Memories of Gent's Electrical Equipment Manufacturing in Kibworth

By Harold W Ward [Kindly contributed by his widow, Barbara Ward]

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Introduction

Gents & Company Limited (popularly known as Gents') was established in Leicester in 1872 by John Thomas Gent and for over a century was a major manufacturer of electrical equipment. Renowned for its electric clocks in public buildings and railway stations all over the



world, the Company also made telephones, alarm systems, bells, transformers, signalling and recording equipment, as well as many other items. During wartime the Company turned to electrical parts for aircraft communications and landing, radar, U-boat detection, clocks for shipping, and of course air-raid sirens. With a workforce of several hundreds at its height, the main design and manufacturing centre was at the Faraday Works in Temple Road, Leicester, but after WW2 the Company expanded into Kibworth...

Part 1 Gent of Leicester in Leicester Road, Kibworth

When Hitler's war ended, we had V.E. day then, a few months later V.J. day, and after the celebrations and services of thanksgiving gradually came the realisation that we now faced a new kind of uncertainty: they called it 'Winning the Peace'.



Policy decisions had to be made at national, company, and individual levels, and one of Gent & Company's major problems at that time how was to recruit sufficient labour to produce their peace time products. This labour shortage may seem incredible in the light of world wide recession 'forty vears on', decisions taken then can foster endless

especially when studied with the benefit of hindsight. The fact remains, the Company needed additional labour - and I felt in need of a change of environment. Not that I was by any means high enough in the pecking order for my personal comforts to merit consideration, or for me to be made aware of Company policies - I had been with them for a mere ten years, but I lived in a village, and villages operate a kind of 'bush telegraph' and my village had connections with the Parsons' family who, at that time, virtually owned the firm of Gent & Co Ltd.

Thus I heard of their intentions to open a small workshop in Kibworth. Now the idea of working in my village appealed to me, so I applied for a job there. Initially I was regarded with a degree of suspicion by the management, the project was still almost on the secret list, but after a few weeks I was told that my application was being considered. This raised my spirits enormously. I had, during the last year or two of the war, taken a strong dislike to the

journey of ten miles or so, to and from Leicester. In the early days it had been almost an adventure. First aboard the old steam trains - yes - Kibworth could boast a station then, and in



town the ride from Leicester's London Road station to the corner of Spinney Hill Park on an electric tramcar was an interesting and somewhat reverberating experience. especially when negotiating the loop lines on the Evington Road in a pea soup fog. Later Midland Red and City bus companies provided a more convenient method transport but proved equally expensive.

During the summer months I joined the push bike brigade, meeting up with numerous companions at Great Glen church, Oadby bypass and Stoneygate terminus. Gradually I had managed to accumulate the princely sum of forty pounds, which represented nearly twelve months' wages, and was able to purchase a small motor bike. With the advent of war however, motor cycling became increasingly hazardous as time passed, firstly it became more and more difficult to obtain petrol, it being allowed only to people in essential industries and working hours that made the use of public transport impossible. Although I fitted neatly into this category, persuading the Authorities of this fact was but the first of many difficulties. Our extensive working hours - it was not unknown for us to continue until midnight or beyond to meet emergencies, so even with the system of double summer time then in use it meant that a very large proportion of my travelling took place during the hours of darkness; and darkness during the war meant just that, there was a total blackout. One's head-lamp had to be fitted with an official mask, which looked rather like a black cocoa tin with three narrow

slits in the lid. We learned how to improve these slightly by judicious use of a file on the inner slits, but the ever present concern that too much light just might attract the attention of a prowling plane, made everyone very, very wary. Then of course there were the military convoys grinding around, often up to two miles long, with tanks on transporters as big as a house, and frequently showing no lights at all. These became more and more numerous round about D-day, but in the early days of the war the lack of ordinary traffic meant that every time there was a frost, the roads became a skating rink. The natural anxiety of a spill was further heightened by the knowledge that damaged riding gear would require precious clothing coupons for replacements and damaged components for the bike could not be replaced for love nor money, as all such bits and pieces had long since been requisitioned for the armed forces. It was not that travelling was dangerous - there were many, many more dangerous pastimes around at the time - it was just, most unpleasant.



Pte Harold W Ward 7 Battn. Leics. 'Dad's Army'

The memory of some of those journeys was still fresh enough to influence my thoughts as I went one evening to take a closer look at the projected work shop in Leicester Road, Kibworth. On the A6, opposite the Foxhound pub, was a rather strange looking building that seemed in imminent danger of being engulfed by the increasing volume of post war traffic. The footpath became narrower as it reached a small yard gate, then faded away completely, but reappeared at the other end of the property. Thus it seemed that the building stood in front of the building line. The fact was that it had been standing there since long before building lines were thought of. I learned later that it had once been a stable belonging to the large house next door known as 'The Croft' which was once the residence of Mr Hardy Parsons a founder member and subsequent Managing Director of Gent & Company Ltd. Mr. Parsons, however, had been a man ahead of his time; he travelled in one of the new fangled automobiles, so the stables had been leased to an enterprising villager who started the first horse drawn carrier business between Kibworth, Leicester and Market Harborough.



Photo taken about 1930 in Leicester Road, looking east, of a lorry on fire: it is close to the building on the right that later became the Kibworth workshop for Gent & Company

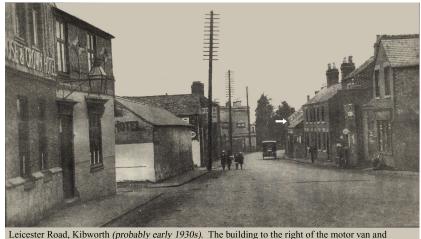
At a later date the horse and van were replaced by a very early type of omnibus, so an extension with three large sliding doors had been built on the north end of the stable. This however was before my time; my earliest recollection of the property was that it had been a cycle shop with a small room above in which lived the proprietor, a little man whose name according to the faded board above the shop window was W E Knight - known to the village lads as wee Knight. The sign also proclaimed that one could have cycles repaired, keys cut, saws sharpened and batteries charged. This business had ceased however after the death of the old Mr Parsons round about 1936; he had been succeeded as Managing Director by his son who lived at Oadby. The big house was leased and the cycle shop became a store room for Gent & Co. During the war all kinds of office records, blue prints and casting patterns had been stored there in case of bomb damage to the parent factory.

