

Forage Friday: The Spectacle of Specs

Friday 29 May 2020

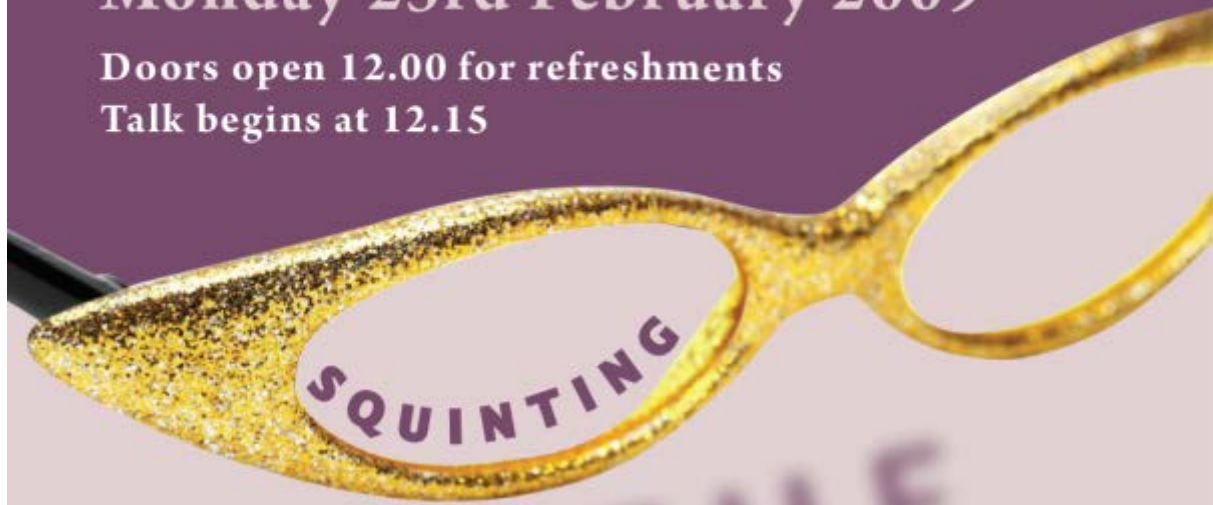
Welcome to Forage Friday: The Spectacle of Specs - sharing our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

Today's guest blog is written by Neil Handley, Curator of the [British Optical Association Museum](#) (BOA Museum) at the College of Optometrists and a long-time friend of Bruce Castle. In 2009 some of you might recall that Neil entertained us and shared his great expertise at one of our lunchtime *Munch and Listen* talks at Bruce Castle, '*Squinting at the Past*', all about the fascinating history of local opticians. Like all other museums, the BOA Museum is closed until further notice. Indeed, Neil is currently furloughed, but he had the foresight to write this piece for us a couple of weeks ago – so let us take a curated tour with Neil through our collections at Bruce Castle and those of BOA Museum to find out more about our local optical heritage.

Munch 'n Listen Lunchtime Talk at
Bruce Castle Museum on

Monday 23rd February 2009

Doors open 12.00 for refreshments
Talk begins at 12.15



AT THE
PAST

Do you recoil with horror or remember
fondly your old-fashioned spectacles?
Neil Handley, Curator of the
British Optical Association Museum,
casts his eye over some
unusual curios.

“Are your eyes feeling tired? During lockdown we have all been spending much longer looking at screens, whether to surf the web, watch ‘live’ theatre performances or hold meetings on platforms such as Skype or Zoom. Young people, who it is known already spend hours of every day glued to their monitors for social and leisure purposes, are now required to receive their school lessons by similar means. This has prompted the [College of Optometrists](#) to issue guidance on the importance of regular visual breaks. On the other hand, many people have re-discovered the joy of books, taken up painting or a new handicraft. These close-up activities may just as equally bring home to us the value of clear vision.

There are various things that we can do to help look after our eyes, but recently many of these have become that bit more difficult. We can ensure that we maintain a healthy diet, if we can get to the shops and if the right foodstuffs are in stock (green leafy vegetables, blueberries and root ginger are all highly recommended for eyesight). We should also get out more, and the recent relaxation of lockdown restrictions offers the opportunity to expose our eyes to natural daylight. It is recommended that we should normally have an eye examination at least once every two years, but at the moment most optometry practices are closed for routine services, although emergency eye healthcare may be available. Did you know that optometry has been identified as ninth on the list of those professions requiring the closest physical contact with clients? Social distancing presents a real challenge to the optometry sector in returning to business as normal.



