



The year is 1895 and the employees of the flourishing Deddington firm pose for a group photo . . .

# Six inches short!

AND THAT PROVED  
A DEATH SENTENCE  
FOR AN OXON FIRM

By Pam Meade

**SUPER-SLEUTH** Sally Stradling has tracked down a fascinating slice of Oxfordshire history . . . to chronicle the rise and fall of a firm that achieved international renown, only to crash and disappear almost without trace.

At its peak at the turn of this century, in the dormitory village of Deddington, Franklins employed more than 200 men and were the biggest employers for miles around.

They also had a reputation second to none for their church furnishings and woodcarvings.

That lasted until 1917, when an almost laughable mistake led to the firm's downfall.

During the 1914-18 War, Franklins received a large order for stretchers which they unfortunately turned out six inches **SHORTER** than the War Office specifications. Because of this they weren't paid and went out of business in 1917.

Little has been heard of them since, although their work is still in existence all over the world.

Sally's investigation began with the donation of a box of 74 wood carving tools to Banbury Museum early last year.

Each of the tools had a name engraved on the wooden handle and Sally decided to try to trace relatives of people connected with the company, to build up a detailed picture.

## Woodcarvers were the elite

Though she wasn't able to speak to any employees, she has pieced together a fascinating account of the life and times of the firm of H.R. and W. Franklin.

The tools themselves, accompanied by examples of Franklins' work and many photographs, are now on show as the Summer Exhibition at the County Museum, Woodstock until September 29.

Sally from Chipping Norton, who has a three-year contract as a field worker for the historic Buildings Survey, has researched the exhibition and taken many of the photographs. It was designed by John Rhodes, the keeper of antiquities at Woodstock.



The year is 1985 and Sally Stradling poses for a photo with some of the tools the old workmen used . . .

Sally's research shows that Franklins specialised in church building and restoration, and employed joiners, carpenters, pit sawers, smiths, masons, horsemen and estimators. But it was their woodcarvers who were the elite.

The firm was founded in 1850 by Robert Franklin and 20 years later his widow was employing 84 men and eight boys. Later it was taken over by the brothers, Henry Robert Franklin and W. Franklin who turned it into a major concern with over 200 employees.

Their output, mainly in the Victorian high-Gothic style, was prolific, and spread far and wide — from a tiny chapel in the North Oxfordshire hamlet of Hempton, to Hobart Cathedral in Tasmania, for which the firm produced a chancel screen and pulpit.

Sally found her detective work fascinating. "I am so glad I did it. If I had left it another two years it would probably have been too late," she says.

"Already two of the people I talked to, have since died."

Nearly all the people Franklins employed came from the Deddington area, and there was a five-year apprenticeship as a woodcarver, for which each man had to provide his own tools — between 60 and 90 of them — which he would keep in a wooden toolbox or chest.

Sally spoke to the daughter of one of the last woodcarvers employed by Franklins, Alf Stanley, who recalls her father worked very long hours and was often away from home, all for the princely sum of 6½d an hour.

Franklins used mainly English oak from Exeter or Brackley for their work, and examples can be seen in St John's Church, Cowley; St Margaret's Church, Oxford; Holy Trinity at Stratford-on-Avon; and Horton Hospital at Banbury which they built from scratch.

In Deddington itself, the church roof, pulpit, reading desk, communion rails and altar pieces were all provided by Franklins, and the gates were made by Alf Stanley after he retired.