Now in the autumn of 1946 I could see signs of a reawakening. The windows were partially obscured by mud thrown up by the closely passing traffic but the interior had been re-painted, new work benches erected and modern fluorescent lighting had been installed. I reflected with a

warm glow of anticipation that when the windows were washed and the outside given a lick of paint this could be an opportunity and a challenge. I slipped into the 'Foxhound', the nearby pub, long since de-licensed, to enhance my warm glow with a toast.

Imagine my elation, therefore, when a few weeks later I was summoned to the office of the Works Manager, who told me that "in view of my experience with make do and mend" I was to be given the job of starting the Kibworth Assembly Shop where we would be making the new small domestic bell to be known as the Fig 396. I was not quite sure what was meant by the reference to "make do and mend" but I had no time to worry about its implications as we collected the Production Manager, piled into Mr Swift's Rover and set off to inspect the place.

We entered the front door. and I was immediately warned that on no account must this door be used by other employees because of the danger of stepping into the path of a passing motor car! Inside, we found short passage dividing the old shop soon to be my office from the work shop. This latter had one



Leicester Road, Kibworth (probably early 1930s). The building to the right of the motor van and labelled GARAGE (marked with white arrow) was destined to become Gents' Kibworth Assembly Shop

door which led to a small cloak-room and toilet for the ladies and another in the other corner which concealed a much more microscopic one for the men. This was positively claustrophobic but as I was to be the only male this fact was unimportant. The work's entrance in the far wall led to a tiny weed covered yard via two steps and the last corner housed a narrow staircase leading to a dusty garret and forming a convenient alcove for the electricity meter. Thus we had all 'mod cons' - more or less - the heating was by oil filled radiators controlled by a time switch and though the place measured only some twenty five feet by twenty, the apex roof and concrete floor made me wonder whether it would be warm enough in winter. I had no intention however of passing detrimental comments, as I was already noting the size and shape of the shining new hardboard topped benches and mentally planning a flow-line for the bells.

As we returned to Leicester, I was told that arrangements had been made for me to spend the next morning in the bell shop; the new bell was already in production at Leicester, but I would have to work out my own procedures as I would obviously not have the equipment available that was to be found in a large factory. The tool stores would provide a few basic items and we had recently acquired two or three samples of a new electric screw driver - but apparently these had not been very well received at bench level. The afternoon was to be spent with the Company Secretary who would initiate me into the mysteries of recruiting labour, explain the meaning and necessity of the Factory Register and Accident Book, and generally acquaint me with the numerous legal requirements demanded of a Company under the Factory Acts of 1902, 1921 and 1957 a copy of which it is mandatory to have on display in a prominent

1050 at Gents' Leisester Road Kibwarth Sectory, left to right

1959 at Gents' Leicester Road, Kibworth, factory: *left to right*Standing: Mary Taylor, Harold Ward, Alice Merritt
Second row: Ellen Nibbs, Elsie Mabel Kemp, Pat Cornish, Sheila Butteriss
Front row: Fan Foxon, May Bromley, Doreen Holyoak, Marjorie Smith

position in every factory and workshop in the land.

Upon reflection I think frequently of the old proverb 'fools rush in'; my of administrative sum total knowledge was minimal, I had never made a bell, my pre-war experience had been obtained in the clock shop and my war time efforts had been to help make ASDIC components (anti U-boat detectors) for the Navy. It was a case of being thrown in at the deep end, as all of my tuition took place on only the one day - Friday and I was to start the project on the following Monday.

I realised I had got to uphold the confidence of our Management, so two days later I boldly entered the Fleckney labour exchange to notify then of our intentions, and ask their help in finding 'six female operators'. I was promptly slapped down! Apparently they should have been sent a formal letter and in any case they had only one person on their books - a lady from London , close to retirement age, a victim of the bomb damage and whose trade was a starch collar ironer! I apologised for the lack of a letter saying that, as we were a Leicester firm, it had been sent to their Leicester office and I had no doubt that it would be forwarded to them in due course. I had no idea whether this was a fact or not, but I kept my fingers crossed and continued that though we had no connection with the laundry industry if they would send the lady to see me I would find her a job.

Though I hadn't exactly lost face, I had lost some of my confidence as I set off on my second mission, which was to locate an elderly Mr Tom Smith who had at one time been chauffeur, right hand man and ultimately nurse to our late Mr Parsons and who was understood to be custodian of the remaining keys to the property. Up to that moment we had only the one to the front door. I eventually found Mr Smith and over a cup of coffee rapidly produced by his good lady wife, I was privileged to hear numerous anecdotes of life in the service of an electrical pioneer: such as the story of when our workshop had been one of the very earliest HAM radio stations in this country. This would be around the time of Daventry and 2LO, and was an explanation of the huge amount of poles, insulators and tangled wires that I had found in the loft. Mr Smith had no other keys, but he did have a daughter who was interested in our project: during the war years she had been making parachutes for the paratroops and now like everyone else, facing changes. She told her friends about our little factory in the country, and within two or three weeks we had recruited our team! And what a team they became, the London lady stayed with us till she reached the age of seventy, three left only when they got married and moved away from Kibworth and the other two eventually became members of the quarter century club.

We spent what remained of 1946 in putting our house in order; the relevant authorities were approached and we eventually were allocated a small ration of tea and sugar - the war may have ended but rationing lingered on and all factories, large or small, demanded a tea break. A small radio set was obtained which gave us 'music while you work' twice per day from the BBC. It is interesting to recall that a special concession had been given to war time factories, allowing them to put these programmes over their Tannoy systems, no vocals were allowed but whether this was because of 'Performing Rights' or, as rumour had it, to remove the temptation to switch one's machine off , in order to hear the words , was never quite clear, but no matter - the music became important to us and every year thereafter the first entry in my small petty cash book read '1st January - one Radio Licence - £1'.