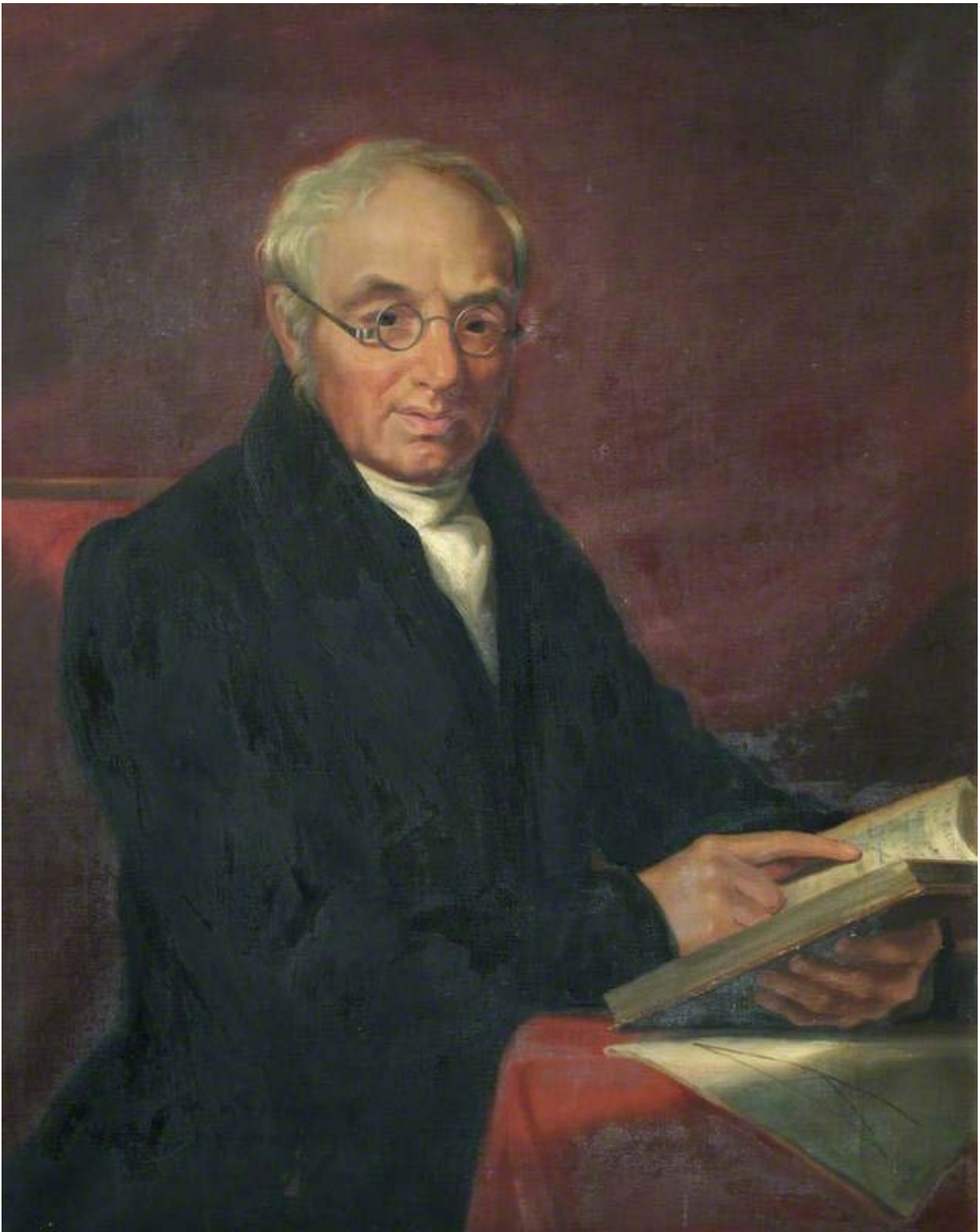
A pair of iron or steel-rimmed spectacles, dating possibly from the late 18th or 19th century. From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

All of which just serves to remind us of how we have taken optometrists and opticians for granted. (Just to clarify, optometrists, previously known as ophthalmic opticians, are specifically those opticians who can test eyesight and diagnose eye disease...and these days sometimes treat it too). The common ancestor of these modern professionals was the Spectacle Maker and we know there have been dedicated makers of spectacles in London since at least the early 15th century although the first ones were south of the river, in Southwark. This location may reflect the fact that many were Flemish immigrants.



