

The Life and Accomplishments of Lord Southwood

Ernie Mackenzie worked for seven years at Sun Printers in Gravure Process, Carbon Etching, and the Warehouse, after working for fourteen years at Odhams in Watford.

Elias: Printer, Publisher, and Peer

The life of Julius Salter Elias is reminiscent of that old Japanese Proverb, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.”

In 1894, out-of-work men would wait outside works entrances where they hoped to find jobs. Such was the case when the two sons of William Odhams, who owned and operated a printing company in Burleigh Street, off The Strand, decided to set up their own printing business, Odhams Brothers Ltd., in Hart Street. One morning in early January, the new manager, looking for a compositor, came out and had a brief interview with some of the men. One with the requisite qualifications was singled out and invited in. The remaining men went their various ways – except one, a slight, boyish figure dressed in what must have been his best suit. The next morning, he was there again, before anyone else had arrived. The early snow had turned to sleet and the lad’s clothing was drenched by the time the manager emerged. Singling out the men he wanted, he told the lad, “I have nothing for you,” then relented and invited him in to get dry and have a warm drink. At some point he took pity on the lad and offered him a job as the works’ office boy, which was gratefully accepted. As it happens, that day, the 5th of January, was the lad’s birthday and, although he looked a mere boy, he was now 21. The manager said, “Well, we’d better know your name then.” The lad replied, “Julius Salter Elias.”

Born in Birmingham on 5th January 1873, Julius was the youngest of seven children. The family moved to London in 1883 when he was ten. His father had been a maker and seller of jet buttons and brooches, until they went out of fashion; in London, he ran a small newspaper and confectioner’s business at 81 The Grove, in the Borough of Hammersmith. Julius would deliver the newspapers before he went to school. He wound up attending a number of schools, where fees were fourpence a week in old currency. His schooling, which had inevitably been spasmodic, ended at the age of thirteen when he started working for a jeweller in Houndsditch as an errand boy for five shillings (twenty-five pence) a week. At the age of 15, he commenced his career in the printing industry, working for the Carlyle Press, whose premises were in Charterhouse Square, in the heart of London. It was here that he started a long and arduous apprenticeship in the line of work for which he had the greatest respect and aptitude. He spent five years at the Press before being laid off, a development that led him to seek employment at Odhams Brothers.

The brothers had only just broken away from their father’s business and set up their own in Hart Street, later to be renamed Floral Street. Odhams Brothers employed about twenty people at the time that Elias (as he will be called from here on) joined the company. Two flatbed presses were being relied on to meet the needs of customers; there was no rotary press at the time. As the orders increased – and they increased rapidly – more personnel were recruited. By May of that first year (1894), there were over sixty employees in the various departments. By Christmas, Elias had earned himself the position of Manager. In 1898, Mr Odhams senior retired, allowing the two Odhams

establishments to amalgamate under the new title of Odhams Ltd., with Elias being made one of the directors – a great tribute to his energy and industry, having advanced from office boy to director in only four years.

From a firm that had started out, through debentures with fixed interest rates, as a £7,000 company in Floral Street in 1894 (the year Elias joined it), he had steered it astutely round the corner, once given a chance at the helm. By the time of the amalgamation with William Odhams' firm in 1898, the company had an authorized capital of £50,000. Plans were then put in place for Odhams Ltd to be converted to a public company, with a further £50,000 to be raised by the issue of shares to the public.

At the start of the twentieth century, Odhams began looking for more space, with the intention to expand further. Southwood Smith and Co., in Fetter Lane, had taken away the *Today* paper that Odhams had been printing, and Odhams had retaliated by taking *Madame* away from Southwood Smith and Co. Elias suggested to the board that he meet with the head of Southwood Smith and Co. and propose that the two companies enter into an arrangement for printing on each other's machines, so that each might lean on the other when there was too great a workload, and thus the maximum advantage might accrue to both. The visit was a success and both sides agreed to take in each other's printing as the need arose.

