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.
1834–1870

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 shipyard at the age of 16, thereafter spending years in the demanding business of boat building. It was this practical background that stood him in good stead for the next phase of his life, when he moved to Manchester to start a company.

The company, W. Thompson & Son, was formed in 1850, the same year that the first steamboats were built and operated. The company continued to grow, and by the late 1860s, it was one of the largest in the country. The company's success was due in part to William's innovative ideas, such as the design of the steamboat that would eventually revolutionize the industry. The company's influence extended beyond the local area, with branches established in other parts of the country.

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 and canal booms in Wolverhampton, and the company continued to flourish.

Yet throughout the 1840s, the company maintained a full order book with new and existing clients, a measure of the respect in which the company was held. By the time of his death in 1870, the company had grown to become one of the largest in the country, with a reputation for innovation and quality.
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. This takeover coincided with the Great Exhibition, regarded in its time as the greatest wonder of the world. It gathered together all 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 the trade. His determination to fulfill his father's ambitions and carry on his legacy meant 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, as a ten-year deferred agreement. When every prospect had been repaired, John concentrated on the company's future development. Needing more space, he chose a new site near the picturesque village of Bingley, near Bradford, where they had moved from the original Leeds premises in 1826. This new site would be close to the canal and offer more scope for expansion. The opportunity provided by Thompson's continued growth was seized by James Thompson. He joined them in 1861 when he was just 21 years old and in the following years rose to become 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 hundreds, with generations of his family following his example to make the name of Thompson synonymous with boatbuilding. The company grew steadily, absorbing new developments in production and changes in demand, and within a few years, William Thompson became partially disabled. In 1870 John took over complete control. That year also marked the last installment to Stephen Thompson with the company, now fully back in control of the founder's family.
1871 - 1900

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

At this time, the Victorians were great innovators, the 1850s and 1870s saw the invention of the telephone, the typewriter, the steam engine, and the electric light bulb. By 1871, the railways were making a network of 12,000 miles of railways covering the length and breadth of Britain.

The Victorian Entrepreneurs

Under John Thompson's guidance, the company grew through the early 1870s and when William died in 1873, nearly twenty years had passed since John had taken over the company.

The founder's widow and all of her sons wanted to continue the business together, a situation agreed to by John who, however, in overall control. However, before the youngest son, Enoch, and Samuel were due to become partners, they wanted a trial in the factory to see if it was practical 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 way, they were quite successful, producing work into the well-known firm of Thompson Brothers, which, ironically, would one day come into the John Thompson group.

John Thompson continued to forge ahead and, by the mid-1880s, they were employing fifty people. Most of the work still had to be manufactured, with boiler plates brought in by wagon. Four of the shops had tools and, in winter, plates often had to be dug out from under snow or ice. After rolling, the plates were collected up three in a row for hand riveting.

These drum riveters were the only suitable transport available at that time and with the draughts of horses and donkeys necessary to haul the finished boilers, the noise of hammering and shouted instructions created quite an occasion when they were being hauled.

This was how the old graduated boilers were produced. The design was simple but it was the work that was carried out by skilled craftsmen. The high level of craftsmanship soon developed a tremendous reputation for John Thompson's in this field of engineering. As well as those involved in making boilers, many of the men were now employed in important repairs work all over the country.

As steel became increasingly available, John Thompson began to see it on a large scale. With the improved performance of the material, high-pressure Lancashire boilers were now being utilized in preference to the older, furnace-type...
A Thompson advertisement, 1904.

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, who 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 at Woodmill Works, Dudley, to increase their production capacity.

Incorporating all the advances in technology with their accumulated skill and practical experience, John Thompson's boys prepared their management, capacity and product range to meet the demands of the twentieth century.
John Thompson Order Book 1907

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<td>Four brothers and an Empire</td>
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<td>The new century saw an equally new approach by the company, with John Thompson seeking new international markets along with his younger son, exhibiting yet again the personal qualities that had enabled him to turn 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...</td>
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**1901 - 1930**

1901 was the end of a great era in British history: on the 22nd of January, Queen Victoria died. Kitchener's name is forever associated with the Boer War, President McKinley of the United States was assassinated, and the Titanic was launched. A railway network was completed across the Atlantic and the first British submarine was launched.
to take full advantage of technological advances. The success provided by the advent of electricity was unmeasurable with powerful steam generators for compressors and then water-gas welding plant.

In 1921, John Thompsons opened a London office and in the same year was awarded a diploma at the Paris Exhibition for the dish-end boiler which they had introduced in the US.

This new method of construction impressed the performance of the boiler with high efficiency and many of the previous production processes, making the manufacture much more economic and general engineering businesses grow, but now 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 Kenticott name.

While touring from a trip to Egypt, Greece, and Palestine in 1950, John Thompson, the architect of the company, died, leaving his four sons to continue to make up equipment for the growing business.

They did, as well as maintaining the established staff with new facilities, with regular staff meetings and a national apprenticeship scheme, while continuing the company's policy of paying more than the minimum wage level.

The atmosphere and culture of the company continued to change under his sons.

A 1938 Thompson 'Herbert' deadweight spring loaded safety valve

The 1944-1968 war took many men to the trenches and amongst those honored at home was Major L. J. Thompson who was awarded the DSO for his bravery.

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

When peace came, the company regrouped its resources and moved through the 1950s, with the massive production of automotive components, the formation of a marketing company in Australia, development into mobile window frames and continued investment in new plant and equipment.