The arms of the Worshipful College of Spectacle Makers, founded by Royal Charter in 1629

Spectacles were cheap and served only a limited market since, originally, spectacles lenses could only correct the age-related condition known as presbyopia, so they were useful just to those who could read. Thus, as the chances of making a profitable living were low, it was common to work as a spectacle maker alongside another occupation such as a haberdasher, pharmacist, goldsmith or jeweller. This remained the case well into the twentieth century, with some spectacle makers presenting themselves as eyesight specialists and others supplying them alongside other products.



From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Bruce Castle Museum's portrait of Sir Rowland Hill's father [Thomas Wright Hill](#) (by [E. S. Nevinson, after Mary Pearson](#)) shows a painting from the first half of the nineteenth century of Thomas in round-eye spectacles, probably iron or steel (see the photograph far above for similar spectacles in the collections at Bruce Castle). Lenses were ground on a wheel and that is why for most of history they have been round. This could present problems, especially for more complicated astigmatic prescriptions, because the lenses might revolve inside their rims. The fact that he is holding a book reaffirms the link between glasses and literacy. The

spectacles are rather prominent, literally 'in your face', and liable to appear somewhat wonky when worn.



From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Moving forward in time, the Museum's portrait of Dr Laseron, Founder of the Tottenham Hospital ([by W. T. Fisher](#)) – who we learnt about in the Museum's post on International Nurses' Day, shows a late Victorian example of spectacles from the higher end of the market. The frame is probably of precious metal and the oval eye-rims present a more flattering and less owl-like appearance. Crucially, the old prejudice against spectacles as an outwardly visible sign of disability seems to have disappeared. Dr Laseron may have felt that instead they added to his sense of distinction and gravitas. They mark him out as an intellectual and a professional, to be taken seriously. They also serve as a psychological barrier, placing just a little bit of proper distance between us and him...but perhaps not as much as two metres!

We do not know from where Hill or Laseron sourced their spectacles, but the Haringey Archives include a sepia photograph of Benjamin King, Optician on the Tottenham High Road, from about 1880.



From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

By now it was much more likely that persons of lower status might own a pair of spectacles. It wasn't just that rates of literacy were rising. Spectacles could be useful for needlework and other close tasks. Indeed, the big spectacle-shaped sign above the shop entrance, with its 'crank' bridge and prominent eyes showing through it, may have been intended partly to attract the illiterate customer. Spectacles in this era were promoted as eye-preservers. Wearing them had a therapeutic benefit and could prevent eyestrain or headaches. The photograph is particularly interesting to me, as historian to the eye healthcare professions, because it just predates the formal establishment of a qualified profession. As there are no professional records before the 1890s, the evidence for this earlier period is even more reliant on old photographs. Above the door it says 'Optician' although this was not a protected job title until 1958. A high-up sign shows that Mr King also sold watches and clocks in addition to spectacles to 'suit all sights'. Next door is a draper, possibly a useful business neighbour to have, as it reinforces what was then the relatively new idea that spectacles might be a fashion item of apparel.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR EYES, THEY
ARE VALUABLE TO YOU.



*Your eyes scientifically tested and suitable lenses supplied
by W. JUNG, 89, West Green Road, Tottenham.*

IMPORTANT NOTICE.

In addition to the above important branch the Proprietor has opened an entirely new establishment at 89, West Green Road, where all kinds of Fancy goods can be procured—as also Hair-Brushes, Combs of all kinds of the very best quality. Toilet requisites of every kind, and other goods of a like nature are extensively stocked.

NOTE the address—

W. JUNG,

89, West Green Road,

South Tottenham, N.

(Opposite Grove Park Road).

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

In this era, we also start to see advertising for spectacles. This example (above) is from inside a theatre programme from about 1910. Whereas posh people used [opera glasses](#) and [lorgnettes](#) at the theatre, ordinary people might simply want to get a clearer view of the stage through something more convenient. W. Jung proudly proclaims that he offers the 'scientific' testing of eyes, but he also maintains a separate establishment on the West Green Road for the sale of 'fancy goods' such as hairbrushes.