As Odhams Ltd. developed, new work kept the presses running pretty much non-stop. In fact, the workload was growing too fast. The Southwood Smith and Co. factory, in Plough Court, and the Odhams Ltd. factory, in Floral Street, were soon both working to capacity, there weren't enough presses, and there was no further space for the factories to spread into. It was soon obvious that Odhams Ltd. would have to move. By now, Elias was Works Director of both companies, and he realized that the only way to get the printing done was by involving other firms in the same way that he had first involved Southwood Smith and Co.

He soon arranged a deal with Danks and Co., of Dean Street, to come into the fold. He now had several workplaces to keep his eye on and he saw an urgent need to bring these scattered concerns under one roof. Fortunately, a property, available and ideally suited to the purpose, was just around the corner, in Long Acre. It was an old theatre, The Queen's, London's largest after Drury Lane – but no performances had been given there for close on a quarter of a century. The pleasing-to-the-eye structure of The Queen's, and the size of the property, left Elias extremely happy and enthusiastic for the future of all concerned. The move to Long Acre, in 1905, turned out to be just the start; Odhams would soon spread like flood waters over both sides of the road, side streets and turnings in all directions, spilling over into Henrietta Street, Holborn, and even The Strand.

By now Odhams Ltd. and Southwood Smith and Co. were working in a more convenient union.

In 1906, Elias entered into a union of his own when he married Alice Louise Collard, the daughter of the head of a London firm of chartered accountants.

It was at this time, too, that Horatio Bottomley, a former newspaper proprietor and the new MP for Hackney South, was working on a plan to launch a tabloid-style version of an earlier conservative magazine called *John Bull*. Odhams took on the printing, although Elias had to be convinced to do so; there was much about Bottomley that Elias couldn't connect with. No two men could have been more dissimilar: in the days when Bottomley had been a millionaire, Elias had been unemployed; Bottomley had reached great heights and then crashed, while Elias had risen slowly but steadily; Bottomley was a gambler and an atheist, whereas Elias had no taste for gambling and read his bible every

morning. Bottomley was flamboyant and perpetually in the limelight, whereas Elias was shy and retiring. However, after careful consideration, Elias decided to take on the printing of the magazine.

The first issue of *John Bull* in its new tabloid guise went out on the 9th of June, 1906. The print order was to be fifty thousand copies and the issue consisted of twenty-four pages plus a pale buff cover. It was an instant success and sold out within a few hours. More copies were quickly printed and rushed out to the bookstalls to satisfy the demand. The success was phenomenal and exceeded Elias's most optimistic expectations. The print order for the second issue was increased considerably and, once again, insufficient copies were printed and, once again, the presses had to roll to supply additional copies to meet public demand. Each subsequent issue experienced increased demand. In their entire history, Odhams had not had an order as lucrative as the one for the printing of *John Bull*. In the twelve months following its launch, sales had risen to a million copies each week.

In 1912, Elias bought the film magazine *Picturegoer* from Southwood Smith and Co. By this time, Odhams had become a publisher as well as a printer. It had also absorbed three other printing establishments and was engaged in four times as much work as before. By 1914, Elias was printing forty different publications. To accommodate this volume of work he now installed new rotary presses, each capable of printing 30,000 copies an hour. Amongst the publications were *Passing Show*, *Picturegoer*, *Kinematograph Weekly*, *John Bull*, *Fairplay*, *The Performer*, *The Cabinet Maker*, *Hardware Journal*, *Sunday Pictorial*, *National News*, *Sunday Evening Telegram*, *Madame*, *Medical Express and Circular*, *Hairdresser Journal*, *Railway Times*, and *The Perfumer*.

And then WWI intervened. The war meant that newspaper sales soared, as the papers were the main source of information for a public desperate to know how things were going. That demand ran up against other pressures, as paper became less easy to obtain, and so did ink and labour. Compositors, printers, and packers who had joined up had to be replaced by those who were physically unfit for active service. When Elias realized the war wouldn't be over by Christmas of 1914, a lot of his plans had to be put on the back burner.

