

Spencer Corsets Limited, Britannia Road, Banbury

By SALLY STRADLING

SUMMARY

The premises occupied by Spencer Corsets Limited, Banbury, now part of the Remploi Healthcare Group, are unlisted buildings outside the Banbury Conservation Area. The purpose of this paper is to trace the origins and development of the corsetry business, and to provide a record particularly of the Art Deco factory premises.

BACKGROUND

In 1989 a planning application was granted to demolish the Spencer House factory and to erect 37 two-bedroom flats and 15 single-bedroom flats in 3 and 4-storey blocks with 71 associated car parking spaces.¹ As the local Conservation Officer, I was concerned at the potential loss of a building and industry which were of local interest to Banbury. I contacted the then Curator of Banbury Museum, Melissa Barnett, to advise Oxfordshire Museums Service of the existence of the corset factory and the impending demolition in order that they could take an interest if they wished. At the same time I started to research and record the building with the permission of the owners. Since the building had been evaluated for listing during the resurvey of 1984–87 and discounted, it was not felt appropriate to apply for spot-listing.

As it happened planning permission was not activated. By 1992 Remploi applied to renew the existing permission.² Planning permission was refused on highway grounds as car parking standards had changed in the interim and the scheme failed to provide adequate off-street car parking. No subsequent applications have been received and the corsetry business continues in Spencer House.

In 1995, during the course of my research, I came across an estimate produced for tendering purposes dated December 1936 and original drawings (dated 2 October 1936) for the new Spencer factory premises, both by Wallis, Gilbert and Partners, architects of the Hoover and Firestone factories in London. Armed with this fresh documentation and with hope that the Banbury factory might be a hitherto unknown Wallis, Gilbert and Partners design of more than local importance, an application for spot-listing was made to the Department of National Heritage.

Regrettably, following assessment by English Heritage, the Secretary of State's professional advisers on listing matters, the premises were not considered listable on the grounds that:

¹ CHN 250/89, Demolition of Spencer House Factory, Planning File in Cherwell District Council.

² CHN 323/92, Renewal of CHN 250/89, *ibid.*

Although Wallis, Gilbert and Partners were arguably considered the best known designers of commercial buildings in the inter-war period, their Hoover and Firestone factories were considered the most evocative; the firm was prolific and Spencer House was deemed to be amongst their humbler buildings. In addition the exterior had unfortunately been refenestrated in a crude manner in 1982, internally the board room and director's rooms had lost their decoration, and the entrance hall, although considered pleasant, was not exceptional in its use of materials or details.³

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMPANY

Spencer Corsets Limited, Banbury, was formed in a solicitor's office in Manchester on 14 February 1927.⁴ The owners were the Berger Brothers of Newhaven, Connecticut, U.S.A., who sought premises in this country in order to expand their business into Europe. Dorothea and Robert Allen, reputedly from Manchester, were appointed directors and were also shareholders. Associated factories had been set up in Connecticut, U.S.A., and Rock Island, Quebec, Canada. The company specialised in individually designed foundation garments, and in surgical and other orthopaedic supports.⁵

It appears that the Berger Brothers found the Midlands had the necessary prerequisites for their expansion plans, in terms of skilled workforce, factory premises and raw materials. Certainly historically, Banbury had become nationally renowned as a centre for weaving, particularly for the manufacture of plush and other heavy fabrics of worsted and cotton.⁶

The Spencer corset factory was established in Britannia Road, Banbury, in 1926, in premises of circa 1890 constructed by Messrs. W. F. Lucas and Company for the manufacture of ladies' linen underclothing.⁷ Production started in the Lucas building in 1927 and by the 1930s minute books and registers show steady growth under the directors Dorothea and Robert Allen.⁸ The company made exclusive individually designed foundation garments, and pioneered 'in the matter of scientific research as applied to corsetry' in order to create special designs for separate clients, including Dress Corset, Spencerette, Supporting Corset, Belt, etc. – whatever was needed for 'beauty of line, health, comfort and support'. It was stated that Spencer Supports were recommended by the medical profession and that Spencer advertisements had regularly appeared in the *British Medical Journal*, *The Nursing Times*, *Vogue* and *John Bull*. It was claimed that thousands of women, girls, men and children were wearing Spencer corsets, brassieres, surgical corsets, abdominal belts or Spencer corselettes.⁹

In the 1930s the Spencers District Managers' Guides emphasised the British nature of the product and workforce. The company desired to use only British materials; corset cloths were mainly from Lancashire mills, hooks and eyes from Birmingham, the famous Spencer bone and hose supporters came from Leicester. Other materials were made in Nottingham, Bradford, Derby, Glasgow and Staffordshire. However silk brocades and batistes were purchased in France as they were not obtainable from British manufacturers.

