

150 Years of NEI Thompson

1984

NEI Thompson – part of our industrial heritage.

One hundred and fifty years is all the time that it has taken for the world to move from gas lights, steam engines and horse drawn vehicles to nuclear power and interplanetary flight. This incredible social and technological progression being brought about by the interaction of scientific advances and industrial entrepreneurial skills.

Since the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century the United Kingdom has had a reputation for industrial innovation and skill, the quality of its products becoming famous throughout the world.

With manufacturing developing in specific areas that had access to both coal and iron, the subsequent concentration of skill and competition produced the ideal conditions for industrial development.

This was when the Black Country earned its name, with the intensity of manufacturing fueling the motivation of progressive individuals. One such person was William Thompson, who in 1834 founded a family business in Bilston that over the next four generations would become part of our industrial heritage.

1834 to 1984, one hundred and fifty years that have seen Thompson become a byword for engineering and commercial excellence.



Founder, William Thompson 1814 – 1878

1834 - 1870



Wolverhampton was noted for wool in the 1830's

1834 – In the Reign of King William IV Britain was in the middle of the first railway boom and three years away from the start of the Victorian era. Western Europe was becoming industrialised as was Great Britain. Tsar Nicholas I ruled Russia.

Industrial Origins

In 1834 when William Thompson established himself as a boiler-maker, there was little to suggest that this was to become a landmark in industrial history.

Born in 1811, William started work in his father's coal mine at the age of ten, leaving two years later to begin an apprenticeship at G. B. Thorneycroft of Bilston where he learnt his boiler-making trade.

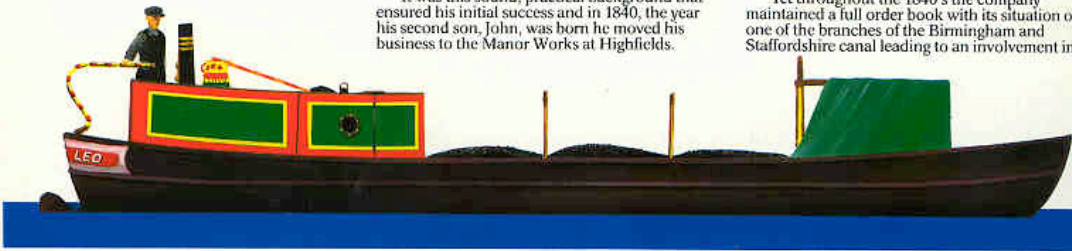
It was this sound, practical background that ensured his initial success and in 1840, the year his second son, John, was born he moved his business to the Manor Works at Highfields.

Unfortunately, while his personal ability enabled him to develop a reputation as a skilled boiler-maker, his lack of business sense allowed the innovations that came easily to him to be exploited by others.

It is said that he was the first man to make a boiler from a template, a development that would considerably reduce the cost of manufacture, yet he made no attempt to patent the process or to keep the knowledge from his competitors.

This was the time before the railway had reached Wolverhampton, noted more then for wool than for engineering. Queen Victoria had just come to the throne and Ettingshall was still a country village. It was also a time of great industrial depression with the many unemployed giving rise to food riots in the main industrial areas.

Yet throughout the 1840's the company maintained a full order book with its situation on one of the branches of the Birmingham and Staffordshire canal leading to an involvement in



Iron boats were built and repaired



Thompson Workforce around 1850

the building and repair of iron boats.

Despite William Thompson's engineering skills and the steady flow of work, his commercial naivety caused the business to get into difficulties and in 1851 it was taken over, by his younger brother, Stephen, who had always exhibited exceptional business acumen and foresight.

His takeover coincided with the Great Exhibition, regarded in its time as the eighth wonder of the world. It gathered together the latest manufacturing trends and techniques, stimulating the ideas of all those engaged in industry.

With the company now under control of his uncle, John Thompson continued to work learning his trade. His determination to fulfil his father's ambitions and one day buy back the business was strengthened by the gradual improvement of his already close relationship with Stephen.

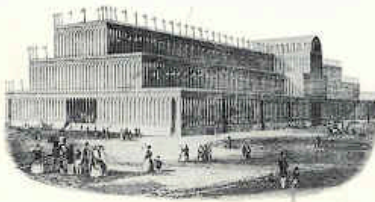
Because of the growing respect he earned from his uncle, John became progressively more responsible for the running of the company until in 1860 he was actually able to buy it back on a ten-year deferred agreement.