With the coming of peace, Elias set about placing Odhams on a firmer financial footing. He decided to embark on a complete reorganisation of the business, to bring together all of its many parts. He also started, or took over, more publications. In 1918 came *Pan*, a weekly, chiefly concerned with humour that appealed to every section of the public capable of laughter, containing original quips and cartoons, and articles by Britain's most amusing writers. Comyns Beaumont, already editor of *The Passing Show*, was appointed editor of *Pan* as well. The first issue of *Ideal Home*, a monthly magazine, appeared on newsstands in January 1920. (It is still published today.)

John Bull was reaching the peak of its popularity by then, but Bottomley was taking longer and longer to pay the printing bills. Elias met with him in the hope of persuading him to pay off some of the debts, but Bottomley was skint. Elias told him that a resolution would have to be found or there would be no further printing of *John Bull*. Bottomley suggested that, in the circumstances, Odhams and Elias should take over the publishing as well. Elias agreed to this, and a new company was formed, to be known as Odhams Press Ltd.

Around this time, Elias acquired his first newspaper, *Sporting Life*. He also started a fine-prints and postcard department, to produce pictures of film stars for enthusiastic admirers. He added to the business Dean's large range of children's books. After this, he went in another direction, that of street hoardings with their multi-coloured advertisements. He first acquired the Gosnay advertising

company, which had a hundred or so prime poster sites in London and suburbs, and then the Borough Billposting Company, which had nearly seven thousand poster sites.

By 1922, the weekly print order for *John Bull* was 2 million copies.

Elias's next acquisition was *The People*, a well-established Sunday newspaper with a weekly print order of 250,000 copies. As its new publisher, he supervised an overhaul of its contents to make it more competitive with the other Sunday papers, including the *News of the World*, which had a print order of 5 million copies. By 1926, *The People* had achieved a circulation of 1 million copies, and would pass the 2-million mark by 1929. Having started out as a printer, Elias had become a newspaper publisher and now had a place at the council table of the Newspaper Proprietors Association.

Then, in May 1926, Britain was brought to a complete standstill by the General Strike. Neither morning nor evening newspapers were published, so plans were made by the Conservative government (of which Stanley Baldwin was prime minister) to issue a daily newsletter, to be called *The British Gazette*, describing the day-to-day situation from the government's point of view. The principal agent in preparing and executing this plan was Winston Churchill, MP. But before the plan could be launched, a printer had to be found who was prepared to undertake the work in defiance of the strikers. Churchill and Baldwin discussed the matter with other cabinet members and it was finally decided to approach Elias. After much deliberation with his board and department heads, Elias concluded that he could not undertake the printing of any newspaper that involved the use of black-leg labour, and he notified Churchill and Baldwin accordingly. (*The British Gazette* wound up being produced for about a week – until the end of the strike – by His Majesty's Stationery Office on presses commandeered from the Organization for the Maintenance of Supplies, which had been made an arm of the government.)

Meanwhile, with the success of *The People* and *John Bull*, Elias was now the most talked-about man in Fleet Street. He spoke very highly of his Odhams staff and their loyalty and efficiency. He improved their pay and working conditions. He took a keen interest in his employees' welfare, instructing heads of department to inform him whenever a staff member had become ill. Furthermore, he made it his business to learn the circumstances of staff members who were unwell, and helped out when he saw a need. Two examples of his many kindnesses: He paid the bills of a compositor who was in hospital suffering from pneumonia and who had been unable to pay money he owed to tradesmen. In a note to the patient, Elias told him not to worry but to concentrate on getting better, assuring him that his job was safe and that his salary would continue to be paid in his absence. In the case of a messenger boy who fell ill and died, Elias not only paid for the boy's funeral but also gave the boy's out-of-work father a job.

Elias was again on the lookout for another daily newspaper. Someone suggested *The Daily Herald*, a paper well known for its political connections with the Labour Party. At the time (1926), it was owned by the trade unions and was the mouthpiece of unions and socialists.