The Spencer business developed through trained professional corsetieres visiting clients in their own homes. New corsetieres were trained by district managers in the Spencer service and were required to buy a Spencer book of photographs and basic Spencer demonstration equipment such as garments and tape measures at a cost of £21.

³ Decision letter dated 22 September 1995 from Listing Branch, Department of National Heritage.

⁴ Spencer Company Minute Book and Registers, in custody of Remploi Healthcare Group.

⁵ Spencer Corsets Limited, District Sales Manager's Guide (1933), 6, *ibid*.

⁶ W. Potts, *A History of Banbury* (1978), 236–7.

⁷ *Ibid*. 299.

⁸ Spencer Company Minute Book and Registers, in custody of Remploi Healthcare Group.

⁹ Spencer Corsets Limited, District Sales Manager's Guide (1933), 7, *ibid*.

So greatly had the Spencer business developed by 1932 that the combined income of Spencer Corsetieres from their sales reached one million pounds. The Spencer factories in Canada, America and England were said to be the largest corset concern in the world at that time.¹⁰

By the late 1930s the company needed to expand and a new Art Deco factory block, designed by Wallis, Gilbert and Partners, was constructed against the east elevation of the Lucas building in 1937 by T.H. Kingerlee and Sons Limited. Further expansion occurred in later years, as photographs of c. 1954¹¹ show Spencers occupied the Britannia Buildings opposite, formerly Stone's box factory of c. 1885.¹²

The company prospered and by the early 1940s employed 600 – mainly local women. At one time there were over 2,000 Spencers Corsetieres or fitters. This figure had dropped to 250 in the 1970s and 1980s.¹³ Over the years various subsidiary companies were formed including Wendel Fashions, Spencer Surgical (Wendy) and Spencer Banbury Limited. In 1982 Spencers acquired Silhouette, and, in 1985, Spirella of Letchworth, Hertfordshire, a rival company which had been started up by an ex-employee of Spencers. From the 1970s onwards Spencers diversified into made-to-measure and ready-to-wear surgical supports. In the early 1990s Spencers was taken over by the Remploy Healthcare Group and now manufactures surgical supports and lingerie under the trade names Spencers and Silhouette.¹⁴

During World War II the Spencer company was known to assist the war effort by designing and manufacturing light-weight anti-gravity suits for fighter pilots.¹⁵ A war-time edition of the 'Spencergram' magazine for employees of the organisation invited 'contributions of sixpence and upwards to the Spencer Spitfire Fund.' The advert continues, 'Show your clients that you too are helping in the national war effort.'¹⁶

In August 1990 an article entitled 'Dancing with a Stranger' was published by a Sunday newspaper after Dorothea Allen's death. Dorothea died in 1990 intestate – a millionairess and a recluse, living in Sutton Manor, Sutton under Brilles, Warwickshire. Robert Allen had died in 1965 after a long illness. Since that time it appeared that Dorothea lost interest in the company and she was removed from the Board of Directors. The mystery that remains to be solved is why this successful couple appeared to destroy personal papers and left no clues as to their origins nor benefactors to their impressive fortune.¹⁷ Dorothea Allen's death attracted considerable media interest at the time of the Sotheby's sale of the estate which included her personal possessions. She is remembered by locals and Spencer staff as something of a 'character'. A television film has been made of her life and a biography is currently being researched.¹⁸

THE BUILDINGS (Figs. 1–2)

Spencer Corsets Limited incorporated three distinct buildings during the course of its history: The Banbury Linen Company premises, the new Wallis Gilbert factory extension and Britannia House.

¹⁰ Ibid. 6–7.

¹¹ Information from Blinkhorns Photographic, Banbury.