At first the high pitched whine of our electric screw-drivers made both listening and conversation rather difficult but we soon learned to 'tune it out' and in any case it became of secondary importance as the girls developed an amazing degree of skill with the things, which brought them a useful amount of piecework bonus. I had carried out one or two modifications on these power driven screwdrivers which made them much more suitable for our job, in fact we asked to be provided with a few more and coupled with the fact that my production line, though slightly different, seemed to be more successful than Leicester's, within a short time we achieved a production rate of 5000 bells per week, which was very good by anybodies' standards. Maintaining our production figures became really important to us, in fact it became almost an obsession, which was not entirely bound up with piecework bonus. Many times I have seen the whole workforce leave their own job in order to join in to help someone who had hit a problem.

It was not always sweetness and light though; we had our ups and downs, our own little family squabbles, our accidents and our adversities. The adversities started with the new year; 1947 brought us cold weather with deep snow and a new headache for industry - power cuts. These made us very vulnerable, the mains driven clocks would not keep time, due to the varying frequency; our radiators went cold and the machines stopped. We were able to take certain steps to keep going; an 'impulse' clock system was installed, which actually gave us an unexpected publicity boost. By virtue of the fact that we now had the most accurate clock system in the village, all sorts of people - local tradesmen and particularly the nearby bus company took their time from us. We installed extra tubular heaters which would warm up quicker than the radiators and we used 'pump' screwdrivers which at least helped to keep our blood circulation going. When the light was too bad we had a large supply of candles, but if the cuts lasted for any length of time, as they frequently did, as our temperature dropped the need for hot drinks became apparent. Our electric kettle was useless but my Aunty Ethel, who just happened to live across the road, kindly allowed us to dash over and use her gas stove! Well I had been warned that it might become necessary to "make do and mend".

Mending things though is not the same as mending people. The possibility of accidents in any branch of engineering is always present - we had a small First Aid cabinet - rescued from one of Leicester's air raid shelters and two of my staff had been in the Girl Guides, but my only first aid knowledge had been acquired as a member of 'Dad's Army' and consisted mainly of how to apply a 'Standard Field Dressing'. Fortunately apart from the usual minor cuts and bruises the worst cases I had to deal with concerned one girl who put her finger under a small press. Thank goodness it was not power driven. And another who tipped a tin of burning methylated spirit into her lap. However our reactions were fast in those days, we had her wrapped in my overall and the flames smothered before she had time to scream. Being the only male on the site was in itself rather worrying. I knew that girls sometimes felt faint for various reasons and, although we had a 'factory doctor' in the village, his main

purpose seemed to be to conduct medical examinations on young persons under eighteen and sign the factory register to declare that they were fit enough to withstand the rigours of factory life. Anyway, he was not always 'on call' so the answer, I decided, was transport. By this time I had become the owner of an ancient Austin Seven, which I used to park in the bottom yard and thus was able to cart any ailing patient home at the first sign of any problem.



Motor vehicles must play an important part in any company which is trying to operate a branch no matter how small and in the early days our transport facilities were very limited. It was of course, impossible to buy new vehicles; for six years the Armed Forces had had exclusive rights to any thing produced with wheels. The huge 'ex-W D' sales were very slow in getting started and every garage and salesroom had a long waiting list. Gent & Co. however, owned a pre-war Bedford van; this had been used by the Home Guard during hostilities, and had been sprayed a delightful shade of khaki. Its original driver, a veteran of the previous war, had just retired so, as at that time there was insufficient work for a full time driver, we borrowed a man from the machine shop to venture twice per week to Kibworth to collect our completed work and bring fresh supplies of materials. He became quite fond of

the old van which actually had a marvellous six cylinder engine that had been very carefully maintained, and was in a much better condition than the bodywork. This may have been the factor that one day drew the attention of the police patrol who claimed that it was travelling at sixty miles per hour along the Oadby bypass. The machine shop foreman was most unhappy he was finding it difficult enough to keep up our supply of components, without also having to provide a piece work orientated driver so it was not long before a change was made.

We obtained a new driver, who this time was attached to the warehouse and a new vehicle - a small Hillman pick-up with a green canvas tilt. It looked a bit ex-W D but no matter, it was an improvement on the old Bedford, except for its rather limited carrying capacity. This meant that more numerous journeys would have to be made, but this helped us considerably as we found it all too easy for a box of screws, washers or what have you to be accidentally missed out of a materials' list, and with no further delivery for two days or so, the continuity of jobs sometimes became quite difficult.

The Leicester store keeper found a partial answer to this problem; he discovered that the Midland Red bus company ran a parcel service; thus a parcel handed into a Kibworth bus at Leicester, would be delivered to a certain shop in Kibworth, for my collection, some three quarters of an hour later - providing the conductor remembered it. Failing which it would remain on the bus till next time round. From time to time we found this service most useful but inevitably, one day, a box of silver contacts worth quite a lot of money went missing and spent two days riding round on a bus.

We really welcomed a more frequent van delivery - but there were other demands on our new van man - the warehouse was also very busy, so we sometimes missed out. We learned to make use of any and every sort of transport available. The Company Secretary was frequently pressed into service; he lived at Oadby and sometimes delivered our wages. Initially these had been entrusted to registered post but even postal deliveries were not as regular as in pre-war days.

