

JAMES SMELLIE LTD.



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Manufacturers of

CANOPIES & FIRE FRAMES TO THE FIREPLACE INDUSTRY

PERSONAL LETTER TO MY CUSTOMERS

Gentlemen,

For some years I have had two ambitions – one, to write of my experiences and reminiscences, and the other to make a tour of the world. The former may not materialize, but after looking up a considerable amount of data, I decided to write this letter as a first instalment for posting with a New Twelfth Edition Catalogue (148 pages), in the hope that it will be of some little interest to my customers, with many of whom I have enjoyed a valuable friendship over a long period of years. My experience as a retail salesman and traveller taught me the importance of arranging a catalogue in sections, indicating the various sizes of articles available, and having illustrations drawn to scale, the object being to give as much information as possible and anticipate every question a customer might reasonably be expected to ask.

I am posting this letter and also my photograph, to customers in all parts of Great Britain and Ireland, and also to all our Colonial and Foreign customers in all parts of the world; and if those that have known me and pay me the compliment of reading it will send me an acknowledgement and tell me some of their experiences and whereabouts, I will be very much interested and deeply grateful to them.

I was born in Ayrshire on May 31st, 1861, but my boyhood days were spent in Dumfriesshire, where my father, who was an honourable, conscientious, and much respected man, occupied a farm near to the famous old Caerlaverock Castle, and later at Longbridgemuir, Ruthwell. My mother was a most godly woman. Her memory calls up within me sentiments similar to those expressed in a letter by a lady who is a member of a distinguished family, on the occasion of the sudden and tragic passing of my wife on April 14th, 1926, while occupying the position of Mayoress of Dudley:- “I always looked upon your wife as one of God’s saints on earth, and one was better for having known her.”

I was educated at Hutton Hall Academy, a country school, which became famous through the ability and personality of a great Head Master to whom I owe much. In addition to day scholars, there were about 40 boarders, and some of them 20 years of age, who came from America and all parts of the British Empire.

On June 12th, 1878, I commenced my business career, and agreed to serve four years as an outdoor apprentice to the Ironmongery trade in Dumfries at a salary of £40, or £10 per annum.

Although my hours averaged 60 per week, I attended classes in Mathematics, Chemistry, Geology etc.

I burned the midnight oil studying for examinations, I secured several South Kensington certificates and also the first class prize.

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At these classes I first met John Stansfield, who has been a life-long friend, and when I was married on June 3rd 1889, in the Lake District, he was my best man. Some years afterwards he qualified as a Doctor of Medicine at Oxford. He is now a Canon of the Church of England, and long before the days of state medical services he founded in London, on the advise of the late Bishop Chavasse, the Bermondsey Medical Mission in connection with the University of Oxford, where many graduates who now occupy distinguished positions, including the present Archbishop of York, worked with him,

His work of service and sacrifice has always been, all my life, an inspiration to me and an example to the world.

After my apprenticeship, I had experience in an iron monger's shop in London, and later two years in Penrith.

In 1887, I accepted a situation to travel for a well-known manufacturer in Birmingham, who had an excellent reputation for producing hand cut, case-hardened Steel Fire Irons, and Burnished Steel and Ormolu Fenders with bottom plates.

Tiled hearths and brass, copper and what was called Victoria bronze (made and finished in exactly the same way as our Florentine Bronze on Cast Iron is today) curbs and hearth suites had come into fashion, but the cheaper qualities of brass and also iron fenders were bought from small makers who collected the cash on Saturday mornings in time to pay their workers' wages, a system which still obtains in the Birmingham district

From this experience I learned the valuable lesson – that to establish and maintain a sound and reliable connection (even if you do make less profit), one must manufacture cheap goods as well as the best and thereby give customers reliable quality and finish. This has always been my aim.

In January, 1893, six years later, I determined to make a start for myself, and purchased a partnership with a manufacturer in Dudley, whose cheap iron and brass rail fenders had been factored and which I had sold.

We engaged a first-class draughtsman and pattern maker, who was a very skilled craftsman, and we made up a number of new patterns for expensive Black and Copper Hearth Suites.

We also commenced to make all Brass, Copper, Pierced and Forged Hearth Suites, also all kinds of Art Metal Goods, Grates and Fire Places.