W. LIONE,
OPHTHALMIC OPTICIAN

30 YEARS PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE
AS MAKER AND FITTER.



Spectacle Specialist to the Leading Opticians and
London Oculists.

Hospital Prescriptions worked out at Hospital Prices

YOUR SIGHT TESTED,

and Advice given Gratis.

A LARGE STOCK OF OPTICAL GOODS

May be inspected at my only Address—

2, St. LOY'S ROAD,
TOTTENHAM,

One door from High Road. (ESTABLISHED 1800).

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Gradually a new concept emerged of the sight-testing or 'ophthalmic optician'. In this newspaper advertisement W. Lione of St. Loy's Road, uses the new term, though he spells it incorrectly! He stresses that he is a 'specialist' but rather than levy professional fees he actually offers his advice for free, seeking to earn his money from the sale of appliances.



From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)
A. C. Boalch of 418 High Road, shown here in a photograph from circa 1910 (above), shows some awareness of the new specialism. Although most of the shop front and window display is given over to his other product lines including clocks, watches and cigarettes, if you enter the doorway there is a smaller promotion for spectacles, complete with spectacle frame graphics. As the profession grew so did the desire to separate it from the retail function as much as possible. Indeed, if you wanted to insult a fellow optician you called him or her a 'shoptician'. Advertising was frowned upon, and actively discouraged, by the professional bodies such as the British Optical Association and the [Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers](#). They took the view that physicians and surgeons did not advertise, so neither should ophthalmic opticians.

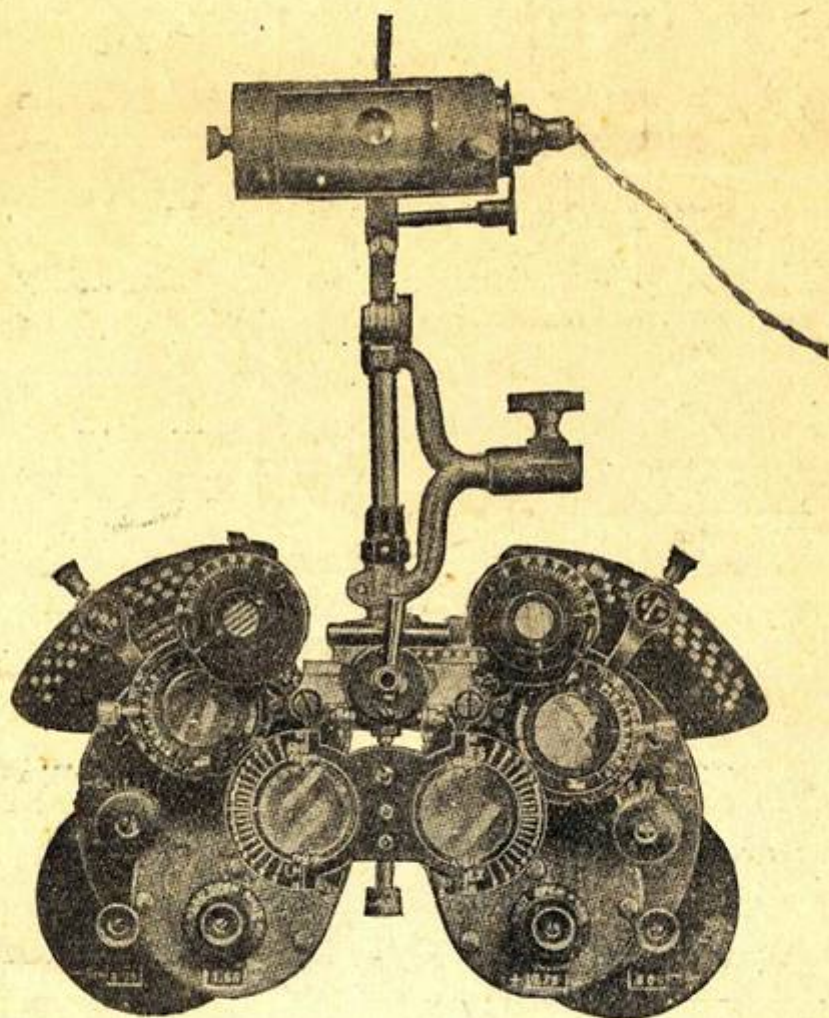
Spectacles were supplied mainly still by independent practitioners rather than the retail chains we know today, but some had practices in more than one part of London. For instance, H. E. Parry Jones was at Grand Parade Haringay but also at Mare Street in Hackney in the 1920s.