¹² *V.C.H. Oxon.* x, 39.

¹³ 'Unlaced Grace' (Southern Arts Exhibition leaflet), 1995.

¹⁴ Information from Adrian Jarvis, Maintenance Manager, Remploy Healthcare Group.

¹⁵ Advertisement in *New Haven Journal-Courier*, 15 January 1945, in custody of Remploy Healthcare Group.

¹⁶ *Spencergram Magazine*, 19 (1940), *ibid.*

¹⁷ 'Dancing with a Stranger', *Sunday Times*, 12 August 1990, 28–33.

¹⁸ Information from Blinkhorns Photographic, Banbury.



Fig. 1. Spencer Corsets Limited: location of the buildings. Scale 1:1250.

The Banbury Linen Company (Figs. 3–5)

Spencers started up in 1927 in the building originally constructed for the Banbury Linen Company in Britannia Road, approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ mile south of Banbury town centre. This building, constructed by Messrs. W.F. Lucas and Company, is of steel frame and red brick construction with blue brick pilasters defining bays to ground and first floors. The roof is of red clay tiles. Four storeys in height, the building has a 10-window range and four gables on both north and south elevations. This building is noted as one of two (the other being The Red Lion in George Street) commercial buildings in Banbury reflecting the Arts and Crafts movement of the turn of the century, and as having affinities with certain buildings of the period in Birmingham. The premises are described as good examples of the more advanced architecture of the time, four-storeyed with gables to the fourth-floor windows, a pitched roof and elliptical arched windows.¹⁹ All windows are of three lights with white painted timber casements, the centre windows opening with hung pivots. A brick entrance porch was added on to the east end around 1926.

The Wallis Gilbert Factory Extension (Figs. 6–14)

During the 1930s land was purchased to the north and west of the Lucas building from a Mr. Abel and Humphris the builders. A row of cottages, known as Kirby's cottages, together with the Mason's Arms public house, were demolished to make way for the new premises.²⁰ Spencers expanded by adding a new Art Deco factory extension to the existing Banbury Linen Company premises. (Fig. 6)

In December 1936 Wallis, Gilbert and Partners prepared an 'estimate of work required to be executed in the erection and completion of extensions to existing factory and office buildings at Banbury, Oxfordshire for Messrs Spencer Corsets Limited'. This document was produced for the purpose of inviting builders to tender for the work. It is an incredibly tightly drawn document itemising the schedule of work for each trade together with other services including excavator and concretor, reinforced concrete work, drainlayer, bricklayer, carpenter, joiner and ironmonger, founder and smith, plasterer, plumber, glazier, painter, engineering services, roads, boundary walls, fences and gates, garage building, demolitions and works on site.²¹

This fascinating document reveals work standards and practice as expected by top architects of the day. There is even an early form of archaeological condition and allusion to treasure trove: 'All old curiosities, relics, coins, etc, found in excavating or other executions of work shall remain the property of the Employer and are to be handed over to the Architect. Should any ancient masonry, pavements or other old work of interest be opened up the Architect's attention is to be called to the same before demolition or removal...'²²

Details of the proposed form of construction of the new building are clearly stated in the tender document: 'The work, the subject of this contract, comprises the erection of a steel framed building with reinforced concrete floors, brick external walls and flat roof, consisting of a new factory wing with a connecting link between the old and new factory wings, housing lavatories, staircases and lifts, the superficial areas measured over walls being as follows:

¹⁹ *V.C.H. Oxon.* x, 39.

²⁰ Information from Adrian Jarvis.

²¹ Estimate of work for Messrs. Spencer Corsets Limited, prepared by Wallis, Gilbert and Partners, London SW1, 1936, in custody of Remploy Healthcare Group.

²² *Ibid.* para 44, 13.



Fig. 2. Aerial view of Spencers.



Fig. 3. Banbury Linen Company premises.



Fig. 4. Interior of workroom.



Fig. 5. Cafeteria.



Fig. 6. Art Deco extension.

