

CHAPTER XVI

In 1920 the responsibility for the contracting operations of the company fell largely upon three men. The senior of these was F. W. Jennings, who was in charge of the London office. He was now a man of 48 years and had been employed by Ashwell and Nesbit since 1902, firstly as chief draughtsman at Leicester and as a director since 1908. He was an experienced engineer in his field and had played a leading part in the development of atmospheric steam heating; in addition he was the holder of patents relating to the thermostatic control of valves. The firm's representative in Scotland was James Playfair who was busy building up a lucrative connection in both Glasgow and Edinburgh. His appointment to the board also dated from 1908. The third member of this triumvirate was Austin Ashwell, now 37 years of age, who, in July 1920 was appointed "manager of contracting work" at Leicester and Manchester, where the office was now at 32 Oxford Road, at a salary of £650 per annum with the addition of a commission on the profits of the company. In the year 1920-21 his total earnings were about £900 but this sum was much reduced by the end of 1924 when no profit was earned. During the ten years following his appointment he did a great deal of travelling between Leicester and Manchester so that he saw his family rather infrequently. After 1928, when he became assistant managing director to F. C. Pulsford, he spent more time at home but still continued to exercise general supervision over the work at Manchester.

As we have seen, Austin Ashwell had joined the company in 1902 and over the years had gained a comprehensive experience of both sides of the business. He had been appointed a director in 1911, and in 1913 he married Dorothy Ewen who gave him a daughter and a son, born in 1915 and 1918 respectively. By 1921 he was living at 34 Avenue Road, Leicester, not far from his mother, who occupied a house in Prebend Street until her death in the spring of 1923 after a widowhood of 27 years.

It can perhaps be said that Austin went some way towards laying the foundations of the company's highly successful business in the Manchester and Liverpool areas, although this did not really come to fruition until after the second World War. During the period up to 1928 he was successful in obtaining orders from a number of important industrial clients. He used personal friends in the business world to advance the firm's interests in many parts of the country: directors of companies such as Patons and Baldwins and Brintons of Kidderminster, who were known to him, were approached. In 1925 he made an investigation into the heating problems at the Aintree

Biscuit Factory of W. and R. Jacob Ltd., and was complimented by a director of that company "on rendering such a comprehensive and lucid report". Ashwell and Nesbit are still working for Jacobs today. The non-executive member of the board was, of course, T. G. Mellors, who had been associated with Ashwell and Nesbit as an accountant from the earliest days. On his appointment as a director in 1920 he had resigned as auditor of the company in favour of his partner, Duncan Basden. In the summer of 1922 Mr. Mellors suffered a breakdown in health, being forced to withdraw from business for 12 months and under these circumstances it was thought prudent to co-opt a new member of the board. An obvious choice was George Tutin, who had been Arthur Ashwell's partner and legal adviser to the company since the latter's retirement in 1910. In October 1922 Mr. Tutin was duly nominated and made his first appearance as a director at a meeting in January 1923. The board now consisted of seven members which was the maximum number allowed under the articles of association, and after Mr. Mellors' return a full complement was present at the meeting held at Barkby Lane on the 14th May 1923.

In the year 1923/24 the company seemed once again to be in trouble. The loss on trading incurred in that period resulted in the ordinary dividend being passed, and it must have appeared to shareholders that the apparent recovery of the immediate post-war years had been an illusion. Some redemption of debentures had been maintained since 1912 but the outstanding debt still stood at £16,500. A constant watch had to be kept on the bank balance and part of the overdraft was once again subject to personal guarantees by the directors. However, the balance sheet showed the reserve account standing at £23,000, nearly twice the pre-war figure, and the order position had markedly improved, particularly on the contracting side. In fact the next five years proved to be a turning point in the fortunes of Ashwell and Nesbit and by 1928 annual sales were once again over £200,000. In that year the nett profit exceeded £10,000 for the first time, allowing a serious attempt to be made to reduce the company's indebtedness: and there were signs of a firmer hand on financial matters generally. For example the value of stock in trade was radically reduced from over £17,000 in 1926 to half that figure at the 30th June, 1928. Severe restrictions were imposed on expenditure on experimental work which had been increasing for many years although some of the unprofitable projects introduced by Messrs. Nesbit and Pulsford collapsed of their own volition.