Hammond's cinema slide 1932, with the business at 659 Green Lanes, Haringay.
From BOA Museum, courtesy and © of the Hammond Family

As the twentieth century progressed one local business, with multiple branches across North London, attained notoriety for flagrantly ignoring this professional consensus. The firm of Hammond's Optical Services Ltd, first incorporated in 1929, stands out for the prominence of its advertising, particularly shopfront signage and other innovative marketing such as using the space on the side of local buses and having its own liveried delivery van. The illustration is of a slide used in cinema advertising in 1932. It shows the Green Lanes, Haringay branch and makes no lesser claim than to be the 'greatest opticians in London'. You can see why they may have annoyed their rivals. A similar slide was used for the new Muswell Hill branch in Station Parade from 1934. Some key points about their advertising are the mention of various services including manufacturing, repairs and sight-testing. It is stressed that the sight-tester is 'qualified' and that patients requiring services under the inter-war National Health Insurance scheme may find them here.

HAMMOND'S
OPTICAL SERVICE LTD.,
YOUR SIGHT TESTED FREE
AT OUR STAND
AT THE
NORTH LONDON EXHIBITION
ALEXANDRA PALACE.
BY THE NEW
BRITISH REFRACTION UNIT
ILLUSTRATED HERE



LOCAL BRANCHES:
110, BRUCE GROVE TOTTENHAM, N.17.

From BOA Museum, courtesy of the Hammond Family

Hammond's also made use of the local press, here promoting their stand at the North London Exhibition held at Alexandra Palace in 1933 (image above). The purpose was to show off a piece of the latest equipment, the British Refraction Unit, that part-automated the process of bringing trial lenses before each eye in turn. Visitors to the show were offered a free eye test and indeed there was a post-show offer whereby clients could also claim a free test by visiting a Hammond's branch. In 1941 Hammond's sought to exploit a national emergency – the blackout – by advertising extended opening hours and inviting patients to visit them because 'the black-out has had one consequence which few people anticipated. It has made us all realise how dependent we are on our eyesight'. Today Hammond's would be considered a pioneer, which would be to miss the controversy their promotional activities caused at the time. The Secretary of the British Optical Association, George Giles, wrote to Bernard Hammond, complaining that they were bringing the profession into disrepute. He took particular exception to the bold display of prices in branch windows.



Hammond's HQ at 9 Bruce Grove, Tottenham, c.1950

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Just look at the large lettering on the side of their headquarters building at [9 Bruce Grove](#), known as 'Optic House' and first opened in 1944. There are two spectacle frame motifs as well as large arrows and a list of their various branches. The name of the business is mentioned on the building no fewer than three times and just visible is the foot of the flagpole from which flew a pennant also bearing the company name in the 1950s and 1960s. The building was sold in 1969.



Coloured drawing of Optic House at 9 Bruce Grove, Tottenham, from 1955
From BOA Museum, courtesy of the Hammond Family

As with some other professions, including dentistry and pharmacy, ophthalmic optics became ever more specialised in the NHS era. For example, Mr Thurston at Jones' practice at 651 High Rd Tottenham in the 1960s, was an Orthoptist, offering eye muscle-training for the correction of childhood squints and other binocular imbalances affecting stereoscopic vision. Orthoptics grew out of ophthalmic optics but is now seen as a separate profession and is often hospital-based rather than a primary care service delivered on the high street.

The 1980s saw de-regulation of the profession. Advertising was no longer restricted from 1986 onwards and many dispensing opticians seized the opportunity with two-for-one price offers and even free sight tests. It was partly a reaction to this that prompted the ophthalmic opticians to officially adopt the name 'optometrist' from 1987. The word had long been in use in America and the British dominions, but had never previously proved popular in the UK.