Basement	7850 square feet
Ground Floor	9050 square feet
First Floor	7400 square feet
Second Floor	7400 square feet
Third Floor	4800 square feet

The storey heights are as follows:

Basement to Ground Floor	11' 0"
Ground to First Floor	12' 9"
First to Second Floor	12' 9"
Second to Third Floor	12' 9"
Third Floor to Roof	11' 6"

The contract also includes certain alteration work inside the existing factory, the construction of a small garage building in the west corner of the site, external roadways, sprinkler, heating, electric light and power installations and sundry other work, all as measured and described in the Bills of Quantities.²³

²³ Ibid. para 48, 14.



Fig. 7. Main entrance.



Fig. 8. Window detail.



Fig. 9. Entrance hall.

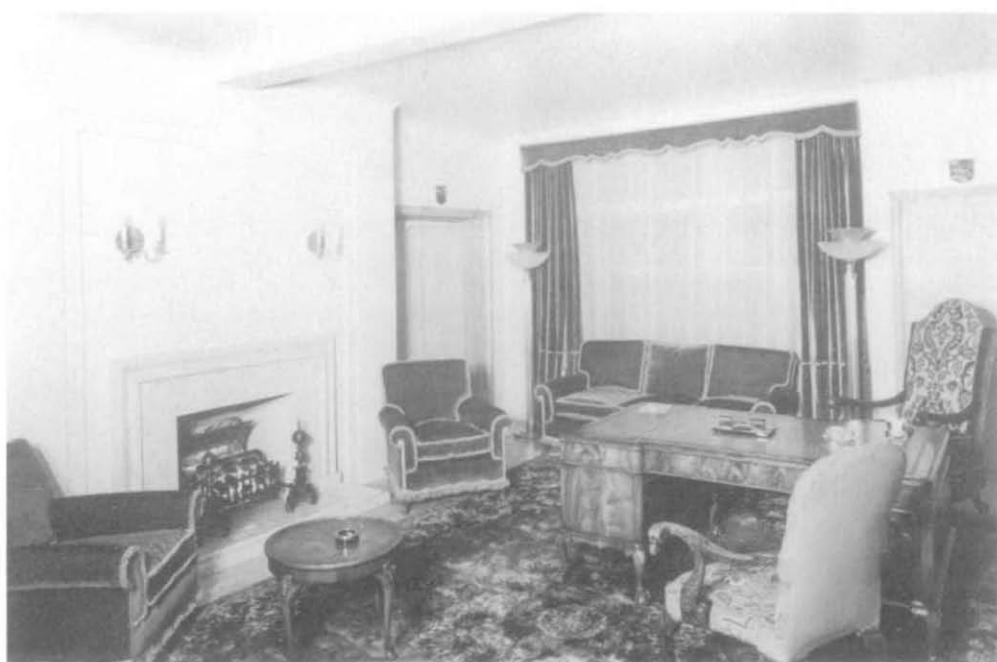


Fig. 10. Director's suite.



Fig. 11. Bronze entrance doors.

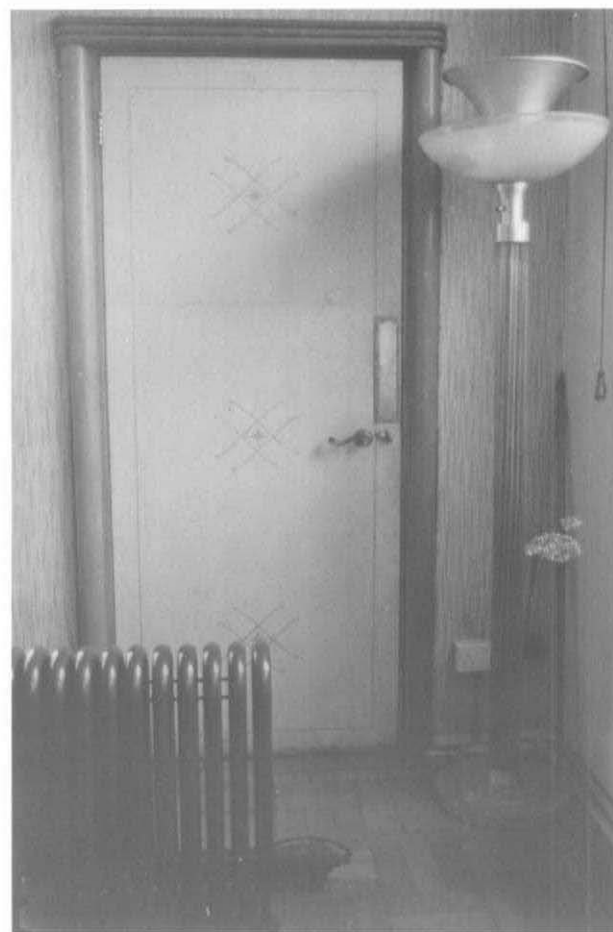


Fig. 12. Standard lamp, door and radiator.



