

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2003

The Motor Industry in the Thames Valley

The Hannen Room was packed to hear Theo Ziffo speak at the October meeting. After working for a merchant bank, Theo had spent 30 years working in the motor industry - working for Ford, Chrysler, Jaguar and Rover, and finally Unipart.

Originally, motorised vehicles were powered by steam, and then by gas. In Germany, Gottlieb Daimler had developed a motor vehicle, and in 1893, Frederick Simms bought the rights to make these for Britain and the Empire. He built motor launches at Putney Bridge, and used some of these engines for vehicles. It was Simms who coined the names 'petrol' and 'motor car'.

In Britain there then grew up two main centres for the motor trade - the Midlands and the Thames Valley. Some significant car vehicle makers were situated in the Thames Valley, as well as a host of smaller manufacturers in London and the surrounding area, as well as parts and component makers, and racing teams such as Williams.

Nearest to the mouth of the Thames was Ford. Henry Ford believed that for any industry to progress, it had to be near water. Ford in Britain had begun in Cork, but when the Irish Free State was created, the political situation and a 22% tax led Ford to open a factory in 1929 at Dagenham. It had its own foundry, power station and gas plant, and the largest private quay on the Thames. Ford recognised the need for a small car in the 1930s, and so developed the model Y - an 8hp car that went from drawing board to production in just 5 months. With the depression in 1933, Ford embarked on a cost cutting programme, and reduced the price from £120 to £100. During the war, the factory made troop carriers etc, and also 30,000 Merlin engines for the RAF. After the war, the Anglia and Prefect models were introduced - by lifting the carpet below the accelerator, they could get up to 60 mph!! The Consul and Zephyr - American influenced in design - followed, with column gear change, and the Zephyr was the first car to have a 6 cylinder engine. A factory to build vans and light trucks was also built at Langley, costing £70 million. In 1962 Ford set out to make a light car with plenty of space, aiming to make it for less than 6 months average wages. The result was the Cortina - at one stage 1200 were built per day, and over a million by 1966. The Sierra, Mondeo and Fiesta models followed, but - partly due to union problems - car production was came to an end at Dagenham.

In London there were many small manufacturers - some making only 2 or 3 cars per year. Of the larger firms, Napier had been making armaments and printing machinery at Acton since 1808. Montague Napier fitted a 2 cylinder engine to a boat, and another to a car, which completed a 1000 mile trial, and won the Gordon Bennett trophy in 1902. Napier built the world's first 6 cylinder engine. The factory employed some 1200 people. Balfour owned a Napier - the first Prime Minister to own a car, but in 1914 the government acquired the factory, to build aero engines and air frames. Vauxhall - based at Vauxhall from 1903 - also began with marine engines, but by 1905 needed more space, and moved to Luton. They were bought by General Motors in

1925, and production remained at Luton until fairly recently. AC Cars, AEC buses and lorries and Lotus were other firms in London. The latter began in 1950 at the back of Colin Chapman's father's pub - making very light - and fast - cars.

Further west was Lagonda - which began in the greenhouse of a house at Staines, making motorcycles. Bought by David Brown (tractor makers) in 1947, the factory moved to Feltham, where Aston Martin (also owned by David Brown at the time) were situated. Aston Martin achieved worldwide advertising in the film 'Goldfinger'. There were several foreign firms who assembled cars to avoid the import duty - notably Citroen who did so at Slough from 1925 - 66.

In the Reading area there were a number of small makers - such as the Burnley Streamline at Maidenhead in the 1930s or Piper Cars at Wokingham in the 1960s. On Remenham Hill, Andrew Squire built sports cars, Lord Camoys buying one, although only 7 were produced.

The other major company in the area was founded by William Morris. At the age of 15, He had started his own bicycle repair shop with a capital of £4. He went on to build his own bikes, selling some to the Post Office, and promoted them by racing the bikes. He won many trophies, and displayed these in his shop. In 1910 he set up - with an Oxford graduate, Morris Garages. He wanted to make a car for the masses, and the first Bullnose Morris appeared in 1913, priced at £175. 2 and 4 seater Morris Cowley models followed in 1915, and an improved version in 1918, production being doubled by 1925. As production increased, so many of the suppliers had difficulty keeping up -- so Morris bought them up - including Pressed Steel and SU carburettors.. The first Morris Minor was made in 1929, the forefather of over a million - one of the most successful cars made in Britain. Alec Issigonis was involved in its design - he was not happy with the new model in 1948, so had it cut in half, and put the 2 sides 4" apart - giving it the familiar rounded shape, and making it more stable. Demand exceeded supply - 75% being exported. In 1952, Morris merged with Austin to form BMC. William Morris - later Lord Nuffield, gave over £30 million to medical research and Nuffield College in Oxford.

In 1924, a sports car based on the Morris was launched, and known as the MG. In the 1930s, despite having a small 848cc engine, these had managed a speed of over 100 mph. MG built up a reputation for their sports cars, with success in competitions at Brooklands, the Irish Grand Prix etc. By 1939 an MG with an 1100 cc engine had achieved a speed of 203 mph. After the war, MG took over the American market, selling over 100,000 in 7 years. However, by the 1970s, by then in British Leyland ownership, the lack of investment meant MG were unable to make a profit, and so the factory at Abingdon closed in 1979. Theo also spoke of the subsequent history of the Rover Group, which had taken over both the Oxfordshire factories.