In 1926 it was decided to re-organise the method of selling works products of all kinds by using the contracting branch offices as

agencies. F. W. Jennings had expressed his views on this subject in rather strong terms in a letter to F. C. Pulsford. "I cannot help feeling," he wrote, "that there is something radically wrong with the selling end at Leicester." He referred to "red tape" and lack of technical knowledge in dealing with such things as "Nuconomisers" and Gas Heaters. He mentioned the better methods of selling employed by two members of his own staff in London, M. G. Marshall and S. H. Tirrell, and suggested that two salesmen from Leicester should be sent to London to be instructed by them. D. M. Nesbit took exception to this letter and opposed the subsequent suggestion that the outside offices should act as sales departments for the works. For the first time he was overruled by a majority of the board on a major issue.

In the spring of 1927 Mr. Nesbit became seriously ill and was taken into a nursing home in London for treatment. At first he had been thought to be suffering from diabetes but insulin prescribed by his local doctor, on a wrong diagnosis, did considerable harm to his health. By the beginning of May he was recovering but did not return to business until the middle of June. A letter from him to Austin Ashwell in reply to expressions of sympathy during his illness gives an insight into at least one side of his character. In a reference to the company he wrote: "I am glad to know the old ship is going strong, this good news further stimulates me to get well and be with you all again and help all I can for the old ship to achieve further success. So long as life is spared to me nothing will be wanting on my part to carry on the good work I have done for nearly half a century, and I will endeavour to relieve myself of such other work as I can to give of my best the remaining portion of my life to foster and help along the good work your dear and lamented father so well began. Unfortunately for you and me he was not allowed to stay with us long enough to extend and complete it."

In the autumn of 1928 Mr. Nesbit again became ill. He made a brief appearance at the works in the following February but died at the end of March. He was 73 years old and had served the firm for 44 years. At the meeting of directors on the 8th April, 1929 after expressions of regret, and sympathy with Mrs. Nesbit, had been recorded, T. G. Mellors was unanimously elected chairman of the company.

In the course of this review a great deal has been said about David Nesbit and little needs to be added now. The early death of Frank Ashwell left him to carry on the affairs of the firm as well as he knew how. His character attracted some and offended many others; he was rude yet sentimental, grasping but sometimes generous. He was admired as an engineer but had serious shortcomings as a business man. His knowledge of heating and ventilating was perhaps unrivalled in his day but woe betide the client or architect who

disagreed with his suggestions. The fact remains that only when his control began to slip did the company start to repeat the success of the partnership. The period following his death were years of increasing prosperity for Ashwell & Nesbit.

CHAPTER XVII

Tributes to the late chairman were received from many sources and in particular from the organisation by now known as the National Association of Heating, Ventilating and Domestic Engineering Employers, in the formation of which, in 1904, Mr. Nesbit had played such a leading part. Other tributes were received from the Institution of Heating and Ventilating Engineers of which he had been president in 1900. An enlarged photograph of her father was provided by Miss Francis Nesbit, after some disagreement between herself and the directors on the size and style of the portrait, and was hung in the boardroom; the smaller photograph originally put up by F. C. Pulsford being relegated to the staff mess room. Francis survived her father by only eight years and in fact predeceased her mother, Isabella Nesbit, by two months.

In March 1928 F. C. Pulsford had been granted two months leave of absence, as he, in his turn, was having trouble with his health. He was a man of indulgent habits and combining the offices of managing director and secretary placed a great strain upon him. Much of the routine work of administration was delegated to J. W. Sleightholme, the assistant secretary; and on the technical side the other executive directors, together with J. T. Swift, the manager of the works, took a fairly free rein. Nevertheless Mr. Pulsford was carrying a heavy responsibility and in view of his impending absence Austin Ashwell was given the temporary appointment of assistant managing director. In July his position was confirmed as permanent with an increased annual salary of £850. As this meant that he had to spend far more time at Leicester, a great deal of the Manchester business devolved upon Richard Jennings, son of F. W. who was senior member of the staff there. By 1930 Austin Ashwell was visiting Manchester once a week only although he still retained overall responsibility for the office.

At this time the new generation of managers were coming more and more into the picture. E. W. Woolgar and M. G. Marshall in London, Walter Charles at Birmingham and Richard Jennings. By the end of 1929 these four were all shareholders, having taken up between them a parcel of ordinary shares offered by Harold Adamson, a member of a family with a long connection with Ashwell and Nesbit.