The paper had a storied history, first appearing in 1911 with a print order for 26,000 copies but soon shutting down for lack of funding. A year later, George Lansbury and Ben Tillet had succeeded in reviving it, and the paper acquired a reputation for standing up for the underdog, fighting for Ireland, for India, and for the campaign to extend the vote to women. Lansbury and Tillet worked hard to keep the *Herald* rolling off the presses but it was always underfunded. In 1914, with the outbreak of war, it had been forced to become a weekly. In 1919, Ernest Bevin was brought into the picture. He had formed, and become the general secretary of, the Transport and General Workers' Union that

represented mainly unskilled labour, and had become the most influential figure in the trade union movement. Lansbury and Tillet contacted him to see if he would be interested in supporting the *Herald*. He was interested, and the *Herald*, with renewed union backing, became a daily again and Bevin joined the board as a director. Still, the newspaper struggled. In 1922, its funding was taken over by the T.U.C. [Trades Union Congress] and the Labour Party, which, at the same time, acquired the *Herald's* printing company, Victorian House. The *Herald* remained financially straitened, however, and it was hoped that substantial loans might be obtained from elsewhere. Bevin's board had learned of Elias and his quest for another daily to run on his presses alongside *The People*. John Dunbar, the general editor of *The People*, had always been a keen trade unionist and an ardent member of the Labour Party, and was also eager for Elias to print the *Herald*. At the annual T.U.C. conference in 1929 it was agreed that an arrangement should be entered into with Elias, and a new company, The Daily Herald (1929) Ltd., was formed. It would have nine directors in all, four representing the T.U.C. and five representing Odhams. Elias became chairman, and Bevin dropped down to deputy chairman. In this way, the paper was able to remain the voice of the trade unions and of the Labour Party, and Bevin and Elias, finding that they worked well together, would, according to John Dunbar, make the paper equal to the best in the country, in short order.

The date selected for its launch was March 17th, 1930. Elias and Bevin invited Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald to start the presses rolling. Before he did so, the Prime Minister gave a speech to the audience gathered in the press machine room; his message was that "Labour has finally got its own daily newspaper, and it will relay to the public the voice that the party so imperatively needs and deserves." The PM then sounded the klaxons on the presses, which roared into life and began printing the new *Daily Herald* at 30,000 copies an hour. Both Stalin and Gandhi were front-page headlines in the first edition. Gandhi was reportedly ill, suffering from strain, and Stalin was said to be relaxing his iron-hand policy in Russia. Elias got his one million copies with the first edition of the newspaper. Within four weeks, he was able to issue a net-sale certificate showing that the paper's circulation was being maintained at, or exceeding, the one-million mark. By June 1933, the *Herald* had shot ahead of all national newspapers to become the first daily in Britain to attain a circulation of two million copies. The paper that Elias had acquired to keep his presses running led to his becoming a member of the Labour Party.

In 1933, the *Sunday People* (originally *The People*) surpassed the three-million mark weekly. With the success of his newspapers assured, Elias turned his attention to his magazines, eager to add colour and make them more attractive.

The Sun Engraving Co. in Watford was already printing magazines using colour photogravure, and had been doing so since 1926; Elias approached the Sun's owner, Edward Hunter, with the objective of purchasing his company. Hunter entered into discussions with Elias but the talks broke off when Elias decided that insufficient progress was being made. He had, meanwhile, been following the development work of the Alco-Gravure Company of New York, which was marketing a gravure-cylinder production system using the Dultgen process, to print photogravure in colour and monotone at newspaper speeds.

Elias now had a burning desire to print Odhams' magazines in photogravure and colour, thus making them look more modern, so he moved quickly to acquire exclusive UK rights – for 20 years, from 1937 – to Alco-Gravure's technology and to the use of Goss rotary presses. These developments made it necessary for Odhams to locate to a new site and build a modern factory. The site Elias selected was in North Watford, located adjacent to the A41/A412 intersection, which would provide

good transport links to London and to the North and South of the country. Watford was chosen because the type of labour that Odhams would want was already in the area, at Sun Engraving and at Waterlows, the security printers.

Odhams in Watford would take shape over the next two decades: The first two attractive art-deco buildings (erected in 1936 and 1939) would be designed by Sir Owen Williams. A third building (built in 1953) would be designed by London-based architects Yates, Cook and Darbyshire, the principal company architect being T.S. Darbyshire FRIBA. The famous clock tower was modelled on Stockholm Town Hall.