Fig. 13. Chair detail.

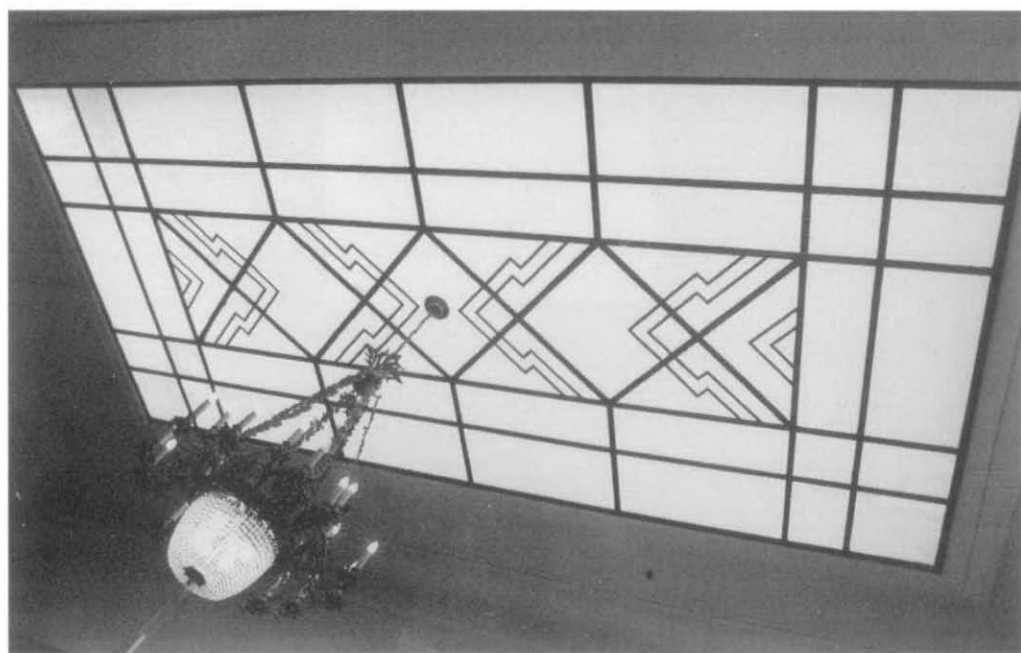


Fig. 14. Entrance hall overlight and chandelier.

As an example of the exacting standards expected the joiner's specification states: '... should any of the joiner's work shrink, warp, wind or fly more than $\frac{1}{8}$ " within twelve months of the completion of the building the same shall be taken up or down as the case may be and new re-fixed at the contractor's sole expense, together with all other work which may be thereby affected ...'.²⁴

The specification for lime and hair plastering includes instructions for hydrated lime, coarse stuff composed of one part lime to three parts sand, and one pound of long dry hair to every three feet cube of plaster and fine stuff to be composed of one part lime to one part of sand. All hair is required to be 'best long dry back bullocks hair free from oil and grease'.²⁵

A damp proof course was to be composed of '... two courses of stout slates laid to break joint, neatly trimmed to thickness of walls, and bedded, jointed and pointed in cement mortar including cutting and fitting around steel stanchions'.²⁶

The physical evidence of the new Spencer factory extension appears to follow the work specification proposed in the estimate produced for tendering purposes together with the ground floor plan by Wallis, Gilbert and Partners dated 2 October 1936.

