

The Freemans Story

How Freemans Came To Peterborough

A Chance Meeting

One very rainy morning in mid-April 1965, following my night shift at British Rail, I cycled from my home in Norton Road to attend a meeting at the Town Hall with the Town Clerk and to dictate some letters to his secretary as, in those days, there was no such thing as a Members Secretary.

Following this work, I left the Town Hall to return home. On going down the steps, a gentleman walked into the foyer of the Town Hall. I asked if I could help. It was purely by chance that both of us should meet. He introduced himself to me as being a businessman who, with his colleagues outside in the car, had decided to take the turning off the A1 at Wansford and come into Peterborough. They had, that morning, had a meeting with local representative of the Local Authority and industrialists at Grantham. They had previously also been to Northampton.

The purpose of their visit was to look for land, with railway facilities, for the company to relocate. He enquired whether we had any land in Peterborough. Being a British Rail employee myself, I knew of the negotiations for the purchase of the Midland and Great Northern Railway line, the development of which was taking place on the Westwood Airfield and the Westwood Estate, together with the employment potential that was required. I invited this gentleman and his colleagues into the Town Hall, introduced myself and we all sat down with the Town Clerk to have a brief discussion. It was not unusual for me to telephone my wife to say I would not be coming home until later on and, having done this, I then contacted the Parks Department, who had a small office in Central Park, asking them to bring four pairs of wellingtons to the Town Hall with some waterproofs, if any were available.

I suggested that we go and look at the land at Westwood and see if there was anything which we could show them that would be to their advantage. They were kind enough to give me a lift, as, again in those days, there was no Members car, and we set off down the old Westwood Airfield road, adjacent to the RAF hangars, leaving the car on the perimeter airfield road to walk through the mud and rain onto the site, which is now Freemans. We then continued onto the Midland and Great Northern Railway embankment and the marshalling yards, which we had acquired from British Rail. This area of land was what was called "backland", as it had no frontage that led to any main roads. Consequently, we had been able to buy this land very cheaply, the majority of which we later sold back to Freemans, for a substantial profit, to enable them to build some of their extensions.

We stood on the Railway Embankment, which formed part of a bridge over Lincoln Road, and which rose substantially and looked over the whole of the site. I was able to explain to them exactly what was taking place with the building of houses and was able to give them some idea of the female employment potential available for them, as many of the wives moving into these houses would be wanting employment and the company were looking for female employees.

If they were interested, how quickly could they have a decision? was the question asked by the three directors. My reply was they could have it right then if they could stay the rest of the afternoon for a meeting with the Opposition Leader. The policy was that the City Council would assist any new and expanding businesses in the City, financially or otherwise, where it could. This policy was also

adopted and carried forward throughout the 20 years of the Peterborough Development Corporation, of which I was a member the whole of the time, and am fully conversant with the incentives that were given by the Peterborough Development Corporation in delayed payment for rent availabilities which, in some cases, would mean up to one year in free rental, together with many other incentives to assist companies, in the same way as we have been doing in the City in the past years, to attract and keep employment with full Government approval and also the agreement of the Auditors.

We made our way back to the car and I took them on a short tour of the City of Peterborough, explaining to them what expansion was all about, what we were, at the present time, discussing with the Minister and what would take place if we did get the designation for which we were asking. As you are aware, all these things have now come to fruition.

I later left these gentlemen at the Town Hall with my officers to pursue any further discussions. I also contacted the Leader of the Opposition, Alderman Setchfield, to inform him of what had taken place and to invite him to join any further discussions.

I attach, for your information, a photocopy of an announcement I made in the first week in May of that year, some 21 days later, together with a copy of a further announcement made in mid-June, and one when the Mayor laid a slate stone in the entrance to the office block of Freemans some 18 months later. Also attached is a copy of a Standing Order 38 – Approval Westwood Industrial Estate, which I signed as Chairman with the Chairman of the Finance Committee giving authority pursuant to Council policy.

I wholeheartedly endorse your Catalogue of Success article, which has been brought about by co-operation and Freeman's confidence in this City. It has also had what it still has now, confidence in the administration of the City, and I am sure your article, to any fair-minded person, will only demonstrate what Local Government is all about, and how rewarding it can be for those who are able to dismiss their critics with the catalogue of success, which they have been able to achieve.

Last year saw the first rent revision since 1969, of the amount due to the Local Authority, which is £750,000, per annum for the next 20 years, when there will be a further review, and that is equal to £6.00 per head for every Poll Tax payer, along with job security for 1,000 employees and the knock-on effect, which this has amongst the trade and commerce of this City. Plus £925,000 Business Rate, which goes to the Exchequer, for redistribution into the general pool, for which the Poll Tax payer again benefits. All this during a period of recession, cannot be a bad thing.

I note that the Auditors of Great Britain, who carried out the survey, gave Freeman's 18 out of 20 categories. I feel sure that our District Auditors will catalogue our success in this venture as a local authority and award us 100% value for money.

Charles W. Swift OBE

Leader – Peterborough City Council

CWS/JB 28 January 1992