

WARWICKSHIRE INDUSTRIES

MACHINE TOOLS

A machine tool is a machine for handling and machining metal utilising one of a variety of processes. These can be turning machines (e.g. lathes and boring machines), planers and shapers, drilling machines, milling machines, grinding machines, power saws and presses. From simple beginnings with a small machine on a workbench, the capacity and complexity of these machines has developed over time, with corresponding increase in size and weight.

It was the development of the bicycle industry in Coventry that initiated the demand for (increasingly sophisticated) components, and this in turn placed a demand on the necessary tools to produce those components.

Early pioneers were Willdig and Hatton, E. S. Brett, Webster and Bennett, and Alfred Herbert, all established towards the end of the nineteenth century. They took on the challenge of matching the toolmakers of Manchester and Birmingham. From modest beginnings, expansion was rapid. Formed in 1889, Herbert and Hubbard initially employed only a dozen hands, then 250 by 1897, and 1500 by 1910. By this time, Herbert was supplying nearly every cycle manufacturer in Europe.

The motor cycle and motor vehicle industries only served to expand demand for machine tools. In 1910, for example, Humber had over 1,000 machines in its machine shop, and as mass production techniques developed, so the demand for machine tools increased.

Alfred Herbert was not alone in the industry, and firms such as Webster and Bennett, Wickman, Coventry Gauge & Tool all enhanced Coventry's reputation as a centre for the machine tool industry. Even so, Alfred Herbert led the way, with two manufacturing sites, one in Upper York St., the Butts and another at Edgwick. In 1928 the whole organization was moved to Edgwick, and in 1945 the former premises of the Rover Company in Red Lane were also acquired.

The industry entered the post Second World War marketplace with high expectations, but it never regained its pre-eminence and gradually lost business to foreign competition. By the 1980s the industry was in terminal decline, illustrating many of the problems associated with the de-industrialisation of the British economy. Very little evidence remains of this once hugely significant industry for the development of Coventry.

Further information

Astrop, A	The Rise and Fall of Coventry's Machine Tool Industry	WIAS
Victoria County History of Warwickshire Vol 8	Within section on OTHER INDUSTRIES (Available online) www.british-istory.ac.uk/vch/warks/vol8	Victoria County History, London
Coventry Environmental Education Project	Alfred Herbert Ltd.: A Coventry Firm 1888-1983	Coventry City Council
Lloyd-Jones, R. and Lewis M.	Alfred Herbert Ltd and the British Machine Tool Industry, 1887-1983 (Modern Economic and Social History)	Routledge
Youtube	Alfred Herbert Factory Coventry	Pathé News

Dudley, Kimber & Wickmanites	A.C. Wickman	Privately published
Gilchrist, Paul	Sport under the Shadow of Industry: Paternalism at Alfred Herbert Ltd. A controversial piece that explores the nature of 'the Herbert Spirit' and the role of Sir Alfred Herbert as paternalist employer.	In Tomlinson, & Woodham Image, Power, and Space: Studies in Consumption and Identity.

Visits

Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry	Established partly by donations from Sir Alfred Herbert
Sites	There are very few remaining sites of the machine tool industry. See WIAS database under 'Machine Tools'