The new Art Deco corset factory extension by Wallis, Gilbert and Partners was constructed in 1937. The builder was T.H. Kingerlee and Sons Limited of Oxford. Essentially, a 'T'-shaped extension was added onto the north of the existing rectangular-shaped Lucas building to form an 'H'-plan. The industrial design of the factory derives stylistically from 'Art Deco', a name coined after the 'Exposition Internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes', held in Paris in 1925. Exponents of the style included architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier et al. Typical features included symmetrical plan, use of flat roofs, expanses of glazing, staircase tower, function dictating form, and the harnessing of modern building technology and materials in construction.²⁷

The Wallis Gilbert building comprises a four and five-storeyed steel-framed building with reinforced concrete floors, red brick external walls with Hornton stone dressings, flat roofs and metal windows. The 'new' factory has a connecting link with the 19th-century block. This link houses the entrance hall, lavatories, staircases and lifts. The entrance front has a single-storeyed brick porch with semi-circular arched stone head supported on engaged Tuscan columns – the arch displaying the lettering 'Spencer House'. The brick porch has a Hornton stone coping decorated with swags. The entrance is dominated by wide bronze doors with herringbone patterning, deep fanlight and flanking bullseye sashes with bronze metal herringbone grilles. To the rear of the entrance hall is the five-storeyed staircase projection with function defined externally in the tall narrow windows five storeys in height, with fanlight. The north wing has a three-window range on the entrance front on Britannia Road and an eleven-window range on the north elevation, both with three-light metal windows, many of which regrettably have been altered in the 1980s. Giant brick pilasters define the bays externally.

The interior plan form comprises:

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Lucas building on south: | – basement for storage of tanks and sprinklers |
| | – ground-floor canteen and cloaks |
| | – first-floor manufacturing |
| | – second-floor offices |

²⁴ Ibid. para 133, 26.

²⁵ Ibid. para 153, 28–9.

²⁶ Ibid. para 558, 69.

²⁷ U. Kultermann, *Architecture in the 20th Century* (1993), chapters I and II.

- Wallis Gilbert extension on north:
- ground-floor entrance, cloaks and cutting room
 - first-floor manufacturing
 - second-floor offices
 - top-floor Directors' suite²⁸

The interior retains original fittings and furnishings including Art Deco doors, cornices, glazing, sanitary ware, lighting fittings and office furniture such as desks, chairs, upstand lamps, etc. The entrance hall in 1937 was ostentatious with marble columns and Italian silk wallpaper. Visitors were greeted by doormen in white tie and tails (Fig. 9).²⁹

The workrooms were recorded as large, airy and sunlit, cool in summer and kept comfortably warm and well ventilated in winter. Everything possible was said to be done for the workers' comfort and well being in the modern factory. Facilities included baths in the factory, a cafeteria, medical care with attendant doctor twice weekly, tennis courts, and Spencer Sports Club football and hockey teams.³⁰

Britannia Buildings (Fig. 15)

During post-war expansion, part of the Spencer operation occupied Britannia Buildings – the former Henry Stone factory in Britannia Road, opposite Spencers' main buildings.

The Henry Stone patent box company originated in 1845 in premises in Parsons Street, Banbury. The firm manufactured boxes and expanded and diversified into cabinet and furniture making. By c. 1885, Stone's had moved into new, purpose-built factory premises designed by architect W. E. Mills of Banbury and constructed by Kimberleys, builders also of Britannia Road, Banbury. The Henry Stone factory is believed to be amongst the first works of W.E. Mills, a local architect of some note (other designs include No. 8 Horsefair, and Church House, Horsefair, Banbury, dated 1900 and 1904 respectively).³¹

The premises are noted as well-designed functional buildings of a 'classical vernacular' style evident in other 19th-century industrial buildings, and represented in Banbury by buildings such as Barrett's Malthouse in Newland and the earliest part of the Britannia works in Britannia road.³²

The Henry Stone premises comprise two blocks joined by an archway entrance. The blocks are of red-brick construction with Welsh slate roofs. The buildings are of three and five storeys respectively, increasing in height southwards with the slope of the land. The elevations are characterised by elliptically headed windows with centre pivoting casements, giant brick pilasters defining bays and breaking through from ground to attic storeys, brick cornices below attic floors, and brick plinth and sills. The southernmost range has a mansard roof.

Spencers no longer occupied the buildings in the 1990s when a planning application was approved to convert the premises into flats.³³ Subsequently the northernmost block was gutted by fire, although the main structure survived. A further planning application to demolish the

²⁸ Information from Adrian Jarvis.