Images of optical businesses in Wood Green, during 2000s
 Courtesy and © BOA Museum

Many optometrists found that they were now employees rather than business owners, working for large chains such as Dollond & Aitchison, which at least had an historical pedigree having been founded by Peter Dollond in 1750. The company would ultimately find itself swallowed up in an amalgamation with a 'new kid on the block', Boots Opticians (founded 1987) in 2011. Here are some photographs (above) of optical businesses in the Wood Green Shopping City in the noughties. As well as the now-defunct D&A we see Specsavers, the 'super-brand' born on Guernsey in 1982 with its well-known slogan 'Should have gone to...' There is also Vision Express, which opened the first 'one-hour' Opticians (with an in-store laboratory) in 1988. That company borrowed a slogan from my Museum: '*Come and see us*'.

Finally, there is Optical Express, founded in Scotland in 1991 and which was, for a while, the fastest-growing British chain of opticians driven by a series of commercial acquisitions including the Eye Clinic which gave it an opening into the eye laser surgery market.



From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

The story of optics in Haringey is not confined to the high street. There were also significant manufacturing businesses on industrial sites, some of which were highlighted in an exhibition at Bruce Castle in their *Local Industries Survey and Exhibition* organised by the Museum Assistant, Frank E. Fenton in 1938. Some lens polishing devices and assorted labels from the exhibition still survive in the Museum (as pictured above). Otherwise, the memory of these manufacturers usually lives on only through advertising, but as these adverts were aimed almost exclusively at the profession, rather than the public, they are often little known. Some examples of advertising of manufacturing businesses in the Haringey area from the collections of British Optical Association Museum follow here:



Courtesy and © BOA Museum

Optical manufacturing was centred on London, mainly in the Clerkenwell and Hatton Garden districts, but with some considerable North London spill-over. Britinol, in Bridge Road, made optical precision instruments such as magnifiers. The Supervision Optical Company, of Seven Sisters Road Tottenham thrived at the start of the NHS scheme when free or subsidised spectacle frames and lenses were offered for the first time. In the late 1940s and early 1950s they sometimes operated to an 18-month waiting list. R.M. Optics of Finsbury Park were specialists in handmade specs, as were Oddy Brothers in Bruce Grove from 1923-1969.

There is sadly almost none of that type of manufacturing left now although in very recent years there have been signs that the small bespoke workshop was making a bit of a revival. Whether Covid-19 will put paid to that or not remains to be seen.”

We have another link to optical equipment at Bruce Castle as we hold the archives of the instrument makers, R.W. Munro Ltd. In 1864 Robert W. Munro broke from his family instrument manufacturing business to set up on his own, eventually basing the company in Cline Road, Bounds Green. His firm quickly gained a considerable reputation in the fields of mathematical, optical, meteorological and banking equipment. The company supplied components for the construction of [H.P. Babbage's 'Mill'](#), worked on the development of the Dines anemometer, provided instruments for the Scott and Shackleton Antarctic expeditions and produced a range of other machinery and instruments such as optical and photographic equipment. The company still exists as [Munro](#)

[Instruments](#) today and based in Harlow, Essex, but no longer produces optical equipment.

You can see a listing of the archives we hold from the company on [The National Archives Discovery catalogue](#).

So, we hope you have enjoyed our 'look' at Haringey's history of optometry, through the collections of BOA Museum alongside those of our own at Bruce Castle Museum & Archive. Like Neil, we encourage you to take care of your eyesight, and do speak to the professionals if you have any concerns at all – rather than taking any drives in the countryside!

And if you would like to find out more about the fascinating history of spectacles and other optical curios and company histories, then do explore the [BOA Museum](#) website for further examples of eyewear and the industry generally. Neil has also given his expertise to a number of publications, including his own book [Cult Eyewear](#), the first serious analytical study of the historical development of branded fashion spectacle frames (2011).



From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Have fun exploring – and if you are a family (or know a family) looking for more things to do this 'half term', attached is our Family Art & Craft Activities today. We invite families to get hands on with some art and design, and make some imaginative Groovy Glasses! And do take a photo of any artwork so we can share them in our online gallery.

With our thanks to Neil for his truly wonderful contribution today and for casting his eye over our collections, bringing his expertise to tell a special history about Haringey.

Look after your eyes - take care, keep healthy and stay well

Best wishes from us all at Bruce Castle

Deborah Hedgecock
Curator

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