I did the whole of the travelling from Bristol to Inverness, and opened over two thousand new accounts. Nearly all of these who are still in business are, I am pleased to say, customers at the present time. During three and a half years our business had increased until we were the largest manufacturers of Hearth Suites in the United Kingdom, and I then brought my commercial travelling to a close. My first order was taken in St. Helens in 1887, and my week's personal sales were about £70.

On referring to my Order Books, which I still possess, I find my last order was taken in York on July 9th, 1896, and my personal sales for 4 days were £246.

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On January 8th, 1904, our partnership was dissolved on mutual friendly terms, and I not only purchased the works, property and cottages which we owned, the patterns, stock-in-trade, trade marks, book debts, trade name and all the assets, but I also paid a very large sum for the goodwill of the business, and left my late partner with a free hand, and no restrictions, so far as competition was concerned.

The first year after the business became my own property was one of the most prosperous I ever had, and no words can express the gratitude I then felt and still feel to customers, their buyers and their assistants, for their help and support at a critical time in my commercial career.

In 1906, I turned my business into a Private Limited Company with 30,000 Fully-paid Ordinary One Pound Shares, all of which are held by members of my family.

We have about 3,500 ledger accounts, and the great majority of these customers I have known personally. I have estimated with Principals, assistants and apprentices. During the nine years I was travelling, and since, I have come into personal contact with no fewer than 15,000 people connected with the Builder's Ironmongery, Furnishing Ironmongery and House Furnishing trades.

When I was in Canada in 1928, on a tour with Members of the Federation of British Industries, I met a number of people who knew me and many others who knew and had sold the goods we manufacture.

In September, 1891, "The Ironmonger" published an article ("By a Commercial Traveller") written by me, in which I predicted that the furnishing ironmonger of the future would have to be a complete house furnisher. The Editor informed me that my article would be paid for, and also that any others I wrote on trade subjects would be published. The result was that several articles appeared subsequently under the same nom-de-plume, and also in 1892, a series of articles on Commercial Travellers, "By one of them." The money I received for this and other journalist efforts from 1891 to 1897 I spent on books, and when I was able to buy that valuable work, "Owen Jones' Grammar of Ornament," I was very proud of my possession. I have now a valuable library of art and design books of all kinds, including original volumes by Chippendale, Hepplewhite, Sheraton, Adam and others.

I have always been a great admirer of polished and burnished steel metal work, and spend many happy hours at home before an "Ivanhoe" Rustless and Stainless Steel fireplace, and delight in seeing the flames' reflections in its concave side panels, which adds so much to the cosiness of a room on a cold winter's evening. The advantages of stainless steel fireplaces are each year becoming more widely recognised by the public. The fact that they will last a life-time, will not lose their polish and necessitate no more labour in keeping clean than does a tiled fireplace, are points that make a strong appeal. It is essential, however, that the fireplace be obtained from a manufacturer who is prepared to have many hours spent by specially trained craftsmen in glazing, polishing and finishing the best rustless steel that can possibly be procured. There are now so many badly made tiled fireplaces on the market, that soon crack and fall to pieces, and so many common quality tiles, that the public is getting tired of them. Those who have vision realise that the metal fireplace is coming into its own again.

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It is my firm opinion that confidence in the steel fireplace, based on personal experience, on the part of those whose business it is to sell fireplaces, would give a great stimulus to business. I am prepared to back this opinion by the following offer: - I will supply, at less that cost price, a Rustless Steel Fireplace or Hearth Suite to any customer or his buyer, or any of his salesmen, provided they will install the articles in their own houses where they can watch results and satisfy themselves as to the claims I make for them. A Polished Steel "Ivanhoe" Fireplace was supplied through an old customer to H.R.H Princess Mary. "Ivanhoe" Metal Work has been supplied for Balmoral Castle and many of the old historical Castles and Houses in all parts of the country. We have reproduced old metal goods of all kinds, and have made and supplied all the brass tomb railing for the Sultan of Morocco's grave. Ivanhoe Grates and Hearth Suites are in most of the largest hotels all over the country, and we executed for a customer an order for nearly 400 Armour Bright and All-Brass Curbs, Coal Boxes, etc., for a modern hotel which cost about a million pounds.

