

Lighthouse family that lit up the world

A family from the West Midlands was at the forefront of the world's lighthouse industry. **LISA WRIGHT** and **LUCY TOWNSEND** report on the Chance Brothers' glass empire.

IT was the beacon that helped sailors find their way home, a feat of engineering that marked the Victorian age and a symbol of great heroism and romance.

The lighthouse has always been an emblem of hope that has inspired writers, artists and historians in their work.

But the beauty of their setting belies the gritty industrialism at its core, and it was the Chance family, based in Smethwick, who were at the centre of the great manufacturing race to light up the world.

The great great great grandson of William Chance, who founded the Chance Brothers glass empire, returned to his Sandwell roots this week to launch his new book about the company.

"Lighthouses - The Race To Illuminate The World" tells of the men who made those great steps forward in the Victorian age, and author Toby Chance revealed there is even a possibility of a television documentary series to follow it.

Research

Toby Chance, whose grandfather Hugh was the last manager of the famous firm, and co-author Peter Williams, both admit to being completely obsessed with lighthouses. It is their guilty pleasure.

last three years travelling the world to research and write their book.

A select crowd of invited guests attended the launch at Smethwick Heritage Centre on Tuesday and took the opportunity to pass on their enthusiasm for the company's work.

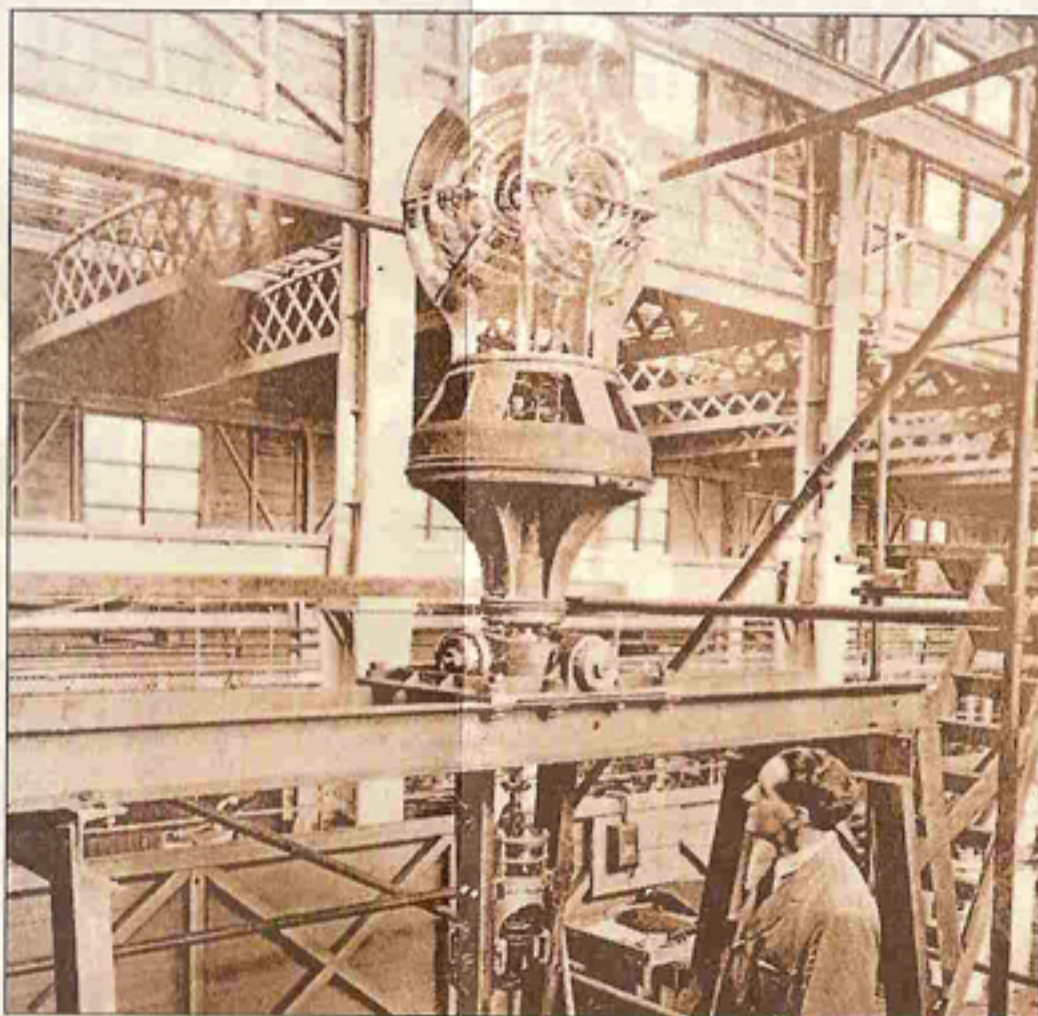
Chance Brothers built lighthouses around the world, from Cape Town to Karachi, forming and designing the parts from their factory in Spon Lane, Smethwick.