In the last two years of D. M. Nesbit's life the company had shown signs of a more long-standing revival after the period of stagnation which followed the end of the war. The accounting year of 1928-29 which finished three months after his death, although less profitable

than the period immediately preceeding it, was successful enough to allow an ordinary dividend of 8% which was almost twice covered by the amount available for distribution. In 1931 the nett profit was over £13,000 but this was an exceptional year, not to be equalled, in fact, until 1937. These improved results gave the company a chance to begin a serious attempt to wipe out the outstanding debentures as well as to increase the dividend, and between 1928 and 1933 the debenture stock was reduced from £15,000 to £5,000. No doubt the beneficial influence of T. G. Mellors played a large part in putting the company's finances on a sounder basis and removing the spectre of insolvency which had haunted Ashwell and Nesbit for so long.

In November 1929 an up-to-date valuation of the property in Barkby Lane was undertaken by a firm of assessors and the figures are interesting as a comparison with the past and with the valuation made in 1968. As built in 1904, including all plant, machinery, and equipment, the property was worth just under £30,000. Ten years later the balance sheet value of the works, after certain extensions made between 1906 and 1910 had been added was £43,000. In 1929 the valuers gave the directors a figure of £63,000 of which £40,000 represented the value of the land and buildings and £12,000 the fixed plant and machinery. By May 1968 after excluding the cost of the new heavy foundry the total valuation amounted to a sum of £175,000.

At an emergency meeting of directors held in the Lodge on the 4th March 1932 it was reported that Frederick Pulsford had died three days before and that they would, therefore, have to make whatever arrangements were necessary to replace him. Austin Ashwell was duly appointed managing director, having been deputy to Mr. Pulsford since 1928, and F. W. Jennings was given the title of sales director. It was also necessary to appoint a new company secretary, and J. S. Woodrow, who had been assistant secretary since January 1930, was promoted to that office, although this was considered to be a temporary appointment. At the same time it was suggested that W. Charles, the manager at Birmingham, should move to Leicester to act as assistant to the managing director, and this was confirmed ten days later, although no increase in salary was offered to him. Control of the Birmingham office passed to L. P. Taunton. It might be of interest to a more recent generation to note that at this time the managing director was paid an annual salary of £1,300 which increased by only £200 during the subsequent ten years. In 1932 the manager of the Manchester office received £450 a year, the works manager, J. T. Swift £400 and the company secretary £310. However

the executive directors were also paid commission, which was calculated in proportion to the ordinary dividend; and in 1933, when 8% was distributed, this amounted to a fairly substantial addition to their remuneration.

The board now consisted of three executive and three non-executive directors. Of the latter both T. G. Mellors and George Tutin had had a long connection with the company, but the third, A. Wallace Cowan had been appointed as recently as November 1930. He was an Edinburgh man and had been brought on to the board at the instigation of James Playfair. As he was a director of several important companies in Scotland and also a member of the board of management of the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh and other hospitals, it was hoped that his influence could be brought to bear in helping the company to develop and expand the Scottish business. A number of large and remunerative contracts had been carried out at the infirmary since 1920 and there were more to follow. Ashwell and Nesbit's long association with the Caledonian Insurance Company, of which Mr. Cowan was a director, dates from this time. In 1934 a further change at board level was caused by the death in August, of Fred Jennings after 32 years with the company. He had been manager of the London office since 1908 and was succeeded there by E. W. Woolgar, who was also elected a director in his place. The succession to Jennings in London had lain between Ted Woolgar and M. G. G. Marshall but the latter had to be content with a subordinate position as chief sales representative. In July 1934 the secretary, J. S. Woodrow, left the service of the company and was replaced by H. R. D. Thurley. In 1932 the staff numbered eighty-five, of whom twenty-two were women, and of these, forty-three were employed at head office and in the works, ten in the heating department at Leicester and twelve in the London office. The remainder were at Manchester, Glasgow and Birmingham; the Leeds office not being formed until 1935. At Leicester Harry Pulsford was the senior heating draughtsman, supported by Percy Caney; and L. H. Hobbin, whose wife was private secretary to the directors, was in charge of works drawings. The cashier was C. H. Furnish, who had been appointed in 1928, and W. Green, who had joined the staff in 1920, was the senior cost clerk. George Baldwin, who was designated foundry clerk, had come to Barkby Lane in 1924 as a boy of sixteen. Others on the staff at this time who were to serve the company for the next quarter of a century and longer included S. H. Tirrell and T. D. Bagnall in London, F. W. Margrett in Scotland and L. P. Taunton at Birmingham; T. H. Dowell, who was later to go to Leeds, joined Dick Jennings at Manchester in 1934. Sam Tirrell, who had been employed since 1915, was to be a highly successful manager in Manchester after the Second World War, and T. D. Bagnall, who succeeded

