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Any visitor arriving at Bowcliffe Hall, Bayford's beautiful head office near Wetherby in Yorkshire, would almost immediately get a sense of the man behind the business. One of the first things the visitor sees on driving through the gates is the statue of a small girl standing on the lawn gazing up at a sign in front of her. The visitor sees first of all the other side of the sign, which orders, 'No Stopping: No Parking: No Kidding'. But on the side attracting the girl's attention is a quote from *Alice in Wonderland*, for the girl is indeed Alice:

'I don't want to go amongst mad people,' Alice remarked.

'Oh, you can't help that,' said the Cat. 'We are all mad here. I'm mad, you're mad.'

'How do you know I'm mad?' said Alice.

'You must be,' said the Cat, 'or you wouldn't have come here.'

It sums up in part Jonathan Turner's view of the type of business environment he wanted to create, one populated by people who were fun to work with, who were a little bit different, a little bit quirky, a little bit mad. It is this ethos that has been behind the success of the business for the past 30 years.

The Turner family has been involved with Bayford since it was founded after the First World War. Perhaps the common thread through much of that history has been energy and indeed for a time the business was known as Bayford Energy. It began by selling coal; today it sells gas and electricity. And in this shift lies one reason why the Bayford name has survived: the business has adapted constantly to changing circumstances. Jonathan's father,



David, began moving the business away from coal in the 1960s when Bayford began distributing oil and selling petrol. In the 1970s and 1980s, his dream was the creation of an integrated energy business. Although this had mixed results, it helped to insure the company against the uncertain fortunes of the coal industry. In the late 1990s, as Jonathan took a leading role, Bayford overcame the crisis in fuel retailing by teaming up with a national fuel bunkering partner and entering the fuel card sector. Latterly, the company's approach has been characterised by keeping an open mind about the future of any of its businesses, happy either to expand them by applying its expertise in acquisitions and management, or to sell them if an appropriate offer comes along. Most recently, echoing the decision to move from coal into oil, Bayford has moved from oil into gas and electricity.

Another reason for Bayford's longevity is the way its leaders have complemented each other in their skills. Although we know little about the relationship Fred Turner, Jonathan's grandfather, had with the company's founding chairman, Benjamin Binks, it might not be too far away from the truth to say that Fred's skills in managing the business day-to-day were complemented by the wider overview of the business taken by Benjamin as chairman for so many years. David Turner and his brother John formed, by all accounts, an ideal partnership; David was an extrovert, full of ideas, the epitome of the salesman; and John was a calming influence, looking after the details in which David was less interested. For the last 30

years, it is the partnership between Jonathan Turner and Liz Slater that has driven the business; Jonathan, his father writ large in many of his traits; Liz, the pragmatist, translating Jonathan's vision into practice.

Furthermore, certainly since the days of David and John Turner, people have enjoyed coming to work for the company. By and large, Bayford's leaders have enthused their teams, creating commitment, dedication and loyalty. The key has been avoiding complacency and inertia, and under Jonathan and Liz the company's ethos of working hard and having fun was not only reinvigorated but also promoted more overtly. In addition, they have shown good judgement in recruiting and developing talented young people, who have filled senior positions and formed the support team that has been necessary for the development of the business.

Lastly, ownership has never been sacrosanct. Bayford is and isn't a family business. It has been re-born with every passing generation. It wasn't a family business to start with in terms of ownership even though it was always managed by the Turner family. Fred Turner only ever had half the shares in the business and it didn't pass completely into the family until David and John bought it in 1972. That was a brave decision by the brothers, as was Jonathan Turner's decision to buy the business from them a generation later.

The story that follows charts the ups and downs of a business and a family whose fortunes have been intertwined for a century.

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## How it all began

**The company takes its name from Bayford, a small village in Hertfordshire.** It was here, so the story goes, that the firm's founders agreed to join up to form a new business. This must be true since there is no other reason why the company should take the name it still carries today.

The four founders, Frank Baker, Benjamin Binks, William Chambers and Sidney Ludolf, were near neighbours in Headingley, Leeds. During the First World War they all saw service on the Western Front. Benjamin Binks and William Chambers fought alongside each other in the Army Service Corps while Frank Baker served in the 5th Battalion of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. They all landed in France in April 1915 and may well have stopped

off in Bayford on the journey. Sidney Ludolf, however, was already in the United States and joined the conflict only when America entered the war in 1917. He then went back to the US, returning to Leeds in 1921.

*Bayford,  
Hertfordshire.*





## The Founders

Bayford & Co was founded by four young men from Leeds: Frank Baker, born in 1884; Sidney Ludolf, born in 1887; Benjamin Binks, born in 1889; and William Chambers, born in 1890. **Frank Baker** was the son of an Essex clergyman. After leaving school he joined an insurance company and in 1914 he was working in Leeds as an insurance inspector. **Sydney Ludolf** came from an old-established Jewish family who ran a prosperous textile business in Leeds. As a younger son, there was no room for Sydney in the family firm and instead he trained as an architect. **Benjamin Binks** was the son of an insurance agent who had married into money. This allowed Benjamin's father to give up work and educate his son at Sedbergh School. Benjamin then returned to Leeds to study law. **William Chambers' father** was the National Telephone Company's superintendent in Leeds. Entrepreneurial by nature, William became a partner in a firm making iron buildings.