²⁹ *Sunday Times*, 12 August 1990.

³⁰ Spencer Corsets Limited, District Sales Manager's Guide (1933), 5.

³¹ Information from Chris Hone.

³² *V.C.H. Oxon.* x, 39.

³³ CHN 252/89, to form 60 self-contained flats with on-site parking, facilities and access, Planning File in Cherwell District Council.



Fig. 15. Middle section of Britannia Buildings.

Stone's buildings and to erect blocks of flats has been approved.³⁴ A request to spot-list the Henry Stone factory was turned down in 1995.³⁵ Regrettably, in October 1996 as this article went to press contractors commenced wholesale dismantling of the buildings to make way for a new housing scheme.

SPENCERS – THE FUTURE

Despite failing to secure the statutory protection of Spencer House or the Britannia Buildings, it has been gratifying that several positive initiatives have emerged as a result of drawing attention to the Spencer complex.

In 1995 the Spencer corset factory inspired 'Unlaced Grace', a season of craft, dance, writing and exhibitions on the theme of the corset co-ordinated through local and regional Arts organisations. A Southern Arts travelling exhibition, with corset designs by Vivienne Westwood et al., opened at Banbury Museum on 28 January 1995.³⁶ During the 1990s, staff of

³⁴ 95/00020/OUT, Demolition of existing warehouse and erection of 7 No. 2 bedroom houses, 7 No. 3 bedroom houses, 7 No. 3 bedroom houses, 7 No. 1 bedroom flats, 3 No. 1 bedroom wheelchair user flats. Construction and alteration of access. Ibid.

³⁵ Decision letter from Department of National Heritage, 3 May 1995.

³⁶ 'Unlaced Grace' (Southern Arts Exhibition leaflet), 1995.



Fig. 16. The Spencer supporting corset, 1931.

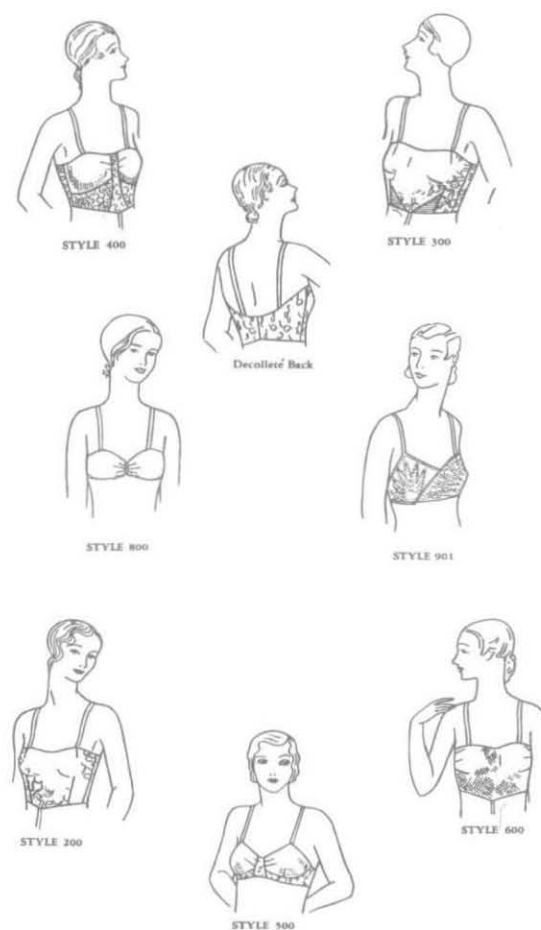


Fig. 17. Bandeau styles, 1931.



Fig. 18. Post-war corset.



Fig. 19. Surgical support.

Oxfordshire Museums undertook an oral history recording project with Spencers' employees. Current ideas under consideration by the local authority and other bodies include the formation of a new expanded museum with improved display and interpretation. The textile industry of Banbury would feature prominently in the new museum, including a section on Spencer corsets (Figs. 16–17).

Whilst Spencers may survive in terms of social history and museum artifacts it is lamentable that the buildings, particularly the Wallis, Gilbert and Partners Art Deco factory, may not.

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