E. W. Woolgar as London manager in 1959, had joined the staff at Leicester as an apprentice in 1926 from Wyggeston School.

In the works Neville Lake was in charge of the estimating department, so called, and W. Frost was foundry foreman. Alan Cooper, in 1968 the longest serving employee of Ashwell and Nesbit, was the storekeeper. Other names familiar to the post war generation were C. W. C. White, A. G. Cottle, Ted Martin in the pump shop and C. H. Towers, the assistant foundry foreman. J. Rigby was in charge of the core shop.

After the death of Fred Jennings the management and senior staff of the company were to remain largely unchanged for twenty-five years, although James Playfair was to retire in 1949 after forty-five years service.

CHAPTER XVIII

The changes in the ranks of the management which took place between 1930 and 1934 and the assumption of the role of senior executive by Austin Ashwell had the effect of shifting the emphasis in the company's activities rather more towards the manufacturing side. D. M. Nesbit had tended to regard the works as an adjunct of the heating business which, indeed, it was when output was directed almost entirely towards heating equipment; but by 1933 a more varied production schedule was being followed and outside customers for castings were being more actively sought. It was at this time that manufacturers of machinery and engines, such as Plenty and Newbury Diesel, began to place orders for iron castings. Output from the foundry increased considerably between 1931 and 1935 from an annual rate of about 400 tons of castings to over 1,300 tons in 1934/5. In the same period sales of semi-rotary pumps rose from 5,158 units to 23,000, of which nearly half were sent abroad. During these years the gross profit of the works was more than doubled, but, nevertheless, it was recognised that some new outlet for the additional capacity was required; and, contracting output having remained rather static, that such an outlet should also be of benefit to the heating and ventilating department. The manufacture of radiators had long since been abandoned and other products could be ruled out on the grounds that they would not utilise the resources of the foundry.

In July 1932 Ashwell and Nesbit were appointed sole agents in the British Isles for the automatic coal burners manufactured by the Iron Fireman Company of Portland, Oregon, with whom an agreement was made for a period of two years, during which time the company undertook to buy machines to the value of 40,000 dollars. If this target was not reached no penalty would result but the Americans would have the option to cancel the agreement. However, in April 1933, the contract was amended to allow for the manufacture at Barkby Lane of a proportion of the burners sold, the remainder being supplied from the Iron Fireman Company's Canadian plant at Toronto. By September seven burners had been made in the works out of a total of fifty-four sold since the previous year. At the end of 1933 fifty-five had been produced by Ashwell and Nesbit out of a total of eighty-four sold.

Many of those who may read these notes will be familiar with the principles on which the Iron Fireman stoker operates but a very short explanation might not be out of place. When coal is shovelled on to the top of a fire the useful heat is immediately reduced and

volumes of black smoke are emitted. The underfeed stoker, as its name implies, feeds the green or unburnt coal into the bottom of the fire, so that the incandescent fuel bed is not disturbed and very little smoke is produced. The fuel is slowly conveyed by means of a revolving screw from a hopper or bunker to a fire-pot, which is placed immediately beneath the fuel bed. The fire-pot turns the flow of coal upward and as it approaches the fire it is gradually heated, giving off the volatile gases which pass through the fire and are consumed and turned into useful heat. The solid residue of fuel is also consumed as it is forced upward, leaving non-combustible ash, which is fused into clinker by the intense heat of the firebox. At the same time air is delivered from a fan to the fire-pot, which is provided with a series of slots allowing the draught to pass through the fuel-bed. Both the revolving screw and the fan are operated by the same electric motor.

