

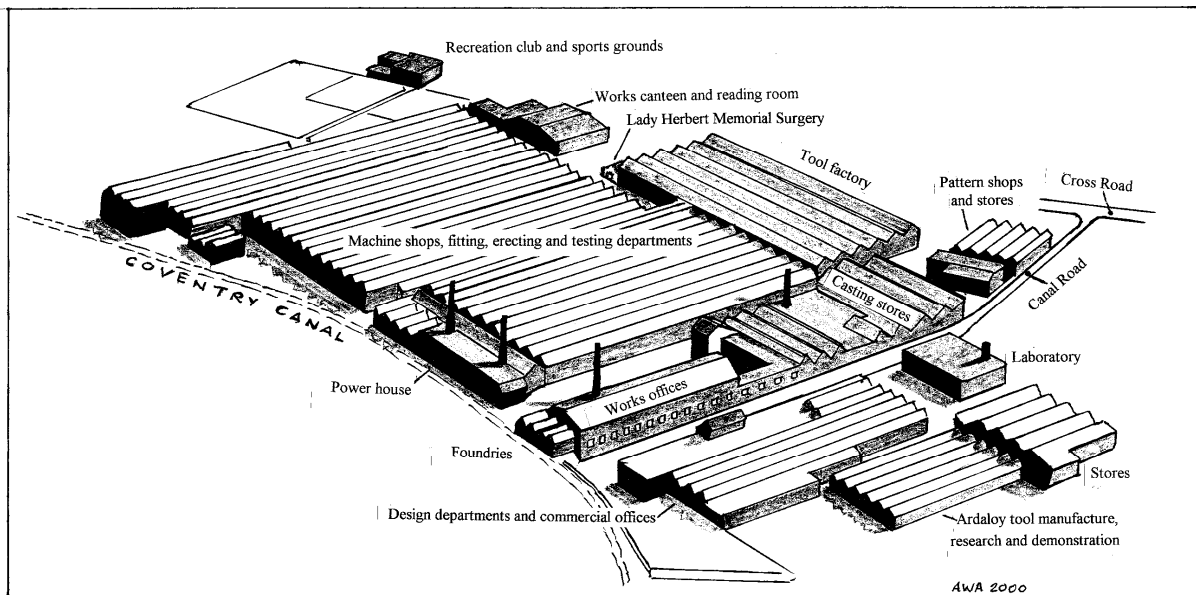
GONE – BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

The Edgwick Works of Alfred Herbert Ltd, Coventry

The firm which was to become known as Alfred Herbert Ltd was founded in 1887 and initially occupied modest premises in Upper York St, Coventry. By the mid-20th century, however, it was acknowledged to be the largest machine tool builder in Europe, with offices, facilities and representation throughout the world.

It had its principal design, development, manufacturing and agency facilities in Coventry, also others located elsewhere in the UK and overseas, but the ‘jewel in the crown’ was undoubtedly its massive Edgwick Works. Located a mile or so north of Coventry City centre, Edgwick Works occupied a multi-acre site bounded by Cross Road, the Coventry Canal, Stony Stanton Road and the Foleshill Road.

A line drawing of Edgwick Works, based on an aerial photograph taken sometime in the late 1950s, is shown below.



At its peak, Edgwick Works employed several thousand skilled workers and had all the resources needed to manufacture virtually every component required to build machine tools and associated equipment, from large iron castings to small high-precision items. It had an exceptional 7-year apprentice-training system which produced engineers with a ‘passport’ to a job anywhere in the industrial world, and provided extensive sports and social facilities for all employees.

With a combination of in-house products and agencies for those of the most prestigious machine tool builders world-wide, AH Ltd boasted that it could provide 'complete factories' for the manufacture of virtually any product, in short it was an early example of a 'one-stop shop'. It was a major supplier of machine tools to the UK's armaments industries during both world wars, and its founder was knighted for his services as Controller of Machine Tools during WW1.

By the end of WW2, AH Ltd was in a commanding position as one of the world's greatest machine tool builders, and for a time after Sir Alfred's death in 1957 his reputation continued to provide some impetus. But by the 1970s, the Company was beginning to falter. It was slow to update its products, a position it tried (unsuccessfully) to correct, and it was encountering fierce competition from foreign machine builders, not least from Japan.

Because of its position as a Blue Chip company on the London Stock Exchange it could not be allowed to 'fail', and it increasingly needed financial support from government. Eventually it was largely owned by the latter's National Enterprise Board, but even that organization could not sustain its losses indefinitely. It finally collapsed in 1983, with debts of around £17 million. The entire contents of Edgwick Works, from the highest-value machine tools to tin waste-paper baskets, went under the hammer in a 5-day auction conducted principally in Bay 26 of the world-famous works. It is believed to have raised approximately £750,000.

At the time of writing (2014) nothing of any significance whatever remains of Edgwick Works, the site having been completely redeveloped for various commercial purposes, including the Gallagher Retail Park.