When every penny had been repaid John concentrated on the company's future development. Needing more space, he chose a new site near the picturesque vicarage of Ettingshall Parish Church. Adjoining the Birmingham Canal, it was ideal for their iron boat business and as the company moved into new areas of production, such as egg ended boilers, they would need the facility of expansion offered by the adjoining open country.

It was at Ettingshall that the John Thompson roots were sunk deep both in boiler-making and in local family traditions of employment. The opportunities provided by Thompson's continued success are typified by James Jeavons. He joined them in 1865 when he was ten years old and in his seventy years employment rose to foreman, works manager and then to member of the board.

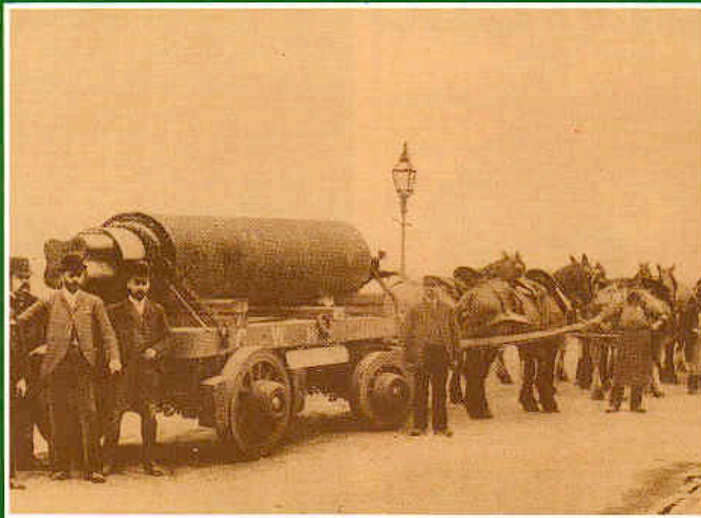
During his career he was to see the workforce grow from a mere handful of skilled craftsmen to many thousands, with generations of his family following his example, to make the name of Jeavons synonymous with John Thompson.

The company grew steadily, absorbing developments in production and changes in demand and when William Thompson became partially bedridden in 1870 John took over complete control. That year also marked the last instalment to Stephen Thompson with the company now fully back in control of the founder's family.



The Great Exhibition 1851

Heavy transport of the 1850's



Boilers made in the 1850's were still in working order in the 1940's



1871-1900

1871 – The British Empire was at its full power and Queen Victoria was in the middle of her 64 year reign.

A great period – the Victorians were great inventors, the 1860s and 1870s saw the invention of the telephone, the typewriter, the gramophone and the electric light bulb. By 1871 the Railway Barons had built a network of 15,000 miles of railway covering the length and breadth of Britain.

The Victorian Entrepreneurs

Under John Thompson's guidance the company prospered through the early 1870's and when William died in 1878 nearly twenty years had passed since John's agreement with his uncle to buy back the company.

The founder's widow wished all of her sons to continue the business together, a situation agreed to by John who remained in overall control.

However, before the youngest sons, Enoch and Samuel were due to become partners, they caused a rift in the family when it was discovered that they had bought a small factory of their own, and were underpricing John Thompson's own business.

John's rare display of temper led him to dismiss both brothers, allowing them sufficient capital with which to independently establish their own business. In this they were quite successful, the company developing into the well known firm of Thompson Brothers, which ironically, would one day come back into the John Thompson group.