This type of mechanical stoker was first introduced by the Iron Fireman Company in 1924 or thereabouts. The machine manufactured at this time by the firm known as the Underfeed Stoker Company Ltd., was in fact a large travelling grate stoker but the most widely used mechanical stoker was the chain grate type, the first example of which had been patented by John Jukes in 1841. This and various other types were available in the early twenties, made by such firms as Babcock and Wilcox, Bennis, Hodgkinson and Riley, all well-known names in this field today. However, the Iron Fireman, and similar machines introduced into this country in the early thirties, such as the Prior "Mastoker" and the "Robot" stoker, could be applied to a smaller range of boilers, particularly the cast-iron sectional types which were originally designed to burn coke. One of the great advantages of the automatic stoker installation is, of course, the comparative cheapness of the small sized bituminous coal which is used, which makes this type of firing particularly economical in regions close to the coal-fields. In 1933 coal burnt in stoker-fired boilers cost 18/6 per ton whilst the price of coke was about 36/-. Another advantage was the ease by which automatic control could be applied by means of thermostats, "water-stats" and pressure regulators.

At first only hopper models were made, the "bunker-to-boiler" type, which fed the coal direct from the fuel store to the fire-box being developed later. In addition to the models designed to burn coal, anthracite stokers were also produced, although here the economic advantages gained by the use of cheap fuel were lost. By the beginning of 1934 eleven different sizes of stoker were being assembled in the works, only the gear boxes being imported from America. The smallest model, rated at 200,000 B.T.U.s per hour, sold to the trade at £73 whilst the largest size, the Number 5, at 1½ million B.T.U.s rating, was priced at £324. Today the former costs five times as much but the latter little more than double the 1934 figure.

Even in the early thirties great play was made of the fact that under-feed stokers burnt indigenous coal as opposed to oil. The sales leaflet issued at the time by Ashwell and Nesbit began with the following introduction: "The advantage of using coal as fuel when the burner is automatically controlled is obvious; coal is a **BRITISH Product** and can be burnt in as clean a manner with an "Iron Fireman" stoker as **FOREIGN LIQUID** fuel, and with equal facility for control." An advertisement in the "Daily Telegraph" was headed by the words "Why burn foreign oil?" and in May 1933 the Coal Utilisation Council published a pamphlet entitled "Coal versus Oil". In this it was stated that "fuel oil has made serious inroads into home-produced fuel markets", and a section was devoted to the effect of imported oil on unemployment. No doubt this type of propaganda was of considerable assistance in selling stokers particularly in view of the public alarm over the unemployment situation at this period.

In the first year of the agreement with the Iron Fireman Manufacturing Company a number of "associate dealers" were appointed including G. N. Haden and Sons, the Thames Bank Iron Co. and Young, Austen and Young. These agents received preferential discounts and at first only five were appointed, although later the list grew to over twenty firms and eventually the same terms were offered to all bona-fide heating contractors. By March 1934 117 "Iron Fireman" stokers had been installed by Ashwell and Nesbit in buildings of all kinds. There were twelve machines at the Blue Coat School in Birmingham and other large installations at the Glasgow College of Domestic Science, Perth Royal Infirmary, the County Offices of Northumberland and Warwickshire and the factory of W. Canning and Co. at Birmingham. Other establishments using the "Iron Fireman" included the London Pavilion and the railway offices at Euston.

The stoker department at Leicester was under the control of Walter Charles who had been instrumental in introducing the company to the automatic stoker field in the first instance. A member of his family in America had sent him a copy of one of the Iron Fireman Company's advertisements which led to his getting into personal communication with its directors. As Austin Ashwell remarked in a letter to the chairman in 1948: "It was undoubtedly due to a large extent to Mr. Charles' advocacy of the stoker that the company gave it a trial and eventually made the first manufacturing agreement with the Iron Fireman Company in 1932." By 1937 stokers were being sold at the rate of nearly 600 machines a year and by June 1939 over 2,000 had been supplied and installed.

CHAPTER XIX

During the five years up to the outbreak of the Second World War the story of Ashwell and Nesbit was one of almost continuous growth and development. In that period sales went up from £190,000 in 1933/4 to £543,000 in the last year of peace and the nett profit from £6,000 to £42,500. We have already referred to the large increase in output in the works, which gave the manufacturing department a far bigger share of the trade than in earlier years; and contracting activities also began to increase. A conservative dividend policy ensured a continuous improvement in reserves; the ordinary dividend was covered twice by available profit in 1936 and nearly three times in the following year. By 1938 all outstanding debentures had been wiped out and the company was distributing 14% free of tax.

