

W.D. & H.O. Wills

W.D. & H.O. Wills was a British tobacco importer and cigarette manufacturer formed in Bristol, England. It was one of the founding companies of Imperial Tobacco. The company was founded in 1786 and went by various names before 1830 when it became W.D. & H.O. Wills. Tobacco was processed and sold under several brand names, some of which were still used by Imperial Tobacco until the second half of the 20th century. The company pioneered the use of cigarette cards within their packaging. Many of the buildings in Bristol and other cities around the United Kingdom still exist with several being converted to residential use.

History

The company was founded as Wills, Watkins & Co. by Henry Overton Wills I and his partner Watkins, who opened a shop in Castle Street, Bristol in 1786. After the retirement of his partner in 1789 it became "Wills & Co.". From 1791 to 1793 the company was known as Lilly, Wills & Co when it merged with the firm of Peter Lilly, who owned a snuff mill on the Land Yeo at Barrow Gurney, and then, from 1793 to his retirement in 1803, as Lilly and Wills. In 1826 his two sons, William Day Wills and Henry Overton Wills took over the company and in 1830 the company took the above name.

The company pioneered canteens for the workers, free medical care, sports facilities and paid holidays. Their first brand was "Bristol", made at the London factory from 1871 to 1974. "Three Castles" and "Gold Flake" followed in 1878 and "Woodbine" ten years later. "Embassy" was introduced in 1914 and re-launched in 1962 with coupons.

The company had factories and offices not only in Bristol, but also in Swindon, Dublin, Newcastle and Glasgow. The largest cigarette factory in Europe was opened at Hartcliffe Bristol, and was designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in 1974, but closed in 1990. Now called Lakeshore, it has been transformed into residential apartments by Urban Splash. The large factory and warehouse buildings remain prominent buildings in Bristol, although much of the existing land and buildings have been converted to other uses, such as The Tobacco Factory Theatre.

The Newcastle factory closed in 1986 and stood derelict for over a decade, before the front of the Art Deco building - which was preserved by being Grade II listed - reopened as a block of luxury apartments in 1998.

In 1901 Sir William Henry Wills *et al.* formed the Imperial Tobacco Company from a merger of W.D. & H.O. Wills with seven other British tobacco companies. Imperial remains one of the world's largest tobacco companies. The last member of the Wills family to serve the company was Christopher, the great great grandson of H.O. Wills I. He retired as sales research manager in 1969. In 1988 Imperial Tobacco withdrew the Wills brand in the United Kingdom (except for the popular Woodbine and Capstan Full Strength brands, which still carry the name).

Notable Products

In 1959 the company launched the short-lived Strand brand. This was accompanied by the iconic, but commercially disastrous, *You're never alone with a Strand* television advertisement.

In India, the Gold Flake, Classic and Wills Navy Cut range of cigarettes, manufactured by ITC (a subsidiary of British American Tobacco, is now Indian Tobacco Company), formerly the *Imperial Tobacco Company of India Limited*, still has W.D. & H.O. Wills printed on the cigarettes and their packaging. These lines of cigarettes have a dominant market share.

Cigarette Cards

In 1887, Wills were one of the first UK tobacco companies to include advertising cards in their packs of cigarettes, but it wasn't until 1895 that they produced their first general interest set of cards ('Ships and Sailors'). Other Wills sets include 'Aviation' (1910), 'Lucky Charms' (1923), 'British Butterflies' (1927), 'Garden Flowers' (1933) and 'Air Raid Precautions' (1938).

Trivia

The factory in Hartcliffe, Bristol, was the location for the filming of UK television series *Doctor Who*, Episode 95 - The Sun Makers (1977). Filming at the Wills Factory spanned June 13 to 15, 1977. In addition to the roof and tunnels, scenes were also filmed in the lift and the roof vent.