The Rt. Hon. Stanley Baldwin, when he was Prime Minister, made a special visit to our stall at the British Industries Fair in Birmingham and was very much interested in our Rustless and Stainless Steel Fireplaces. We had a very interesting exhibit at the International Paris Exhibition in 1900, including a complete Metal Fireplace Suite with Chimney Piece, specially designed by Mr. Ashbee, and we received a silver and bronze medal and also honourable mention.

I chose early in life as a private motto, "Magna est veritas et prevalebit" ("Truth is mighty and will prevail"), for my motto in public life "Never complain, never explain," and for business "Quality remains long after price is forgotten," recognising that in the long run the best is the cheapest.

My tailor charges me twelve guineas for a suit of clothes, and I get the best quality cloth that can be made. When I remind him I see suits in shop windows at 70/- he tells me these tailors make more money than he does as the clothes do not wear, but they buy their own clothes from him.

I don't pay this price because I like it. It is an economic proposition, apart from skilful cut and fitting, and the moral is obvious.

I hate shoddy goods of all kinds, and when Travellers or Salesmen tell me only cheap and nasty goods are sold it leaves me cold. This is only true when they keep offering and pushing the cheapest lines, and this applies equally to both the wholesale and the retail trades. An expert salesman with practical knowledge and artistic tastes always pushes the sale of best quality goods, and thereby does a service to the customer and raises the reputation of the Company that employs him. The converse is also true.

Rough and steep though the path has been, I have managed to make my own way in the world and I lived a very strenuous but very interesting life. I have had my share of disappointments and sorrows, and I often repeat to myself, "There comes a dew and a weeping rain and life is never the same again." On the other hand, my business has given me great pleasure, and I have had many blessings, received much help and encouragement and have always had, in spite of hard work, excellent health. "Labor omnia vincit." I live 250 yards from one

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of the best golf courses in the Midlands, and although my handicap is double figures, I still enjoy my 36 holes golf on Saturdays.

When I was Vice-President of the Dudley and District Chamber of Commerce in 1905, I attended a conference in Liege and in Brussels, and I was presented to the late King of the Belgians.

I have twice been presented to H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, and during my Mayoralty I had to receive and present an address of welcome to the Duke and Duchess of York.

If I had devoted all my life to business, I could have made a great deal more money than I have done, but to me a life of selfish materialism and pleasure is a wasted life. Every person in the world owes a service to society. It is the rent he pays for his room on earth.

For the selfish man there is no heaven, for the self-less man there is no hell.

I have undertaken my share of gratuitous public service, the following being some of my activities in Dudley:

I was elected a Member of the School Board in 1901, of the Council in 1903, and Chairman of the Elementary, Higher and Technical Education Committees in 1909 (positions I still hold). I am a Representative Governor of the Birmingham University and a Commissioner for Income Tax.

I gave an address on Education from the British Broadcasting Studio in Birmingham on January 21, 1926.

I was made a Magistrate in 1917, and I was one of the first Presidents of the Rotary Club.

I was elected an Alderman in 1924, and I served the Borough as Mayor for two years (1924-1926).

During the war, instead of realizing investments outside my business and tasking up the manufacture of munitions of war, by which I could have made a considerable amount of money, I made great sacrifices, while many of our work people were fighting, to serve my country, carry on my business and supply old customers with goods.

My sons were officers in the Army. My wife was doing Red Cross and other war work, and I was appointed to the most unpopular position of Military Representative to the Tribunal, for which I received the decoration of M.B.E.

As I am now approaching the three score years and ten, and entering what literary men would call the corridor of life's eventide, I try to accept, Martial's Ideal of old age. "To look on life with placid eye, and neither fear or wish to die." Charles Kingsley said an American once told him whenever they saw a head rising above the crowd they said, Hit it, and in however humble a way a man makes any progress in life he is bound to create jealousies and make some enemies. I have always tried to play the game even in cases where it has been financially unprofitable in business, and unpopular in public life, and in so doing I have no regrets.

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I am conscious in my life of having made many mistakes said and done things I have very much regretted, and like other men, I have often been misunderstood and misjudges when explanations could not be given, but it has been truly said, "The man who makes no mistakes, never makes anything else."

In conclusion, I would say with Tennyson:

"Yet all experience is an Arc where thro'
Gleams that untravelled world whose Margin fades,
For ever and forever when I move."

Yours ever

James Smellie

Ivanhoe & Cellini Works, Dudley

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