

Glimpses of the Past

by George Toms

No. 11 Brush at War 1939-42

A while ago a colleague suggested that I write about Brush in wartime. A good idea indeed and I set about doing so, for both world wars. Alas there would be insufficient space for both, so here is a mere scratching of the surface, as it were, of World War 2, probably very fresh in the minds of retired employees and beyond the working memory of any survivors at the works.

World wars are not just wars fought solely on the battlefield, they are total wars where all aspects of life of the nation are directed towards winning. Industry is always in the forefront, and in September 1939 this was no exception when hostilities began. Brush had already provided road vehicles and equipment during the prewar rearmament phase, so was better prepared than most companies. Before the end of the year military vehicles were already being delivered and during October the Company announced its alternative motor fuel to counter the adverse effects of petrol rationing. This was the Brush-Koela gas producer which extracted gas from anthracite for fuelling motor vehicles. The system was designed with lorries in mind and was more widely advertised during early 1940.

October 1939 saw new premises acquired in Fennel Street for the Brush Sports and Social Club. At the time it had around 2,000 members and the effects of war were to increase membership dramatically. The new premises were converted over the ensuing months and officially opened on 20th July 1940 by the managing director Mr T. B. Keep. By this time membership totalled around 3,000 and the new facilities were to provide a great boost to the leisure facilities of war-weary Brush employees, particularly as the war had entered a stage perilous to the extreme after the evacuation of the British Army from France.

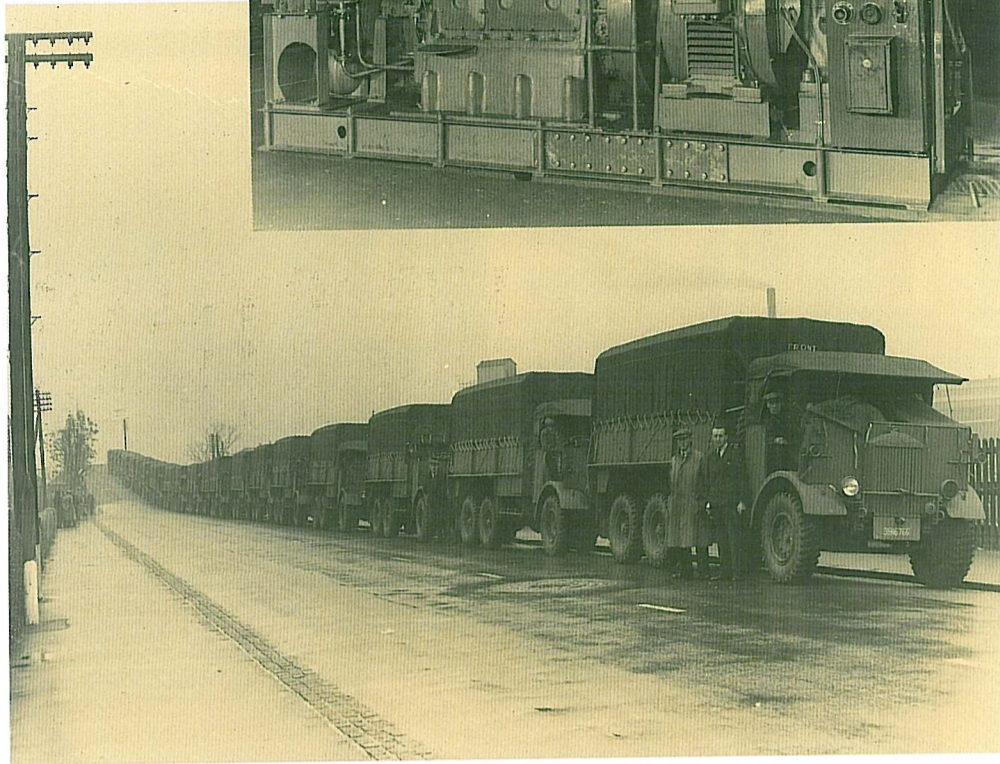
Life had continued for the first few months with a few changes obviously, but some of the peacetime events continued, for example the annual Brush Ball, which was held on 3rd March 1940 and which was attended by 750 people, this attendance not being impaired in any way by the war.

