Frederick Cornes, 1837–1927: Founder and Senior Partner of Cornes and Company (1873–1911)\(^1\)

Frederick Cornes’ grandfather was a tenant farmer at Hall-on-the-Heath, near Haslington in Cheshire. John Cornes, Frederick Cornes’ father, was born in 1805. Although the family were relatively prosperous the growing silk industry at nearby Macclesfield offered him a better future and John obtained employment at Park Mill operated by Messrs. H. & T. Wardle. After learning the trade as a weaver he showed an aptitude for design on which he later concentrated. He subsequently became the firm’s manager and by the time of his death in 1855 was a partner in the enterprise.

Soon after arriving in Macclesfield he married Ellen Wilshaw, the daughter of a neighbour, who was also employed in the silk industry as an operative. Their sons followed in the same line of business.

Their eldest son William was born in 1826. Having inherited his father’s feeling for art William joined Wardles as a designer and spent the whole of his career at the Park Mills. When the Wardle brothers retired he took over the firm, which was then reconstituted as W.W. Cornes and Company. By the time of his death in 1885 the enterprise had been renamed Cornes and Johnson, and William was described as one of the leading silk manufacturers of the town.\(^2\)

John Cornes’ second son Frederick was born in 1837. Although educated at the local grammar school Frederick like his elder brother attended classes at the ‘Useful Knowledge Society’ and was awarded a prize for his drawing in 1848–49. After leaving school in 1852 he spent some time learning the basics of the silk industry. In 1857 Frederick Cornes moved to Manchester and joined the firm of Holliday Wise and Company as a silk buyer. Then after a brief period of training he travelled out to Shanghai to act as one of its representatives. His new duties brought him into contact with the buyers from many other expatriate firms and he quickly gained a reputation as a shrewd and knowledgeable agent. He soon acquired a wide understanding of the trade.

The European silk manufacturing industry was traditionally based in France and Northern Italy.\(^3\) Although these areas originally produced much of their own raw
material the expansion of output in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries meant that more and more raw silk needed to be imported from Southern Italy and the Middle East. The further growth in demand then led to the development of a long-distance trade with Asia and by the 1840s China had emerged as the principal supplier. It was for this reason that Holliday Wise and Company had established a branch at Shanghai. The outbreak of the pebrine disease in the Mediterranean during the 1850s further increased the demand for Chinese silk.

This was one of the reasons which had encouraged the firm to expand its operations and to appoint Frederick Cornes. The situation was not, however, quite as promising as it appeared for the long-running Tai’ping rebellion was beginning to damage a number of the silk-producing areas. By 1860 this conflict was starting to threaten the Shanghai region. This may well have been an important factor in Frederick’s decision to reconsider his position with Holliday Wise, but the opening of a number of Japanese ports for foreign trade was another factor. After much careful consideration, he resigned from the Manchester firm and early in 1861 made his way to Yokohama, which had been made a treaty Port under the Commercial Treaties signed with Japan in 1858 and which had opened for trade in 1859. Yokohama had quickly attracted large numbers of foreign merchants and adventurers. Although the land allocated for business enterprises soon proved to be too small the area was rapidly expanded by the draining of the adjacent swamp. With the advantage of near-by deep water Yokohama was subsequently able to cope with the largest ocean-going vessels and so was able to evolve into one of Japan’s most important ports.4

William Gregson Aspinall was one of the first group of traders to arrive in Yokohama. He was the latest in a long line of Liverpool-based merchants as the Aspinall and Gregson families had been engaged in various aspects of commerce for many generations. Both had been prominent in privateering and in the slave trade before diversifying into more general activities including insurance broking and banking. The success of these enterprises permitted some member of these families to enter into local politics and several were elected mayors of Liverpool. After various periods of on-the-job training, which may have included time with his elder brother Richard, a London tea broker, William Aspinall set up on his own account and became a partner in Aspinall, Mackenzie and Company in Shanghai. After learning of the opening of the Japanese Treaty Ports he decided to move to Yokohama. In May 1860, at the age of 38, he established himself as a ‘Tea Inspector and General Commission Agent’ in the newly-opened port.

William Aspinall rapidly became an important and respected member of the local foreign community. The disturbed nature of Japanese society and anti-foreign feeling in the country made Japan a dangerous place. Many expatriates took to keeping a pistol available at all times. However, in the autumn of 1860 the carrying of weapons was made illegal. Aspinall played a significant role in organizing a protest against this order and although it does not seem to have been revoked it appears to have been subsequently interpreted in a fairly relaxed manner: this was certainly the case after January 1861 when Henry Heusken, the assistant to the US Consul in Tokyo, was murdered.

In spite of difficulties of this kind the trade of Yokohama continued to expand and in its second year of operations exports valued at over £1,000,000 including more than 3,000 bales of silk and 1,250,000 pounds of tea were recorded.5 The increasing