The new factory was designed to allow for future expansion. The initial building – 70,000 sq. ft. of floor space on the ground floor and 50,000 sq. ft in the basement – would be able to accommodate seven Goss gravure presses in addition to the one initially ordered. The Goss was capable of printing (partly in colour) a 64-page magazine the size of *John Bull*.

Elias had launched this North Watford venture for the production of *John Bull* but it would be several years – in 1947, eleven years after the opening of the new plant – before that magazine would roll off the presses there. He had encountered problems when trying to transfer the magazine from the centre of London. The staff involved were suspicious, anticipating that their salaries would be reduced when they transferred to Hertfordshire. But Elias was already paying London rates to his North Watford staff, so the issue was soon resolved.

In the end, the first magazine to be printed at Odhams' North Watford plant was *Everywoman* – in October 1936. The following year, a new weekly, *Woman*, was started, and would be printed there until 1983, when Odhams closed. The magazine was initially priced at two pence (2d). Later, more periodicals were printed at the Watford plant, including *Mickey Mouse*, *Picturegoer*, *Zoo*, and *Mother*. Two more Goss presses were installed.

By 1938, Elias was seeking yet another well-produced weekly colour magazine and he selected *Illustrated*, whose contents bore some similarity to those of Hulton Press's pioneering photojournal, *Picture Post*, launched that same year. *Illustrated* was by then an amalgamation of two earlier magazines: *Weekly Illustrated* and *The Passing Show*, and was printed by the photogravure process, to compete with *Picture Post*. In 1940, *Everywoman*, which had been printed by letterpress until then, was switched to photogravure. This was a magazine of 128 pages of short stories, input from personalities, advice, and colour pictures, priced at sixpence (6d) per issue.

A second press hall was completed, mainly to cope with the success of *Woman*. As with the first building, this one was large enough to accommodate eight Goss presses. Three presses of British manufacture were installed before WWII. Immediately after the war, four more of these would be added.

Odhams' printing works in North Watford engaged in a considerable amount of war work. Leaflets were printed (reaching 80 million/month), which planes dropped on occupied Europe. Papers were printed for the troops, including several in other languages: *Voir* for the French, *Kijk* for the Dutch, *Il Mondo* for the Italians, and a number of Liberation magazines for the Belgians and Germans.

At the war's end, Churchill's government was dissolved and the general election returned the Labour Party to power on July 26, 1945, with a decisive majority.

Elias was now 72 years of age, and the constant stress of his many activities – in printing, publishing, charity work, and, most recently, politics – had had a toll on his health. On July 14th, 1937, he

had taken his place, as Lord Southwood, on the Opposition benches in the House of Lords, joining only a handful of Labour peers at the time. (The title “Southwood” has come from Southwood Court, his home in Highgate, where he and his wife had lived since 1922.) In 1944, he had been appointed as the Labour Party Chief Whip in the House of Lords, a post he held for a year. After Labour’s landslide victory in 1945, Elias’s *Daily Herald* had played a significant role in conveying to the country the new government’s intentions. On 25th January, 1946, he had been created 1st Viscount Southwood of Fernhurst in the County of Sussex.

Elias did not live to see the profound post-war changes that would take place in printing, publishing, and society in general. Ignoring medical advice to reduce his working hours and ease his frenetic pace, he eventually suffered a series of heart attacks and died at home on the night of Tuesday, April 9th, 1946. Only a few weeks earlier, he had told his colleagues, “What greater happiness can there be than to go on working and to help others if one can? I hope I have the privilege of dying in harness.” The help he gave to others, throughout his life, is described below.

He left behind a print-and-publishing operation that was still growing. When the new multi-story building opened in 1954, four more Goss presses of British manufacture were installed.

In the late 1960s, Odhams’ production peaked at 52 million magazines per month. By then the company had converted some of its presses so as to be able to print colour on both sides of the page [“colour backed by colour” or “colour perfecting” in printers’ parlance – Ed.].