Back at the Falcon Works the Company was receiving record orders – indeed the orders represented the largest in its history. This was most welcome because prewar the situation had been seriously depressed for some years. Many employees were already drafted into the armed forces, but the Company was coping well.

I am able to rely on the memory of retired employee Arthur Hutt, who joined Brush Coachwork Ltd in May 1940, and he has kindly provided some enlightening details of what life was like during those hard times. I have combined details from other sources, books, archive material and local newspapers to widen the scope a little.

Arthur mentioned that the Coachworks was engaged on building radio location cabins (radar) mounted on Dyson trailers, converting Humber Snipe army staff cars into navigator training vehicles for the RAF, mobile offices for use in the field by the Army, trailer-mounted army stores vans, gun portees (specially designed lorries carrying 25 pounder guns), vehicle-mounted flame throwers and battery electric vehicles (which were sent to the USSR for use in factories). Utility-bodied motor buses were also produced. During the early part of the war army tank floats were made. These were made of wood and in pairs for fitting to the sides of the tanks to support them during the crossing of rivers.

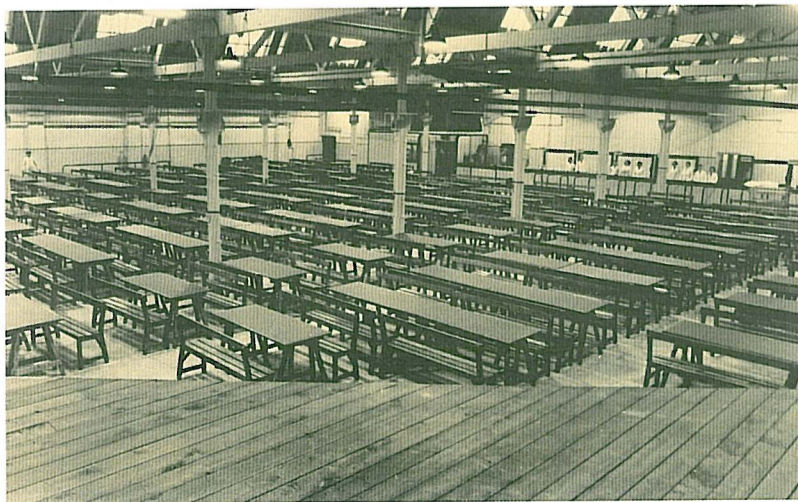
Official opening of the Brush canteen by Company Chairman, Sir Ronald Matthews, 18th November 1941.



At the close of 1940 Brush was noticeably changing. Blackout arrangements had long been in force, but they had a more significant meaning as German bombers raided far inland, reaching such towns as Derby, Liverpool and Belfast. The workshops were completely blacked out, so even in the daytime people worked under lights. In recalling this Arthur related that the managing director of the later war period, Mr A. P. Good, was a friend of the writer J. P. Priestley and the latter used to visit him on occasions at the works. It is said that the book "Daylight on Saturday" written during the period was mainly based on what he saw while visiting Brush.

Arthur remembers that a Brush section of the Home Guard was established with the guard room being in the building next to the Control Centre. He also recalls that the officers were mostly drawn from Brush management. Firewatching was compulsory, each person being given a notice when he or she was required to report for duty. Some of the lookouts were on the roofs of works buildings where incendiary bombs had plenty of places to lodge themselves. Also on roofs were the air raid sirens. From memory, one survived for many years after the war, mounted on top of the three-storey block adjacent to the LMS railway line. Even today faint traces of the wartime building camouflage may be discerned on the brickwork of certain buildings, although one has to look very closely indeed (try 24 Shop).

1941 dawned and operations on land and sea concerned the Middle East and the Atlantic Ocean. The war effort constantly increased in momentum and efforts were made to work more efficiently, with regular appeals made to everyone from the managing director. The combination of increased war work and more men being drafted into the armed forces led to an influx of female labour on the shops. There was nothing novel in this, the practice had been common during World War 1, but it was further indication as to how matters were progressing.