We even made use of my little Austin Seven. By a strange quirk of fate, having become nicely established in a job in Kibworth, I had by the early nineteen fifties become very friendly with a lady from Leicester, who lived not five minutes drive from Faraday Works. This meant that just prior to our marriage in 1953 I was a frequent visitor to that area. Consequently, by arrangements with our storekeeper and the works' night watchman, I was able to collect small amounts of goods that had missed the van. It should be made clear that this van-missing business was as much the fault of erratic deliveries into our stores by outside suppliers as to our own increasingly overburdened internal production capacity. The crunch came on the evening that I had arranged to collect some plastic mouldings which had been a late delivery. They were light in weight, but rather bulky, so it must have been quite a suspicious sight to the policeman who, at almost midnight, found us stuffing carton after carton into this tiny car parked in Faraday Works' main gateway. He insisted on accompanying the watchman back into the factory to ring the Manager to verify our story! Naturally this episode led to considerable recriminations, my actions were completely unofficial and there was of course the whole question of insurance - or lack of it - for the carrying of goods by various private cars.

Soon a much bigger lorry was obtained, with another full-time driver whose job was by now to include delivery of Gent products to all parts of the country. A London delivery became commonplace, and since Kibworth was en-route we were often able to make use of his much greater carrying capacity. The size and weight of this lorry was once almost the cause of an odd disaster. It was a work of art to reverse it into the bottom yard and it always required my services to act as traffic controller to get it out again. One day the rear offside wheel began to

sink! Bill the driver felt it going, but fortunately I was able to give him the all-clear signal, he accelerated furiously, and just got it out on to the road, leaving a yawning hole some three or four feet in diameter at the top of a hidden well which proved to be over thirty feet deep! It was the well that had fed the pump that used to supply the horse-trough for the stables and was still over half full of water!

By 1948 we had increased our product repertoire to include both wood-cased and plastic-cased bells. The wooden type, which were slightly special - almost 'period' looking' - with polished brass and high gloss varnish were quickly withdrawn however, when the cabinet shop foreman, who had called to check on the possibility of some extra shelf space, suddenly noticed that every bit of our structural timber was badly affected by wood worm. They carried out a few tests and we were assured it was not dangerous and would last for many more years but it was decided that we should concentrate on metal and plastic cased bells to avoid the risk of contamination.

Our overall production continued satisfactorily until we were eventually responsible for over twenty different lines and one year, during the mid fifties, we made a total quantity of 187,000 items. By this time we had recruited another assembler but it was becoming difficult for Leicester to maintain our supply of components, the most troublesome of which were coils. 1955 my So in office was incorporated into the workshop by removing the dividing walls, and two coil winding machines were installed together with another



Extended Part of Leicester Road Workshop

Left to right: Alice Merritt, Mary Taylor, Elsie Kemp, Pat Cornish

small work bench. My office was pushed out into a kind of slightly oversized telephone kiosk built into the old stable. We did consider using the little garret but most of the staircase had been removed with the walls and in any case the idea of running up and down a flight of steps every time the telephone rang was not on. The slightly larger working area enabled us to recruit more operators as well as the two who were to train as coil winders, and our numbers eventually increased to twelve - I had doubled my original labour force, and they even gave me a small increase in salary! We installed a wire stripping machine, a bench grinder and a pedestal driller, our electricity consumption had increased considerably - but we were suddenly faced with a new problem - electrical interference.

We had consulted the GPO on this matter in the very early days with regard to radio sets, and various chokes and filters had been incorporated into our mains supply, but the increasing popularity of TV brought a different problem altogether. Even motor cars caused a snow storm on the early screens and our machines were proved to be playing havoc with the sets of our immediate neighbours. We got away with it for a while, at first there were very few TV programmes during day time working hours, but one of the early sports features was the Wimbledon fortnight. It just happened that one of our neighbours was an ex-Leicester County tennis player - and our machines just about ruined her reception; she was not amused so once again we were invaded by GPO men.



Photo taken in side yard of Leicester Road factory - in the background left, and across the A6 road, are old cottages (later demolished) and next to them the Foxhound Inn

Left to right:
Back row: Janet Jarvis (nee Lee), Marjorie Clarke (nee Smith), Ellen Nibbs, Colin Spiller, Pat Cornish, Alice Merritt
Front row: May Bromley (nee Simons), Daisy Hill (nee

Spitnell), Mary Coleman (nee Taylor)

fitted more suppressors introduced induction motors for our main production line, but the use of a three phase motor to insert a tiny 4BA screw was rather like the proverbial sledge situation. hammer and walnut Furthermore our increased number of personnel was itself a problem; a visiting factory inspector raised lots of questions concerning the premises, the toilet facilities and the number of employees.

This time the remedy was not so simple;

Now the maintenance and cleanliness were first class - we made a practice of spending the final half hour of the week on cleaning and polishing; the painting and decorating was meticulously carried out according to factory act rules. The yards had been paved and we had a

window cleaner every week, but apart from our structural problems there was the never ending fear of the close proximity of the passing traffic. Inevitably, one dark evening our elderly London lady mis-timed her road crossing procedure, and her shopping trolley became entangled with a motor car. The net result was that Mary ended up on one side of the road and her trolley on the other, with her empty Guinness bottles rolling in the gutter. Fortunately no one was hurt - she said she would have been much more worried had the bottles been full - but the incident led to a visit from the Police. During our talks they told me that our particular bit of road was the narrowest spot on the entire A6.

I was quite relieved therefore, as well as excited, when I was informed by our Manager, a short time later, that negotiations had started with a view to the building of a new factory on a site at the other end of the village.

There followed the usual period of delays and frustrations but we eventually moved into this new factory on New Road, Kibworth Beauchamp, on the first of April 1961 - an easy date to remember - and the old place was demolished. The only thing left to remind me of its one time existence is a wide pavement flanked by a grassy bank which thanks to our Village Conservation Society is - in the springtime - bright with 'A host of golden daffodils'.