Elias: Philanthropist

Elias’s concern for the wellbeing of others had developed on afternoons after school, when he and a friend would walk up and down nearby Colebrook Road. This was an area of damp tenements where families often lived eight and ten in a room, the children undersized, under-fed, trapped by fate from birth. The boys were appalled by what they witnessed but were unable to think of what could be done about it. Finding a solution was to become the guiding quest of Julius Salter Elias’s life and would spur him to ever-increasing activity for the betterment of the lot of others.

He was a caring employer all his life, but his good works would spread far beyond his own firm. Here are just a few examples:

The first known instance of his becoming involved in charity work, an area in which he was to play so notable part in future years, took place around 1918, with the naming of the author and lecturer Comyns Beaumont as the new editor of *Pan* magazine. Beaumont proposed a fancy dress ball at the Opera House in Covent Garden to celebrate the launch, to which famous men and women from the worlds of letters, the arts, music, and the cinema would be invited. Elias agreed, and decided that all money raised should be donated to a deserving cause. It is significant that St Bartholomew’s Hospital in London was selected as the beneficiary in this first instance, as it was to hospitals that Elias in future gave the substantial sums he raised through his energy and enterprise and, by doing so, aided the work of healing and eased the suffering of so many people.

On Christmas Day, 1937, the year in which he was named a peer, Elias, now Lord Southwood, broadcast on BBC radio an appeal on behalf of the blind. During the broadcast, he promised that he personally would increase by 25% every donation received as a result of the appeal; the amount collected, £35,000, was thus augmented by him to a total of nearly £44,000.

In the spring of 1938, Southwood was invited to become Chair of the Hospital for Sick Children [Great Ormond Street]; during his seven years as Chair he helped raise well over £1 million, and his efforts helped make the hospital one of the wealthiest in the country. Two tablets are still visible there; the first states: “HRH the Princess Royal, president of the Hospital, laid this stone round which the new buildings, long planned in hope, are today rising in fulfilment, 17 March 1937.” The second tablet states “This building is named in grateful memory of Lord Southwood, chairman in years of war and stress, lover of children, generous benefactor, most true friend, 1939–46.”

At the start of WWII, an appeal known as the Red Cross and St Johns Fund was set up, with Lord Iliffe as chairman of the committee. The appeal was called the Penny-a-week Fund for the injured, and for Red Cross parcels for POWs, the idea being that every working person would have one penny deducted from his or her pay packet each week, to go towards the Fund. It soon became clear to Iliffe and the committee that the Fund needed at its head someone with the personality and genius to organise and energize the project. They turned to Southwood, who agreed to take on the job, and the scheme commenced on 29th November 1939. With Southwood’s enthusiasm and ardent interest behind it, the Fund became a remarkable success and delivered a tremendous service to the country. By the end of May 1940, £6,000 a week was being raised; by the end of the war, the amount was £4,000,000 a year. Over the course of the war, the scheme raised £17½ million.

Some of the organizations and charities that Elias supported in his lifetime, in addition to the hospitals – Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children, Hornsea Central Hospital, Charing Cross Hospital – were: The London School of Printing, the Periodical Proprietors Association (of which he was President), the Printers Pension Corporation, the Newsvendors Benevolent and Provident Institution, the Lord Southwood Homes of Rest at Wood Green, the Lloyd Memorial (Caxton) Seaside Home at Deal...

Chief sources:

Ernie Mackenzie’s father, Ernest Frederick Mackenzie, and cousin, John Simpson Jr, both Odhams employees; colleagues from Odhams, including Fred Scott, Works Manager; Odhams sales brochures

Minney, R.J., *Viscount Southwood*, 1954, p.19 & 35 [re Elias starting as a clerk 1894]

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<https://hornseyhistorical.org.uk/julius-salter-elias-viscount-southwood-1873-1946/>

<https://www.londonremembers.com/subjects/julius-salter-elias-viscount-southwood>

Editor’s note:

It has been stated that during World War II manufacture of the Westland Lysander STOL plane took place at the Odhams plant in North Watford, and alternatively (or additionally) that parts for that aircraft were manufactured at the plant. We have been unable to verify this, and have not so far been able to find any published reference to it. If you know anything about this, or know anyone who does, please contact us. To do so please go to About Us on the website.