The main Dining Room of the new canteen, November 1941.

Brush NS.81 alternator driven by a Petter S.S.3 engine for the Ministry of Supply, January 1941.

Convoy of Brush military vehicles ready for despatch on Meadow Lane, Loughborough, November 1939.

relayed around the various dining areas, works and office parts alike. In the larger area, the works portion, was a stage set into one corner, but with a 50ft. frontage. This was used for a variety of purposes, including live musical entertainment. Arthur recalls that on several occasions the BBC radio programme "Worker's Playtime" was broadcast from it with several well-known artists appearing. Another wartime radio programme "Music While You Work" was broadcast over the speakers to boost morale. It was still doing this in 1960 when I joined the Company, being somewhat less of a boost by then. The canteen fought its own war until the early 1970s, when it was replaced by the Falcon Dining Rooms. Its main weapon by then was stewed beans on toast!

Working hours were always long. According to Arthur Hutt most people worked a seven day week, the staff a six day week. As time went on the Government discovered that national production was falling and took measures to correct the problem. At the Falcon Works it was decided that everyone should have at least one day off in seven, so it was agreed that the works would close on Saturday one week and Sunday the next week, hence the title of Mr Priestley's book!

Working hours for the works were Monday to Thursday 7.30 to 12.00pm (dayshift 1.00pm to 5.00pm and 5.15pm to 7.15pm). Friday was 7.30am to midday and 1.00pm to 5.00pm. Alternate Saturdays and Sundays were 7.30am to midday and 1.00pm to 4.30pm.

For the staff Monday to Thursday hours were 8.30am to 12.30 and 1.45pm to 6.15pm, but on Fridays they were 8.30am to 12.30 and 1.45pm to 5.15pm. Saturday working was 8.30am to 12.30 and there was no Sunday working unless required.

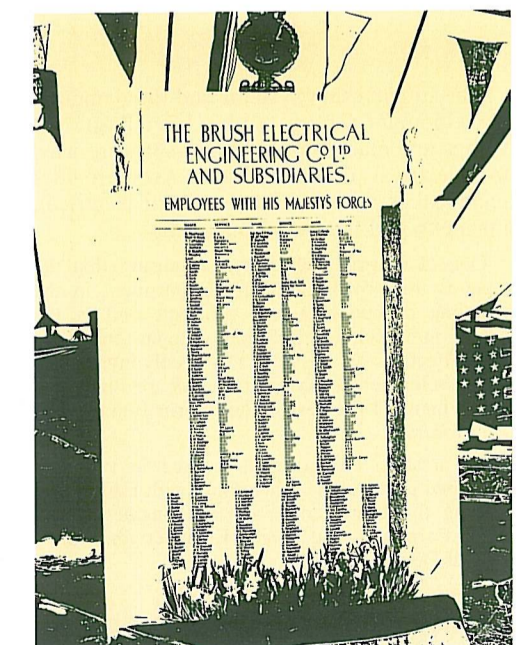
There was a large number of people working on the nightshift with the shift hours mostly being of ten to twelve hours duration. The canteen was open at night for the night-shift.

The hours were long and the products were vital to the war effort. The pace was unremitting, but people still enjoyed themselves, often through the various organised events within and without the Brush Sports and Social Club.

In the next issue the Brush at war theme will be continued, and will include the recent accidental discovery of a wartime clockcard, the shopping problem and aircraft production.

Can you identify this?

This plaque showing Brush employees serving in the second World War is believed to be at an exhibition in 1943. If you can identify the occasion and/or venue, and anything else of interest, please contact George Toms (see below).



CAN YOU HELP?

In preparation for publication in 1994 is a feature recalling the Light Machines Department/Division, sometimes known as Small Motors. Based in the old 11 Shop (now Rapid Transit) it produced a wide range of small machines and had an excellent team of personnel that would be the envy of today's aspirations of teamwork.

Do YOU have any memories, photographs or whatever of 11 Shop? Did you move up from Cardiff during the mid-1950s after Hoppo's were taken over by Brush?

If so please contact George Toms, preferably by internal mail, c/o Main or Mining Test.