Part 2 Gent of Leicester in New Road, Kibworth

New Road, Kibworth Beauchamp, runs from the roundabout in the centre of the village known locally as 'The Bank' - in an almost easterly direction, dips under the railway and joins the A6 at a point slightly south of Kibworth Harcourt. It is not as new as its name might suggest; it was there long before the railway. When the old medieval Leicester to London coach road was re-aligned and elevated to the status of turn pike this was the new road which joined it to the village. In spite of its fairly long existence, our factory was the first building, for human habitation, to be constructed on its southern side. The predominant activity of the area was still agriculture, in fact there were only two other industrial organisations in the village at that time, and a prime concern of our managers was the conservation of the rural scenery. The farmer who sold us the land gave us the option of either a plot at the village end of the field or a strip across the far end; the latter was chosen so that with the railway bridge and embankment on one side, and the gas works across the road, our factory would create the minimum intrusion on the landscape.



It consisted of a single storey, straw coloured brick building with a conventional north light factory roof, a pair of offices and entrance foyer at the front, a utility wing on one side, with a boiler house and fuel store in the rear. Sitting at slightly below road level, behind a privet hedge and almost in the shadow of the railway embankment, only the slender finger of the boiler chimney drew attention to its existence. When we moved in, the front lawn had only just been seeded, but with the smooth tarmac entrance drive and car park, the shining new paint-

work and smart scroll type name plate, we thought it looked super.

Inside, it provided a working area of 7500 square feet, plus a goods in-ward room, a spray shop, a small canteen, excellent toilet facilities for both sexes and a warehouse. The main floor was of varnished wood which shone like a ball-room under the fifty-odd fluorescent lights, prior to the installation of the work benches. Heating was by hot water, from a solid fuel boiler, automatically fed by an 'iron fireman', and pumped through a variety of radiators and fan-heaters. Everything was controlled by thermostats and time switches, the spray-shop particularly depended on a very highly scientific system. In point of fact, the use of cellulose paint invoked a whole new volume of factory regulations covering storage risks, health risks and fire risks. The decision to incorporate a spray section was taken after much careful consideration and was included in the original building plans so that all the structural regulations were adhered to. In any case the design of the bells then in production made it a necessity if we were to be able to complete the entire manufacturing process in-house. In addition the compressed air system required, enabled us to switch to air driven screw-drivers for the assembly benches thus eliminating most of the small electric motors which were the source of the TV interference problems.

Work-flow plans, evolved by Mr J Bulman, then the Production Manager, and myself, and considered mainly at the week-ends during the building process, worked out quite well. By the end of 1961 we had designated a stores area, a machine area, assembly benches feeding toward the spray-shop and a testing and packing area separated from the production unit by a coil-winding section.

Our increased activities had of course required a considerable increase of personnel. I had been joined by a charge-hand whose name was Colin, just prior to the move, so I was no longer alone in a world of women, but by September our numbers had more than doubled. It soon became apparent that Kibworth was to be called upon to play an important role in the overall structure of the Firm.

Our first task was to introduce a recording system for the stores so that materials could be delivered in bulk



Aerial View of Gents' New Road Factory, Kibworth

rather than as sets of parts for a specific job. Then we had to re-establish production flow-lines for our various products and include the new operation 'Spray Trade Mark' and now the final operation had got to be 'Test and Pack in Cartons'.

We were entrusted with the production of the new Fig. 1151 Fire Detector; this represented Gent's first step into the heat detector fire-alarm market. It had been designed in close cooperation with 'The Fire Officers' Committee' - a national body on which we were represented by our Managing Director. We had been granted a British Standards approval licence, which meant that the detector had got to be produced in an approved manner using approved materials, the whole process being subject to their frequent inspection. The testing and calibrating process necessitated the installation of six laboratory type ovens, two of which had to be equipped with precision process timers. These were designed, built and fitted by Messrs Harris, Reynolds and Letts of the Leicester Development Department.

A serial number system was introduced and records were kept of every detector made. The maintenance of very high standards with regard to these tests was considered most important maybe someday, somewhere, lives could be at risk. The task was allotted to Marjorie, the girl who had helped me recruit our first operators. She did a magnificent job, and during the next seventeen years carried the responsibility of testing thousands of heat detectors. Sadly, one day in 1978, after feeling ill at work, she was admitted to hospital where she died a few weeks later. We closed the factory to attend her funeral - it was like losing one of the family.

Returning to the early 1960s, more and more machine tools were being delivered and installed. The off-loading and positioning of these became quite a problem as we had no heavy lifting facilities. Fortunately we had a garage man who was also a vehicle recovery specialist in the village and he was able to adapt his equipment to the manoeuvring of our machines. The electricity consumption escalated to such a degree that our electrician had to double the capacity of his original supply cables. Our labour force continued to expand - by 1962 the number had gone up to over fifty, we were then joined by Joe Stubbs who was brought in to take charge of the machine and spray sections. He had at one time been a member of our Leicester tool room but had left to take up a position as Maintenance Engineer with another firm. Now after a period of nearly ten years he decided to return to Gents - but to the Kibworth branch.

Production levels soon achieved a very satisfactory state; our main problem was moving machines and benches ever closer in order to accommodate yet another one. The supply of components however was still erratic and a couple of years later the service of a firm of business consultants was enlisted to make a survey of our methods and offer advice, which led to the adoption of an overall system of production control. This must have given at least a partial improvement as, with increased production still in mind, a short time later an agreement was reached with a firm in Yorkshire, under which they would assemble some of our products, the materials being transported by our van in exactly the same manner as with our old Kibworth Assembly Shop. They sent a representative to spend a week or two with us to acquire a bit of know how - we obtained accommodation for him at the Old Swan Inn and then several of our products became their responsibility. I am not sure whether this enterprise was very successful, it is over eighty miles to Askern which must have made transport fairly costly, and unfortunately their Mr Bryan became ill and died a short time later. By then however, Gent's circumstances had changed, but meanwhile room had been made at Kibworth for two products which were to play a very important part in the history of the company. These were the Fig. 1102 Fire Point and the Fig. 500/505 Bell. The latter had been developed by our own Leicester Development Department headed by Mr Harris who, during my formative years had been my chief, my tutor and my friend. Sadly it proved to be his final success, he died shortly after it went into production. The Fire Point was destined to become a legend - ultimately to be produced in the thousands and installed in buildings of all sizes across the world.

