2 Volume 2 1 item	1942
U DX339/1/3	[Needlers] Outlook Journal 1 item	Dec 1954
U DX339/1/4	'Fifty Years Progress 1886-1936' A history of the Needlers company 1 item	1936
<b>U DX339/2</b>	<b>Needlers Ltd - Photographs 5 items</b>	<b>1913-1922</b>
U DX339/2/1	Large group photo believed to be Needlers staff 1 item	n.d.
U DX339/2/2	Needler's Ltd. Football Club On winning the Hull Amateur League, 3rd Division 1912-1913. Gives the names of the players 1 item	1913
U DX339/2/3	Needlers staff Taken at the Needlers staff reunion at the end of the First World War 1 item	c.1918

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U DX339/2/4	Mr Frederick Needler Picture of Mr Frederick Needler, the companies founder. Mrs Needler can also be seen 1 item	1922
U DX339/2/5	Group of women in various costumes Needlers staff, with list of names on the reverse 1 item	1922
<b>U DX339/3</b>	<b>Needlers Ltd - Miscellaneous material 4 items</b>	<b>1924-1935</b>
U DX339/3/1	Drawing of Needler's new chocolate factory 1 item	1924
U DX339/3/2	Invitation To the unveiling of a Memorial Tablet to Joseph Cooper Wilson at Needlers 1 item	23 Mar 1927
U DX339/3/3	Invitation and programme For Needlers Annual "Long Service Gathering" and Dinner 1 item	24 Feb 1928
U DX339/3/4	Invitation To the Needlers Long Service Association Dinner 1 item	Mar 1935