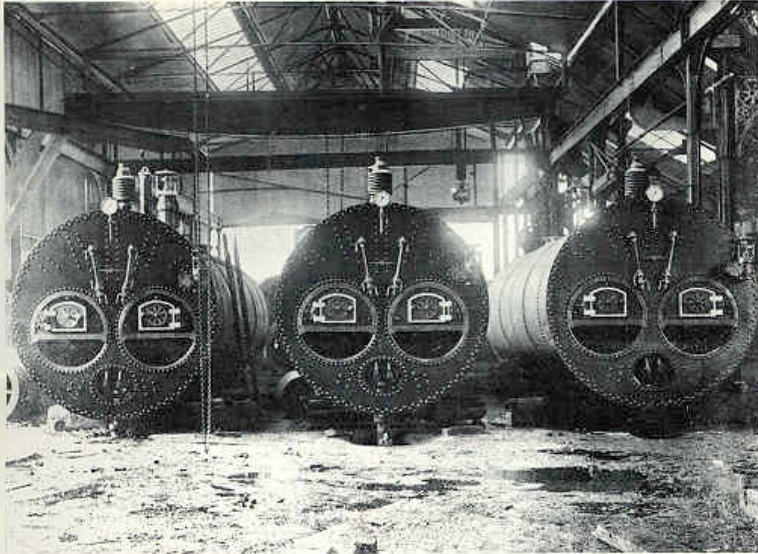
John Thompson continued to forge ahead and by the mid 1880's they were employing fifty people. Most of the work still had to be manhandled, with boiler plates brought in by waggons. Few of the shops had roofs and, in winter, plates often had to be dug out from under snow or ice. After rolling, the plates were cotted up, three in a row for hand rivetting.

Horse drawn vehicles were the only suitable transport available at that time and with the dozens of horses and drivers necessary to haul the finished boilers, the noise of hauling chains and shouted instructions created quite an occasion when they were being loaded.

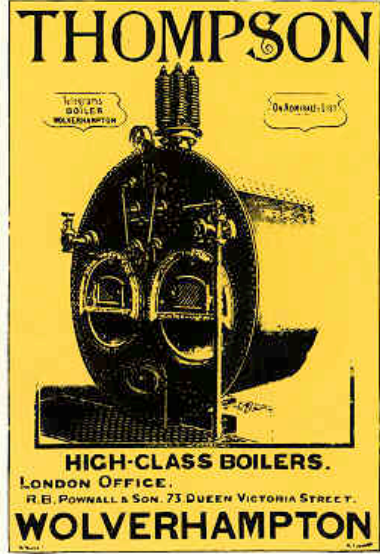
This was how the old egg-ended boilers were produced and despatched but as most of the work was carried out by skilled craftsmen, the high level of workmanship soon developed a tremendous reputation for John Thompson in this field of engineering. As well as those involved in making boilers, many of the men were now engaged in important repair work all over the country.

As steel became increasingly available John Thompsons began to use it on a large scale. With the improved performance of the material, high pressure Lancashire boilers were now being ordered in preference to the older, furnace type.

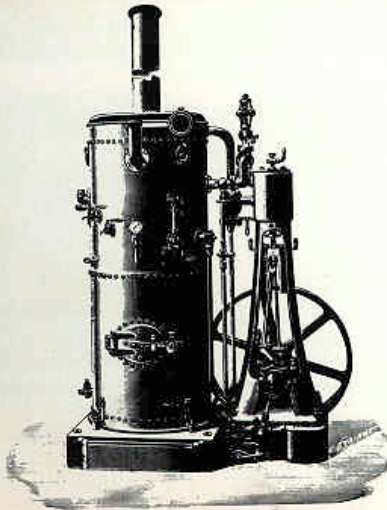
WILLIAM THOMPSON,
ESTABLISHED 1850.
Manufacturer of every description of
WROUGHT-IRON AND
STEEL RIVETED WORK,
INCLUDING
Colliery Ventilating Tubes,
PIT TUB BODIES,
TANKS & CISTERNS
ANY SIZE OR SHAPE.
GALVANIZED OR PAINTED
CATTLE TROUGHS,
Circulating Cylinders, Corn Bins,
GART BODIES, SANITARY PANS,
SHIP, ASH, & CONTRACTORS' BUCKETS
CHEMICAL DRUMS,
KIBBLES for Copper Mines,
KEGS, CISTERNS & DRUMS
FOR PAINT, OIL, AND TURPENTINE.
KEGS, USE PANS, ANNEALING CASKS, SHAKING
BARRELS, CANS and DRAINING BUCKETS for
Nail, Rivet, and Screw Works.
HIGHFIELD WORKS, ETTINGSHALL,
Near Wolverhampton.