The working atmosphere in the new place soon became as good as, if not better, than the old. The facilities of course were considerably superior, and these were enhanced by the temperament and personalities of the people who came to join our workforce. They came not only from our own village but also from the surrounding district and proved to be a cheerful, hard working crowd of country girls, many of whom had never previously worked in a factory. Their main form of transport was the bicycle and we were soon obliged to double the capacity of the cycle sheds. Music while you work was still very popular and for this we now had a proper public address system. Hot or cold drinks were obtainable from a vending machine which, though greeted with a certain amount of caution in the early days, soon became accepted. The small canteen provided excellent 'do it yourself' facilities, and the fact that it was within the building enabled the girls to take turns to 'pop something in the oven' for lunch. Their efforts ranged from a slice of toast and tin of soup, to a chicken lunch with all the trimmings at around Christmas time. As the demand for our products continued to grow, we were obliged occasionally to resort to over-time. This was not popular as many of them had homes to run and husbands and children to look after, however, it was accepted by a good number - strictly on a voluntary basis - but it produced a request that we should carry a small stock of biscuits and chocolate "to keep them going".

I was anxious to avoid a shop keeping situation with the attendant clerical problems of keeping accounts, but a friendly local shopkeeper named John Olivant came up with a solution; he agreed to maintain a small but varied stock of sweets etc on a sale or return basis, to be paid for weekly with a small cash discount. One of the girls - Jean - volunteered to 'mind the shop' as well as cleaning, maintaining, and replenishing the vending machine, and she saved the weekly discount for us, which at Christmas time yielded enough money to buy every one a box of sweets or chocolates.

Preparations for Christmas started November, as it was necessary for each individual to collect her 'dead horse'; this was a term they used for small amounts of work to be kept in hand, so that by the morning before the holiday break they were able to allow time to be spent on a certain amount of jollification while still maintaining the all important production schedules. A week or so before the holiday, streamers and balloons would suddenly appear - all supplied by the girls - and hung during lunch break; my only stipulation was that there should be absolutely no fire risks, and everything had to be cleared before we closed for the holiday. The final half day was an education, the amount of food brought in and consumed was incredible especially auite considered that normally they nearly all were



Christmas at the New Road Factory, Kibworth

careful 'weight watchers'. Drinks of every kind were also dispensed liberally, but in twenty years I never saw anyone get beyond the state of being happy and full of fun and laughter.

There were many unofficial activities taking place in the factory, as I suppose happens wheresoever people meet at work. There were mail order clubs, holiday clubs, raffles and



One of our Carnival Floats: Arthur Holmes with Julie, Rosemary, Ann, Dot & Tessa

sweepstakes, all sorts of charities were generously supported and collections were made whenever a colleague suffered a long period of illness or any other calamity. Birthday and Christmas cards were exchanged and a wedding 'in the family' was of course very special. During the summer months our village used to stage a carnival and many a decorated float was entered in our name but created in their time. It was in fact this activity that ultimately led to an invitation to us to join the official Sports and Social Club but that came many years later.

There now came rumours of a tentative plan to expand the factory; the Company already owned the land immediately behind it and when the small farm separating us from the railway came on the market, that was also purchased. This however, we learned, was with a very long term outlook, there would no noticeable change for a long time - the only difference was that our farmer friend who originally sold us a bit of his land now became our tenant. No doubt it was a satisfactory financial arrangement, but his herd of dairy cows wending their way twice per day to and from his milking parlour nearer the village did nothing to improve our frontage, and they frequently found our neatly mown lawn quite irresistible.

Then in 1967 the spotlight turned away from Kibworth with the announcement that Gents had taken over the firm of Agro Electrical Ltd of Aylesbury. This was a comparatively small firm with a similar product range to our own, but they also had a moulding section which was thought to have considerable potential. Although plastic mouldings had been around for many years their usage was just beginning to take off. A lot of capital was poured into supplying them with new injection moulding machines and our product ranges were rationalised. The association with Messrs Tunstal Byers of Askern was terminated, the products that they were making being transferred to Agro, and a short time later they also took our underdome range. From the time we had started making these small bells in 1945, Kibworth had made over four million of them. Several different lines were then introduced to Kibworth one of which was luminous call equipment. In 1958 a large order for this product had been obtained for installation in the new liner Queen Elizabeth II; this was most interesting to me as I had also helped on the order for the Queen Mary way back in 1936.

Then in 1968 our Managing Director Mr R Swift announced his retirement; he was persuaded to continue as Company Chairman. Our new MD was Mr E O Chapman, who had previously been our Sales Manager 'chappie' and had had a long and distinguished career with the Company having joined as an apprentice in the 1920s: as head of sales he had travelled the world but I always liked to think that he had a soft spot for Kibworth in as much as he also was a countryman, his home town being a small village in the Melton Mowbray area. A few months later a new Production Manager was appointed, this was obviously regarded as a crucial position - we actually had two in the space of twelve months - but Mr D Williamson proved to be an exceptional man, although not popular with everyone; under his jurisdiction many beneficial changes were made to the Company's production methods.

It was late in 1969 that the first tentative steps were taken into the use of printed circuits. The Development Department had built a rather primitive flow-solder machine which was then installed at Kibworth. It was not realised initially that it would create lots of smoke and fumes in the main assembly area, however, about this time a new stove enamel painting plant had been installed at the Leicester works, with ample capacity for the whole of our painting requirements and which rendered cellulose spraying obsolete. So, we closed down our spray shop and it was adapted to take the printed circuits thus making use of the extractor fans. No one in the Company, at that time, had had much experience in this field, but by the process of trial and error and much perseverance, we got a production system going, however it was not till five years later that Steve was recruited - a charge-hand with prior knowledge of this type of work.

