

From the Canning Industry's Childhood

100 years since the birth of Tørres Rønneberg

Tørres Andersen Rønneberg established Stavanger's second, and the country's third, canning factory. Stavanger Preserving Company was older, and that began canning brisling in 1879. Tørres Rønneberg got started a couple of years later.

Tørres Rønneberg was born on March 31st, 1845. He came from a good old Jæren family and was the eldest son in a large family. His father was called Andreas and was a respected farmer with a large good farm. There was more than the usual domestic production, in that they were very skilful carpenters.

Tørres had an uncle in town, Enoch Rønneberg, who had a large drapery and grocery business in (the street) Skagen and had become comfortably well off. Aged 14, in his new Confirmation clothes, Tørres met his uncle in his shop. He was there for 12 years. In that time he also showed what he was capable of as a carpenter. He took part in the building of Enoch Rønneberg's grand property Fredheim by Mosvatnet in Stavanger.

His apprenticeship at Enoch Rønneberg's lasted 12 years. In 1871 Tørres Rønneberg began his own business in the same line of work, together with Jens Johnsen. After 9 years, Rønneberg sold his share to Johnsen who continued running the business.

Work in the shop and the storeroom was too quiet for Tørres Rønneberg. He was 35 years old and had saved up a good sum of money, and wanted to start something new, on his own. That "something new" was the canning industry, which, in a way, was to save Stavanger.

While the rest of the country was advancing on the economic front, Stavanger in the 1880s had been hard hit by an economic crisis. Herring, which for two generations had created the foundation for the economy of town, had disappeared from the fishing grounds over which Stavanger had control, and considerable economic advantage. The fleet of sailing ships, the town's other major employer, had lost out to steam ships, in that Stavanger shipping companies failed to adapt their modus operandi so that the old sailing traditions could immediately assert themselves in the changed circumstances.

Two of the town's four banks closed down, and during the crisis and its aftermath two of the town's four insurance companies also had to give up. The large old trading companies went bankrupt, and much of the business that depended on them, went down with them.

However, new blood was pulsating in the old town's veins, and it was the canning industry that brought the reversal of the decline in its economy.

When the factory manager Georg Bernhardt Mejlænder, to whom belongs the honour of having produced the first Norwegian sardines (*on a commercial, industrial scale – Thorne of Drammen was much earlier, Ed.*), began his operation, he had a certain knowledge of the industry from abroad. Among those who founded Stavanger Preserving Company were men with good academic and commercial education. Tørres Rønneberg did not, but solved the technical problems which provided him with the key to the new industry. He was a good economist – all enterprise must pay for itself. He had no experience to draw on and had to train his fellow-workers himself. With a sure touch he found the right people and put them together in the right teams. He personally had to buy in all the raw fish, oversee production at all stages, and then sell the product at the end.

There were problems to grapple with, and that gave Tørres Rønneberg a certain tenaciousness. Outside his work, he was an unassuming man. He participated in a number of other initiatives with his money, but had no wish to be included among those who traditionally played a rôle in the life of the town.

His efforts with canning were successful, and the factory had to be continually extended as methods of production improved. In order to come closer to the sea and acquire

larger buildings, in 1888 he bought the properties in (the street) Strandgate which had formerly belonged to P. V. Rosenkilde & Son, who had not survived the crisis. The company continued with continual extensions and improvements.

Ten years after the factory had been moved to Strandgate, the activity was extended to include a “steam kitchen” (“people’s kitchen”), and after a few years followed a delicatessen and a café. At that time Stavanger did not have any proper eating places for the general public, although there were several cellar pubs. Rønneberg’s steam kitchen quickly won over the competition by providing good service together with healthy and cheap food. In addition, the somewhat seasonal canning production was provided with a steady even business. Figures for the extent of these related activities are no longer extant, but on a single day the steam kitchen could serve as many as 800 main meals. Stavanger town council bought the properties in 1916 and continued the operation of the steam kitchen, café and delicatessen, because there was a social need for them. The turnover was 2.5 million Norwegian crowns (kroner) in 1917, 4.6 million in 1918, and 3.3 million in 1918 (although by that time the business had been extended to include school meals).