Three Lancashire Boilers for India States Railways 1895



A Thompson advertisement 1894



A John Thompson vertical engine and boiler

But the developments in manufacturing were not matched by technological advances in such areas as power generation so that the only lighting available was from oil lamps hung about in the yards.

As the business grew, so did the involvement of John Thompson's sons. From running the company virtually on his own he was now supported by James, the administrator, Albert, the engineer, William, just through technical college and 'young' John, learning the trade.

As the product range expanded to include storage tanks, steel chimneys and lattice girders, the company acquired a new site of Windmill works, Dudley to increase their production capacity.

Incorporating all the advances in technology with their accumulated skill and practical experience John Thompson's had prepared their management, capacity and product range to meet the demands of the twentieth century.



John Thompson 1839 - 1909



A John Thompson Dishended Lancashire Boiler arriving in Tocopilla, Chile, South America



Water Tube Boilers in the 1920's

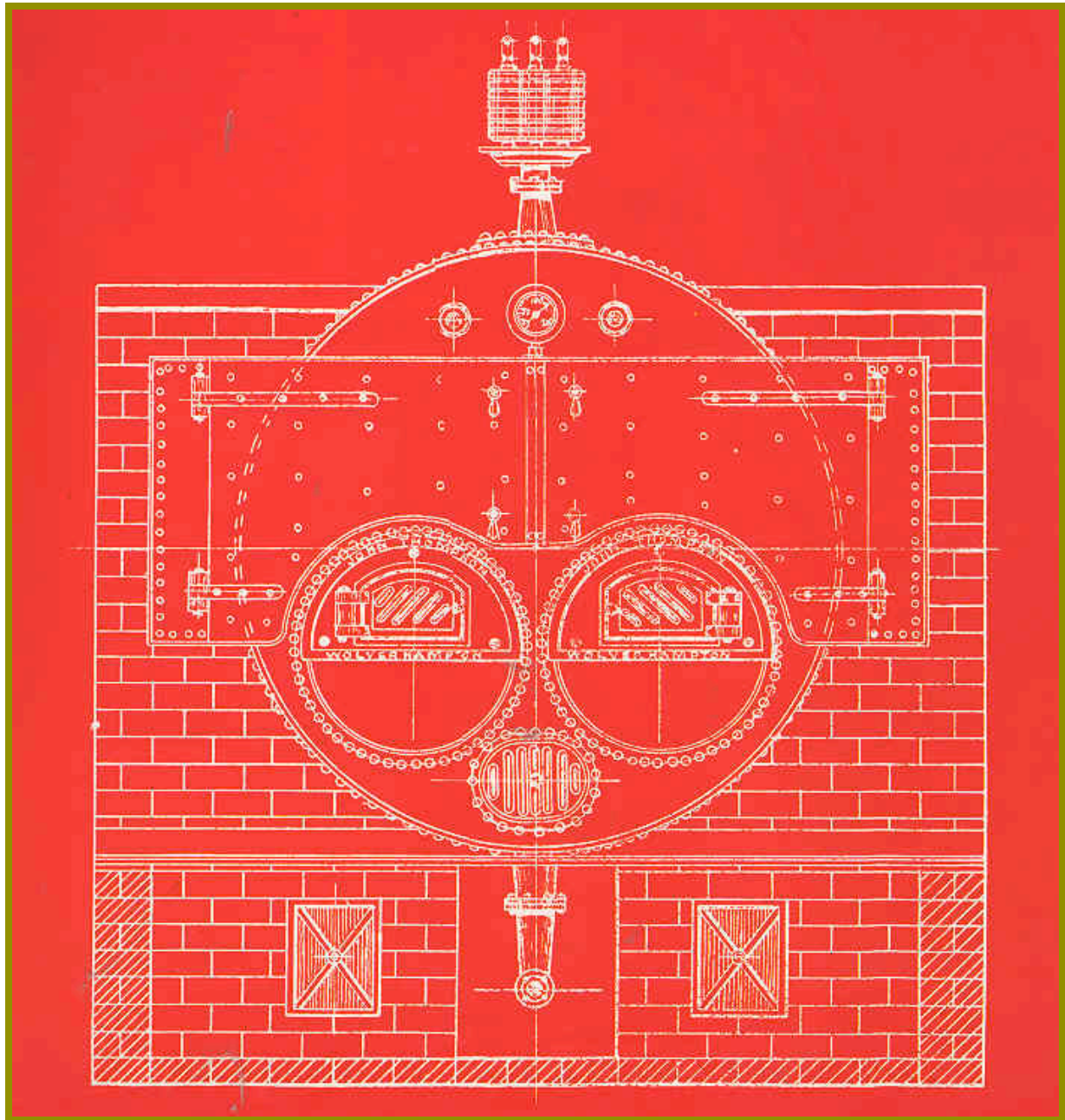


A John Thompson metal sign.