Our stores were rather disappointed to lose the space made available by the demise of the spray shop, as their need for storage room was a constant problem. They had seen many changes, both in their personnel and in the number and variety of components in stock. In addition to materials brought by our own vans it became the practice to have goods from outside firms delivered direct whenever possible. The off-loading and loading required a considerable amount of physical effort, so it became an un-written rule that on these occasions all of our male employees joined in. By 1968 it was deemed necessary to have a man permanently attached to the stores to help Melba, so Don was appointed and two or three years later he was joined by Ken. This was a time when many changes were being introduced into the booking and recording system, racks and shelves appeared everywhere; two large wooden sheds were built in the yard, and even the front entrance hall which it had originally been intended to furnish as a reception room, with low chairs, a coffee table, and potted greenery - but which never ever received its furniture - became a carton store instead. A stock control system was introduced and Geof Dixon - the Leicester representative of this function became a very frequent visitor. Soon with three factories at Leicester, one at Aylesbury, and

one at Kibworth, with lorries and vans calling every day and a list of over ten thousand items in stock, there began to be talk of a computer, but many years were to pass before the dream became a reality.

Then - one weekend Kibworth had a burglary! My office window was smashed, the desk drawers forced, and our petty cash box was taken. We found this ripped open, and minus the money, under a stores bench. Fortunately it had held only a few pounds, and no materials had been taken. This was actually very lucky when one considered that apart from everything else, we were carrying stocks of copper wire worth thousands of pounds. The Police came, took statements, searched for finger prints - with no avail - and we installed a burglar alarm, which almost became a story in its own right. It was automatically connected to Market Harborough police station via the telephone; contacts were fitted to every door and in addition an electronic sensor system was fitted in the main factory. This, I was told, was able to tell the difference between vibrations caused by a man or a mouse, but no one realised how much vibration was caused by the nearby railway trains especially at night when, as we learned much later, it was the practice to run very heavy loads of coal and iron-stone. Consequently, I was frequently phoned by the police, usually at around two or three a.m. and requested to meet their officers at the factory as the alarm had been activated. Sometimes they sent a car complete with flashing blue light to my home address, which would awaken my neighbours and the large bell on the outside of the factory wall would do the same for its neighbours, so our burglar alarm became most unpopular. Eventually the sensor system was removed and an invisible infra red beam system introduced, which was fine except for the occasions when a bird flew in through a door or window and had to be chased out before knocking off time, a sometimes unbelievably difficult task.

In the early 1970s a new Production Engineering Department was formed and everything in production came under close scrutiny. Both our Fig. 500/505 bells and the Fig. 1102 fire points were redesigned and new production lines were laid down. These items were becoming more and more important and gradually some of the drilling machines were removed to make room for them. Colin left us to take up a position with the GPO, Joe took over these new assembly lines, and a full time office girl was appointed to deal with all the new clerical work. By



Fig 396 bell in production at New Road with Margaret and the pneumatic press

this time every coil used within the Company was being wound at Kibworth. We had upwards of twenty machines, ranging from simple hand winders - similar to ones that had wound field telephone coils during the 1914-1918 war, to high speed machines running at 10,000 revs per minute. We also had two multi-winding machines which would wind six coils at once. In 1972 this complete section was re-organised, being located round a roller conveyor which enabled the finished work to be moved easily to the testing station. The whole unit was the brain child of Eric Cockeril and Trevor Marlow of this new Leicester Production Engineering Dept. It had settled down nicely yielding incredible production figures when, in 1974, the country was hit by a coal strike!

In those days most of the power stations were coal fired so, very quickly, electricity was rationed by law, all industry being reduced to a three day week with the exception of those firms who possessed their own generators. Naturally there was a big demand to hire or buy these things, but somehow one was obtained for our coil winding section, and for ten or twelve weeks our coils were wound by courtesy of a noisy diesel engine in the yard. This again was a source of annoyance to our neighbours - by this time a housing estate had been built right up to our perimeter fence. There were times when I thought - with a degree of nostalgia - of the time when we had only farmyard cows for company.

When the strike eventually ended and industry tried to get back to normal Gents had a further outcry on the subject of production and productivity. We had earlier been investigated by another firm of experts called Proudfoot Incorporated who I believe were American in origin, and who evoked many witty comments at bench level concerning "X the unknown quantity under pressure equals expert" but eventually a modified version of their system was introduced. It involved a complex method of booking and recording time, but whether it was beneficial or not was a bit debatable and when, a few months later, we were again facing problems of outstanding orders for our fire points, I suggested that maybe a practical idea would be to run a twilight shift. The idea was considered by the Production Engineers and eventually approved as a viable proposition, so I was instructed to recruit enough operators to run the production line, who would be willing to work from 6pm till 10pm of an evening. This shift started up immediately after the July break and ran until Christmas 1974; it was only moderately successful, we certainly boosted the production figures, but it must have been a fairly expensive operation and it introduced a note of discord in the harmony of the workforce as a certain degree of friction developed between the two shifts. However by now our numbers had risen to nearly eighty people, so perhaps it was too much to expect things to be all sweetness and light all the time.

The Company celebrated its centenary in 1972. It seemed a somewhat subdued sort of birthday to us at bench level and although everything seemed to be going well one wondered whether perhaps the phrase 'Happy Birthday' was more appropriate than 'Many Happy Returns of the Day'. Gents had been created and run by engineers - men who manipulated metal - rather than financiers adept at fiddling with figures (please note I did use the preposition "with") but at that time it sometimes seemed that in the business world the latter were often achieving more success than the former - but, ours is not to reason why.