But in 1981 the company was taken over by Pilkington and the factory on Spon Lane was left derelict.

Toby, aged 48, now lives in Johannesburg. He says: "I really started to concentrate on the project after I visited two lighthouses in Cape Town.

"The lighthouse keepers were so amazed to meet a descendant of the Chance family that I thought that's interesting, why are they so interested?"

"I began to dig around and found there were hundreds of websites that were built by preservation societies all over the world where they were restoring the original lights and glass of lighthouses, many of which were



The Chance lightworks in Spon Lane, Smethwick, pictured in 1946



manufactured by the Chance brothers.

He adds: "The most difficult thing was to find a theme for the book because I didn't want to write a picture book or a history of the Chance brothers, I wanted to find a story that could carry its own narrative."

The "Race to Illuminate the World", as the book is called, tells the history of the fierce rivalry between French and English manufacturers.

Toby pits his great great grandfather James Chance, an optical scientist who first showcased his new lens design that would go on to revolutionise lighthouse production, at Crystal Palace in 1851, against fellow professional Augustin Fresnel.

He writes: "It was only through co-operation and competition - both benign and ruthless - with the French glass-makers that the Chance Brothers was able to reach their position."

"James Chance was the only man in Britain who was able first to equal, and then surpass the French in design and manufacture. He made

the Chance Brothers the greatest force in the world lighthouse industry."

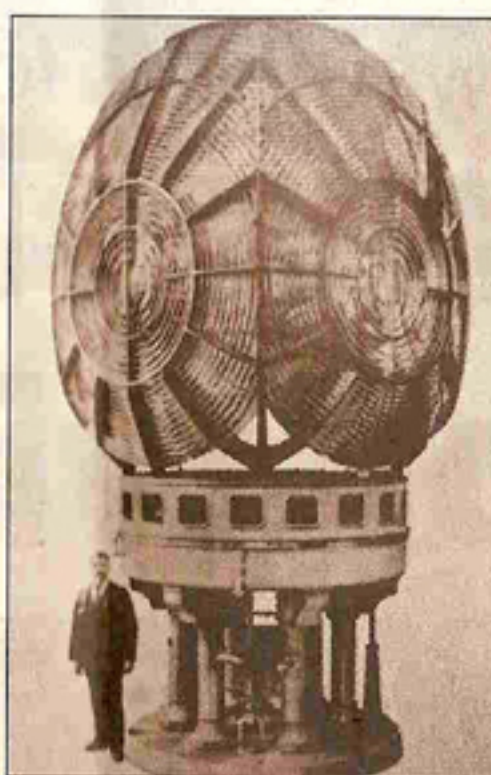
Chance supplied more than 2,300 lighthouse lenses to 73 countries between the building of their first lens in 1851 and the centenary of their lighthouse works.

Indispensable

The Slangkop lighthouse in Cape Peninsula, South Africa is an example of a turnkey lighthouse tower and illumination apparatus, constructed by Chance Brothers in 1914. Today the lighthouse remains in almost exactly the same state as when it was installed.

Chance lighthouses can also be found in Tyneside, Japan, Iceland, Guatemala, Zanzibar and New Zealand.

The book goes on: "In a time when globalisation became a reality for local firms across the world and empires opened up new corners of the globe to Western consciousness, lighthouses were an indispensable tool, ensuring the safe transport of goods



The catadioptric hyper-radial lens built for Manora Point lighthouse, Karachi, in 1908, one of the largest ever built at 20 tons



and people. James Chance, together with his family firm Chance brothers, was at the centre of that expanding world."

Toby's co-author Peter Williams, aged 68, has spent 10 years researching Chance Brothers. He says: "Personally for me it has taken about 10 years of intimate research and an interest in the Chance Brothers."

"Where I work at St Ann's Head in Pembrokeshire I've got an 1868 Chance lens still operating. I always wanted to write about it."

He has been using records and archives recently brought back to Smethwick from the Pilkington headquarters in Liverpool to aid his research.

He adds: "The archivists here in Smethwick were absolutely superb, nothing was too much trouble. Sometimes you don't have patience. You swear and cuss. It's a patient job, but it's also very frustrating."

● "The Race to Illuminate the World" is published by New Holland Publishers and priced £17.99