With all four living in Headingley, they probably knew each other before the war. By then, Sydney was living and working in the United States. Frank, Benjamin and William all joined up when war was declared. Frank served with the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry; Benjamin and William, with the West Riding Divisional Train of the Army Service Corps, all of them landing in France in April 1915, all of them ending the war as officers. Remarkably, Sydney, who was still a British citizen, joined them when the USA entered the war in 1917, coming to France as a corporal in the US Army's 3rd Infantry Division, serving with Field Hospital No. 7.

All four would return to live permanently in Leeds. Although they never took an active role in managing the business, they and their descendants remained shareholders after the business was incorporated in 1937 until its sale to David and John Turner in 1972.

At different times the company has claimed that it was founded in 1919, 1920 and 1922, and there is no firm evidence of the actual date. But if the story of three young soldiers making a pact en route to war is true, then it seems reasonable to take 1919 as the date, for why would they wait any longer to set up their new venture?

Since all four founders were pursuing independent careers, it might seem odd for them to set up a business as coal merchants. It seems to have been a sideline since none of them was involved in running the business day-to-day. There were, however, good reasons for them to choose the coal industry. In the inter-war years, it was still one of the country's most important industries.

## Early Years

Leeds was as good a place as any to start a business selling coal. Unlike many other regional centres, it was not as badly hit as others by the inter-war depression. As well as a

## The Coal Industry

Although the founders of Bayford & Co had no experience of the coal industry, their decision to set up in business as coal merchants reflected the fact that coal was still one of the country's most important industries. As the founders marched off to war in 1914, the industry, it was said, was 'the greatest of the British trades'. It employed more than 1.1 million miners producing 287 million tons of coal every year, a total never again exceeded. Coal heated homes and offices, drove railway engines, powered ocean-going liners and fired up the furnaces of steel and ironworks. Forests of chimneys sprouted from the rooftops of many towns and cities; buildings were blackened by soot; and dense, choking smogs became a regular affliction during cold autumn and winter days. Yorkshire alone had more than 100 pits, which were regarded as among the most efficient in the industry. Until nationalisation in 1947, each pit sold its coal via agents, presenting opportunities for Bayford & Co, well-served in Leeds by direct rail transport from the pits or via barges along the Aire & Calder Navigation.

*Bullcroft Colliery, Carcroft, a typical Yorkshire colliery of the 1920s. (Derne Valley/Alamy)*

*The Army Service Corps on the Western Front: a supply train steaming into a railhead at Frechencourt, March 1917. (© IWM (Q4820))*

*Men of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry fusing mortar bombs, Wieltje, near Ypres, 1 October 1917. (© IWM (Q6454))*





Just a mile from Bayford's South Accommodation Road site in Leeds lay the Balm Road aircraft factory of Robert Blackburn, whose home, Bowcliffe Hall, would later become Bayford's head office. BAE Systems



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population of 625,000, almost all of them living in homes heated by coal, it also had thriving commercial, retail and industrial sectors, whose offices, shops and factories all relied on coal.

Bayford & Co, coal merchants, first appears in local trade directories in 1923, when it was based in Owen Chambers, 4, Duncan Street, Leeds. This was in the heart of the city; Duncan Street linked two of its main thoroughfares, Briggate and Boar Lane. Owen Chambers was home to several other businesses, including the Allied Artists Corporation Ltd; Mitchell N Gladstone & Co, safe makers; George E Nicholson, business transfer agent; George Richards, an iron merchant; Stanton & Smailes, surveyors; Daniel & Royle Ltd, paper agents; and the Leeds representative of the Kitson Engineering Company (London) Ltd. In 1925, the firm moved to 30, Park Cross Street, close to Park Square, and ten minutes' walk away from Duncan Street. Once again it was an address

shared with others, including a woollen manufacturer, solicitor and manufacturer's agent.

By 1929, the business was doing well enough to lease space at the London & North Eastern Railway Company's depot in South Accommodation Road, where trains transported coal directly from the collieries for distribution throughout the city. But this was the year of the Wall Street Crash, which heralded one of the worst global economic depressions, causing countless businesses to fail and throwing millions of people out of work around the world. By 1932, Bayford & Co had given up its city centre office, concentrating all its activities on South Accommodation Road.

By then, the business was under the daily direction of 26-year-old Fred Turner. For the next quarter of a century, he would remain in charge, winning the trust and respect of the founding partners.

## Fred Turner

**Fred Turner spent his entire working life with Bayford & Co.** He joined as an office boy in 1922 and retired as chairman in 1971, by which time he owned half the business. No one knows who ran Bayford in its earliest years but evidently the founders found Fred reliable and trustworthy. Within a few years he was running the business.

Fred built up the business in and around Leeds during the 1920s and 1930s. By the late 1930s, it was probably turning over around £2 million a year in today's values. Coal was delivered throughout the city, firstly by horse and cart, later by a small fleet of motor wagons, all based at South Accommodation Road. It was hard work, with men turning up at the yard at the crack of dawn to shovel coal from heaps into sacks, heaving them onto their carts before they

set off on their deliveries to the terraced streets, housing estates, offices and factories scattered around the city. With their regular rounds, the coalmen got to know their customers well, developing a reputation for good timekeeping and customer service. Coalmen were trusted.



Leeds in the 1930s - Duncan Street and Boar Lane. (Leeds Library and Information Service, www.leodis.net)