In 1975 there was a fire in the Leicester warehouse - which could have been more of a catastrophe than it was, had it not been for the reliability of our fire alarms. Kibworth like everyone else in our organisation, was called upon to help with the checking, cleaning and repackaging of the entire stock - we reeked of smoke for months! Naturally this led to the checking, testing and updating of our own alarm system. Heat detectors were installed in addition to the manual system and another automatic telephone link was introduced, this time to the Leicester fire-headquarters. Steve, our charge-hand, was already a part-time fireman for the village - now these men carry a radio bleeper and when called their instructions are to drop everything and rush to our local fire station, like a bat out of hell; it can be quite disconcerting at times. We asked him to supervise our fire precautions, to maintain the extinguishers and organise our practice fire drills; this he did in a most efficient and professional manner, even timing our unannounced evacuation practices against a stop watch. All went well till the day we forgot to disconnect the telephone line before a practice! Steve was about to call the roll, our staff having correctly assembled outside on the lawn, when his bleeper sounded. Thrusting the register into Ken's hand he departed like a four minute miler for the fire station - where he was instructed to take the engine - back to his own factory! The incident was eventually written off as a technical error but the local press loved it.

In 1974 Mr Bulman retired. He was now Works Director, but he had always been our liaison man with Leicester, and with us and Management. I had seen him rise from bench to boardroom and had worked in close conjunction with him for many years, with respect and admiration; now I had lost another link with the good old days.

Then, a year or so later came the announcement that shook us all - Gent and Company was to be taken over by Chloride and in future would be known as 'Chloride Gent'. We knew they were an international organisation with subsidiaries in many countries around the world - suddenly we were very small fish in an enormous ocean. The first physical effect this had on Kibworth was due to the fact that retirement at sixty for women and sixty five for men was a rule in the Company; this meant that we lost twelve employees in six months. The following year Joe was hit by a heart attack and after many weeks in hospital he also retired. I was on my own again and wondering like everyone else - what next?

The show must go on however, as must work; we continued to maintain production levels to the best of our ability and Beryl was appointed charge-hand to run the assembly lines. She had previously been our shop-steward and I knew she held a very fair and balanced view on factory life and was a popular and respected leader. She did a magnificent job in her new role and things had settled into a good rhythm, then we were told that Agro was to be closed. Once again products and flow lines had to be switched around; the printed circuit work was transferred to a new factory in London Street, Leicester, along with the moulding machinery; and lots of Agro lines were brought to Kibworth - including the small underdome bells, albeit slightly redesigned, which they had taken from us in 1970. Their moulding section having moved to London Street, several of their staff spent a lot of time here helping to get things going again. I understand that some of them were offered .jobs here but none of them accepted. Maybe they were reluctant to tear up their roots in Buckinghamshire to start again in Leicestershire, and who could blame them.

This was 1977 - the year in which I became President of the Quarter Century Club - and Mr Edwardes, boss of Chloride left to join British Leyland! There followed a still greater emphasis on productivity and a brand-new 'work study' department came into being. This is the science that is able to determine the time required to do almost anything! Our production lines and work stations were carefully timed by a trained team of men with stop watches, then new piece-work times were calculated using the correct national formulae which contained the



In 1977, Harold Ward becomes President of the 'Quarter Century Club'

correct built in allowance times for everything from drinking a cup of tea to attending to biological calls of nature. It took many, many months of careful study before it went on to the shop floor. It must have cost a bomb and under the law of swings and roundabouts the actual saving to the Company in allowed hours per product was marginal - at least at Kibworth. I once tried to calculate how many years would be needed before the money saved would equal the cost of the exercise, but as I had no access to the costs of running the department, and as my maths had never progressed beyond simple matriculation level I had to abandon the project. One has to accept however, that this is the only true and fair method of measuring work.

A more sombre fact was that orders into the firm were falling fast, consequently we were becoming short of work. Credit must be given where it is due, our new Managers did their level best to keep Kibworth afloat. It became the practice to convey groups of our operators to the Leicester factories to find work for them, first by car and later by mini-bus. Things became a little better by 1980 and some of them returned, but by now we were in the middle of a nation wide trade recession. Firm action had to be taken by management, many of our low



Flo, our Coil Winder, retires Jan 1980

volume products were deleted and there were some voluntary redundancies at Leicester. I heard that for the first time in its history our Company incurred a half year loss.

This was corrected the following year and we were reported to be 'in balance'; our work situation was a little better and we decided to take advantage of - as we hoped - the lull and have some of our equipment such as voltage supply packs and test rigs overhauled or re-built. We were given a new Managing Director, a Mr Fred Shaw, who came to us from another branch of the Chloride group. We were told of a new bell about to go into production to be called the 213 and things seemed to be looking up. Tentative plans were made to re-furbish the entire factory, with talk of new plastic topped benches and new better designed chairs. We had the first multi-winding machine completely overhauled - then - in July came the announcement that our Company had been sold by Chloride to the MK Electric group. We were now to be called Gent Limited and again we worked with bated breath, wondering what would happen. We were not kept long in suspense as in September we were told that as a result of the continuing trade recession the Kibworth factory would have to close.



Retirement 'Do' for Harold Ward, after 47 Years Service with Gent & Co. Ltd.

There would be a few jobs available at the Leicester factories and free transport would be provided for six months; they did their best for us, but the remainder of us would become redundant at the end of October. There followed a harrowing time of hand-shakes and tears. The girls and two remaining guys, gave me a farewell 'do' in the canteen, we had wine and a cake with 1946-1982 written on it; they

invited my wife, gave her flowers, and they gave me cards and presents which I shall treasure - always. I was actually due to become an old age pensioner - or if you prefer the term - a senior citizen - within a year and when Bert the Company Pensions Officer called to sort out my personal records, he informed me that I had also acquired the doubtful distinction of being the longest serving employee on the pay-roll. I stayed on until November, helping with the melancholy dismantling process; on the last day Colin Reynolds and Mike Paul took me to

the Coach and Horses for lunch. I handed over the keys and as I prepared to face a future of full time employment on my allotment, I half remembered some lines by Thomas Hardy -

"Only a man harrowing clods In a slow silent walk With an old horse that stumbles and nods Half asleep as they stalk. Only thin smoke without flame

From the heaps of couch-grass; Yet this will go onward the same Though Dynasties pass.

Yonder a maid and her wight Come whispering by; Earth's annals will cloud into night Ere their story die."

A forlorn hope of course - all memories are receding fast and growing dim, which is why I recorded the story.