Tørres Rønneberg was never afraid to try something new. He used machines – some of his own invention – to make fish balls. Axel Krefting wrote of him in 1897 in *Norsk Industri (Norwegian Industry)*, published by Den norsk Fællesforening for Haandværk og Industri that “One is hardly exaggerating when one claims that this change has brought the town’s export of fish balls to the level at which it now stands”

Furthermore he produced his own acetylene production plant for the business, and the town’s first electric system, with power from its own plant. It was his eldest son Arne who had the idea for the steam kitchen, and the children who provided the impetus for a number of the large technical systems. But it was Tørres Rønneberg who took the responsibility and made the ideas happen. It was he who acquired Stavanger’s first car in 1898, and a few years later began the country’s first bus route between Stavanger and Malde (a suburb of Stavanger. Ed.)

However far-sighted Tørres Rønneberg may have been with regard to technical possibilities, he nevertheless resisted with all the means available to him the new possibilities for selling that advertising provided for the industry. As a farmer, he knew no other way of promoting a product other than by its quality, and the reputation that good product gave to its company was the only recommendation that really counted in his book. Perhaps he had tackled so much that was new, in his time, that he couldn’t really cope with advertising as well. It thus happened that the big name in the industry, which was in fact 13 years his junior – viz. Christian Bjelland, and his colleague Eldre Grønnestad – overtook him. This however did him no lasting harm.

Tørres Rønneberg was honest through and through, truthful and as good as his word. Thus he often chose to go his own way. His opinions were based on hard-won personal experience, and he stuck to them even when he drew the shortest straw in an argument. Thus he often ended his contribution to a discussion with the words “However, I now think that...”

His opinions were conservative, both in practical life and with regard to wider social questions. The company he built up is the best witness to that.

Tørres Rønneberg was approachable. Smartness was an abomination to him. “Mischief-making” he called it, and was annoyed by things that weren’t real work and solid business. He did have a temper, and on one occasion (soon after he had retired from the business), he threw out a representative from a company which, many years before, had sold him bad quality oil, when he found him in discussion with one of his sons.

In the 1890s he bought a farm in Maldalen which he ran successfully. He didn’t actually work the soil himself, but directed the whole operation, and got people going. It was

only weeds which upset his enjoyment of the farm, and he would gladly let a man trample his way to the middle of a field of oats in order to remove one wild mustard plant.

Tørres Rønneberg and his wife Thomine (née Thorsen) were simple people. Their manner of life was stable, middle-class, a little countrified, and the children were frugally brought up. Their education was however important. Two sons became engineers. The eldest son, Arne Rønneberg, who together with his brother Einar later took over the company, were well grounded in electrical technology, both in theory and practice. Arne was such an expert that professor Fredrik Jacobsen referred to him once in a speech as being “better acquainted with these matters (viz. practical use of electricity) than possibly anyone else in the city”

In 1909 Tørres Rønneberg retired from the company and transferred it to two of the sons. He suffered from asthma and his heart was weakened. He died on the 11th December, 1913. He was already known as “Old Rønneberg”, and the canning production was a large and secure business. A young business which rapidly progressed. In 1917 the old company moved in to two new factory premises in Stavanger and Sandnes, and a new era began.

When Tørres Rønneberg died the Stavanger newspapers wrote: “The city has lost one of the pioneers of canning, and a self-made man in the full meaning of the term.”

Many of the employees and workers in the company shared the family’s grief at Tørres Rønnebergs departure. They liked and respected him. He was a good employer, and everyone knew that he didn’t just know their work and duties through and through, but he also knew them and their families. A former smoker (of sardines, Ed.) tells how Tørres Rønneberg, with a warm smile, shook his fist at him, and showed him the gold ring with the colour of old reddish copper, and said: “That’s the colour you want”. (Brisling was smoked more strongly then than now) (Now = 1945, Ed.)

It is now 100 years since Rønneberg’s birth, and the achievements of his life have been briefly mentioned. There is no opportunity to say more about his character, or about how a farmer adapted to the town life and industry.

In due time he gave the ancestral property to younger brothers, but preserved the ancestral cast of mind which he inherited from his farming forebears.

In a world where crises and bankruptcies, success and good luck practise the fairness of fate, it is sobering to remember a farmer’s boy who began something with empty – but strong and clean – hands, and accomplished a great and difficult task.

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