A John Thompson working traction engine.



A 1934 Thompson Tanker



1901-1930

1901 was the end of a great era in British history – on the 22nd of January Queen Victoria died. Kitchener's peace terms were rejected by the Boers. President McKinley of the United States was assassinated the Theodore Roosevelt succeeds him.

Marconi sends wireless signals across the Atlantic and the first British submarine was launched.



Four brothers and an Empire

The new century saw an equally new approach by the company, with John Thompson seeking new international markets along with his youngest son, exhibiting yet again the personal qualities that had enabled him to win back and establish the business.

From China they travelled to Japan where they obtained a big boiler order and established an agency. Leaving Yokohama they crossed the Pacific to Seattle, then continued on to Toronto.

Their overseas expansion continued when young John visited India two years later. During his year long trip he established office arrangements in Calcutta that heralded the beginning of a long and prosperous tradition of trade with the Jewel of the Empire.

Meanwhile, at home, the company continued

- 1907 -

Merrivale Wks				Merrivale Wks			
Date	No.	Name	Particulars	Date	No.	Name	Particulars
Aug 27	175	John Baker & Co	Chimney 100' x 36"	Oct 13	197	Hennicot W. S. Co	Stimulators, bar
9	176	Lowell Wiggins Co	6 Valves to sample	10	198	British Coal Co	Chimney
22	177	Robert Hoyle & Co	Blowing Plant	11	199	British Coal Co	Ship
10	178	Hennicot W. S. Co	Sackery Chemical	12	200	G. Washburn	Boiling Tank
5	179	Geo. Reynolds	Chimney 100' x 36"	20	201	Hennicot W. S. Co	Hot Prints
7	180	Geo. Scott & Son	Iron Vessel	22	202	Hennicot W. S. Co	Scale Lifter
10	181	Eltinghall Wks	Exhibition Boiler	23	203	Hennicot W. S. Co	10 1/2" x 18" Light
8	182	Hennicot W. S. Co	Softener 13 1/2" dia	24	204	W. Underwood & Co	Iron Stand
11	183	Hennicot W. S. Co	Iron Stand	25	205	British Coal Co	Coal Breaker
12	184	Thos. Tugwell & Co	Allegations to Lamp	26	206	Alfred Rickman Ltd	D. Pipes
11	185	Hennicot W. S. Co	Exhaust Fan	27	207	E. G. Daniels	Spacer Boiler
12	186	J. Kingston & Co	Scrap	28	208	Hennicot W. S. Co	Spindle for Valve
14	187	Dumbar Mill Co	Iron Shell	28	209	Hennicot W. S. Co	Older Machine
15	188	Alfred Allen & Co	Iron Screen	29	210	Carlisle & Sons Ltd	Iron Screen
16	189	Robert Armstrong Co	Vertical 7 1/2" x 33"	30	211	British Coal Co	Chimney 120'
18	190	Hennicot W. S. Co	10" x 35" Machine	29	212	Eastern Machine Co	Boiler 9' x 10'
19	191	Eltinghall Wks	Chimney	30	213	Arthur & Pitt	Iron Shop
19	192	Geo. Baker & Sons	Iron	31	214	J. Briggs & Co	Traps
28	193	Alfred Richardson	Ladle, Paper	31	215	Augustus Pearce	Hot Scrap
29	194	Hennicot W. S. Co	Levelling 50' x 7"	3	216	Henry Lovell	Rolling Chimney
Oct 1	195	Woods Machine Tool Co	Plates 4 Valves	7	217	Hennicot W. S. Co	2" dia. 10'
5	196	Dunsmuir Eng. Co	Angles	8	218	Hennicot W. S. Co	1" - 2" x 8"
6	197	Eltinghall Wks	Boilers (Chimney)	10	219	Jones, Burton & Co	Chimney
7	198	Geo. Scott & Son	Vessel	11	220	Donchase Wks Co 509	Chimney
10	199	B. & S. Savage	Iron Plate	11	221	Hutton Iron Works Co	Chimney
11	200	J. Goodwin & Co	Chimney 100'	22	222	Hennicot W. S. Co	Hot Water 10'
12	201	J. Tappin & Co	Ironing Table	22	223	G. Lawrence & Co	Iron Tank

