

THE HISTORY OF "JONES OF OAKWOOD"

© by Andrew and Rowland Jones.



The Jones family in the early 1980's. From left to right: Andrew, Leslie, Martin, Rowland.

Jones of Oakwood started life in 1917, Fred Jones (born 1874) was working as a plumber in a garage in Back Oakwood Parade. In 1920 he struck up a friendship with Welham's Decorators on the Parade and together they decided to buy a plumbing business in Leeds. The company, which became known as Jones Leeds Ltd, employed twenty plumbers and they were contracted to do all the maintenance for Tetley's Brewery.

Success seemed inevitable, but in 1923 the foreman walked out and took the Tetley contract with him. The business went under and Fred Jones returned to his smaller premises behind Oakwood Parade.

By 1935 Fred's son, Albert Edward Jones (Eddie, born 1901), was running the company. Eddie decided that he wanted to come on to the Parade in a more visible position. His opportunity came as a result of competition for trade between two dry cleaners on opposite sides of the road. Both shops were owned by Smiths, who realising that one was superfluous offered Eddie his choice of premises. The choice was made on the toss of a coin. This chance proved to be very fortunate. The North side of the parade, over a period of about fifteen years had been bought by a building contractor, Henry Lax, as shops became vacant. He would not sell and this prevented any development or expansion. Had Eddie chosen the premises on the North side, the subsequent expansion of the shop and business would not have been possible.

The electrical side of the business began in 1947. Eddie's elder son, Rowland, as a young man was apprenticed as an electrician to NG Bailey. In 1944 he went into the Navy as an electrician on mine-sweepers in the North Sea. In 1946, Bailey's obtained his release from the Navy and he returned to his apprenticeship. A few months or so before his father's death in 1948 at the early age of 47, Rowland left Bailey's and went into the family business. His brother, Leslie, was serving his apprenticeship in the company as a plumber. Rowland began to develop the electrical contracting side. By 1949 the firm changed its name to Jones of Oakwood Ltd.



Jones shop in the early days of the business.

In the 1950s, when technical development was limited, the main problem the company faced was getting enough stock to make sufficient profit to earn a living which could support two families. Jones of Oakwood wanted to move into television but they had to become a recognised agent. In 1961 they applied for Bush, Murphy and Pye but were refused by all three. These agencies were in the possession of another dealer in Harehills called Ainleys.

The next year this all changed. Sidney Simmons, a former Lord Mayor and owner of an electrical business in Dewsbury Road, was passing the shop on his way to the bank. He approached the two brothers and offered them his business. This was a well-established shop that held all the electrical agencies and had a complete service department. The offer could not be refused and Jones of Oakwood was now in a position to trade in television. By 1974 they also obtained the prized agency - Panasonic.

As the electrical side of the business grew and the company's reputation was established, the brothers were asked to set up a local buying group. This was formed and proved to have a big influence for the Company. The buying power of the group which eventually spread to over forty dealers throughout the West Riding helped to obtain better buying prices for the group members and enabled those dealers to compete with the big discounters coming into the markets.

The buying office and administration was all done from Rowland's office at Oakwood. As the group's reputation grew, interest was aroused in London and Rowland was invited to become a director of the Voluntary National buying group which had offices in London. His work was of decided benefit to the Company and Jones' progress accelerated particularly because in the mid 70's there was a definite shortage of television products.

In 1969 Leslie and Rowland had the chance to buy land at the rear of the Oakwood premises. The land was needed for parking and was bought from Miss Nettleton, the daughter of a builder, for £350. A few years later when the Government began sheltered housing schemes, it was decided to offer the land for the building of retirement homes. Twelve flats were built with 15,000 sq. ft. of storage beneath. The land was leased back to Jones for a peppercorn rent of £10 per annum for 99 years. Jones now had a huge amount of storage space available at no building cost to them. The extra space meant expansion was possible. In 1970 when Dewhursts the butchers, in the adjacent shop was put up for sale, Jones were able to purchase these premises.

By 1975, with a sales force of ten, a total staff of twenty-four and two separate premises, the shop needed a refit. The company joined Expert, a European group that had strict guide-lines on house colours, shop fitting and logos. They joined to help them to improve and maintain their standards and image in the face of growing competition from larger retailers. The Oakwood shop was refurbished using the Expert profile. Five men arrived from Hamburg, bringing all they needed with them. The task was completed in four days and Les Dawson opened the new shop in 1975 for the price of a 26" colour TV. Les arrived at 2pm for a two-hour engagement but he stayed until 7pm when the final customers left.

The next opportunity that came the brothers' way was the closing down of Nathan Bake Ltd, the Grocers next door. This acquisition gave them the space to expand their ranges and when the Off Licence next to the Grocers became vacant also, the offer seemed too good to resist enabling them to stock a large range of both home electronics and domestic appliances

During the early 70's Leslie's son, Andrew, and Rowland's son, Martin, joined the company and started at the very bottom of the ladder to learn the business with their fathers' firm belief they should learn every aspect of the business. Unfortunately, in 1976, the contracting side of the business, due entirely to the Construction Industry going through bad times, was affected, and the plumbing side was closed down. The Electrical contracting department continued until 1990. For the 10 years from the mid 1970's the company made good progress in the Electronics and Appliance business and the sons were eventually given more and more responsibility.

In 1980, the company got information about Sainsbury's opening a supermarket on a site on the Ring Road. This was pursued over a 2 year period and in spite of strong competition from the Nationals (i.e. Comet and Dixons) Jones were able to obtain the lease.

In 1987, in view of Jones' progress in marketing, they approached Sony for an exclusive Sony Centre in Leeds and succeeded against strong opposition from other retailers. This is still a great success and another Centre was opened in Wakefield in 1998.

Leslie Jones retired from the business in 1985/86 for health reasons and Rowland stood down in the early 90's. The cousins, Andrew and Martin, the 4th generation, are now jointly heads of the Company.

In 1996 the company began a new venture that proved to be extremely successful. They began doing affinity deals with large Blue Chip companies and financial organisations. This involves supplying the staff of these concerns on a nation-wide basis and now equates for 40% of the company's substantial turnover.

Jones of Oakwood continues to develop and expand. It now employ 60 staff. There is a substantial call centre in the first floor offices at Oakwood and trade via the Internet is increasing daily. A large warehouse close to head office has just been acquired to accommodate increasing levels of stock.

Andrew and Martin both believe that as long as they move with the times and offer the latest products and technology at the right price with great service, the future will be promising in this constantly changing climate.