- 1908 -

John Thompson Order Book 1907

The John Thompson Order Book 1907

to take full advantage of technological advances. The impetus provided by the advent of electricity was immeasurable with powered cranes, generators for compressors and then water gas welding plant.

In 1908 John Thompsons opened a London office and in the same year were awarded a diploma at the Paris Exhibition for the dish-ended boiler which they had pioneered in the UK.

This new method of construction improved the performance of the boilers whilst dispensing with many of the previous production processes, making their manufacture much more economic and their maintenance much easier.

The dish-ended Lancashire boiler became John Thompsons standard type and are now installed in countries throughout the world.

The company continued to expand, with the workforce increasing to approximately six hundred. Not only did the boiler-making and general engineering business grow, but new areas of technology were absorbed within the group. One example was the acquisition of the manufacturing rights for water softening equipment, together with the famous Kennicott name.

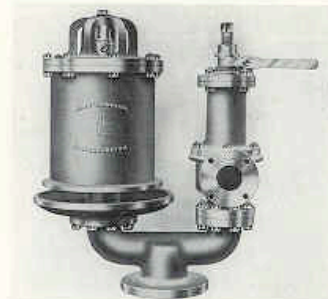
Whilst returning from a trip to Egypt, Greece and Palestine in 1909, John Thompson, the architect of the company, died, leaving his four sons to sustain its growth and development.

This they did, as well as maintaining the established staff welfare facilities, with regular staff outings and a new modest apprenticeship scheme, while continuing the company's policy of paying more than the minimum wage levels.

Female emancipation came to John Thompsons in 1909 with the first female employee. Then with the development of the internal combustion engine the first motor pressing hay was erected at Ettingshall, producing frames for Rolls Royce as well as Scagraves' Sunbeam and the Napier Railton, both world-record breakers.



Members of the John Thompson Fitting Shop 1919

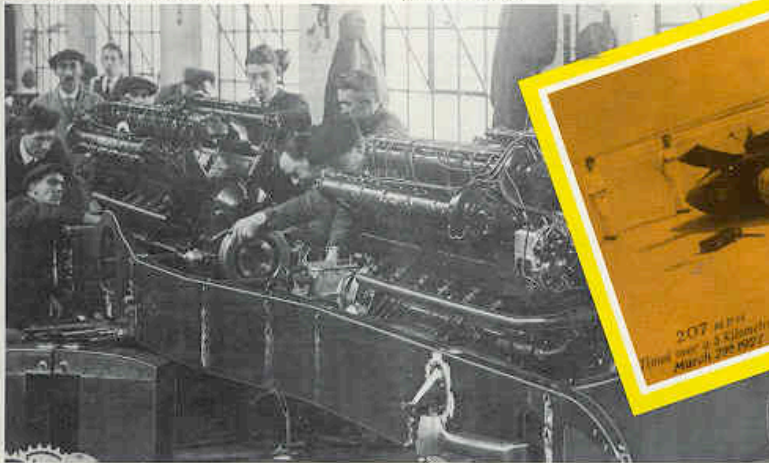


A 1910 Thompson 'Hercules' deadweight and spring loaded safety valve

The 1914-1918 war took many men to the trenches and amongst those honoured as heroes was Major S. J. Thompson who was awarded the DSO for his bravery.

In this atmosphere of national mobilization women were employed at John Thompsons to help with the temporary wartime production of essential military equipment.

When peace came the company regrouped its resources and roared through the 1920's, with the mass-production of automotive components, the formation of a marketing company in Australia, diversification into metal window frames and continued investment in new plant and equipment.



Scagraves record breaking Sunbeam