As profits and reserves increased the resources became available to finance various improvements, particularly in the works where additional plant was needed to keep pace with the rapid growth in business. At the end of 1933 full electricification was put in hand, involving the erection of a transformer house, and this work was completed in January 1934. The current was purchased from Leicester Corporation at the rate of 1.25 pence per unit for the first 2,000 units and 0.9 pence for the next 13,000 units which is an interesting comparison with today's rates. Between 1935 and 1938 the Coreshop, Pattern Shop and Brass Foundry were re-organized and enlarged; an air compressor was installed and an additional planing machine purchased. During the same period over £2,000 was spent in the foundry, which included the cost of a Pneulec Herman moulding machine, an expensive piece of equipment.

On the contracting side some overdue repairs to the London office were carried out and in March 1935 the company bought the freehold of No. 184, Oxford Road, to re-house the Manchester office, which had previously occupied rented premises at No. 7. In the same year, as a result of an increase in the company's business in Yorkshire, an office was opened in Albion Street, Leeds, and F. C. Lant was sent over from Manchester to take charge. At the beginning of 1937 the manager of the Birmingham office was given six months to vacate the premises at 103, Newhall Street by the Office of Works, who owned the building; as the lease still had some years to run the company received a sum of £3,250 in compensation and in June the move was made to new offices at 12, Whittall Street, which had been taken on a 21 year lease.

In the middle of 1938 the sanitary arrangements at Barkby Road, as it was now called, were given an adverse report by the factory

inspector, who also commented unfavourably on the staff canteen, at that time in a small room at the end of the foundry. It soon became clear that a considerable sum would have to be found for the re-organisation of the drainage system and the renewal of the lavatory accommodation for both workpeople and staff. At the same time new canteen facilities would have to be provided. In August the draft annual accounts for the previous year were submitted to the board and as they showed a gross profit of over £100,000 there was no difficulty in making the special provision of £8,000 which was the estimated amount necessary to "meet the requirements of the Factory Act". By the end of the year an order had been placed for a new lavatory block and canteen at a cost of £4,340; and meanwhile work began on renewing most of the sanitary accommodation in the works.

Prior to these new material comforts for the staff, thought had been given to some sort of insurance for their future and in September 1935 a Staff Endowment Scheme was introduced to provide a small pension on retirement. Although under modern conditions this arrangement has proved to be totally inadequate it was a welcome step forward at the time. Later a holiday savings scheme for workpeople and operatives was started.

By the outbreak of war in 1939 a great deal had been done to modernise the plant and buildings at Leicester, and to improve working conditions generally, although a project for the erection of a new office block in conjunction with the lavatories and staff canteen, which were completed in July 1939, had to be abandoned or postponed until after the war. In fact the company never did proceed with this plan. The mechanisation of the foundry had gone well and some extensions which had been put in hand in the summer of 1939 were still able to be completed after the war had begun, so that the production potential of the works had been notably increased by the middle of 1940.

The heating and ventilating department had also enlarged its scope and was now operating from six offices; and some important contracts were taken on during the period of which we write. In 1933 work was begun on the engineering services in the Mount Royal flats in Oxford Street, London, this contract being carried out jointly with Messrs. Young, Austen and Young, who were then still a partnership, and with whom Ashwell and Nesbit also worked at a smaller block of flats in Lowndes Street. Incidentally the cast iron water tank installed at Mount Royal was built in the works and was one of the largest of its kind. Another noteworthy order for

E. W. Woolgar's office was for the heating and other services at the new Freemasons' Hospital in Ravenscourt Park, now known as the Royal Masonic Hospital, and outside London the company was awarded the engineering contract at the large mental institution at Balderton, near Newark, at a price of £82,000; work began in September 1938 but the job was not complete at the outbreak of war and was suspended during hostilities. In Scotland the company played a leading part in the modernisation of the Royal Infirmary at Edinburgh, parts of which were fully air-conditioned; at the University of Edinburgh, also, a great deal of work was done, and further south Ashwell and Nesbit were responsible for the heating and ventilating apparatus in the new stores in Manchester built by Gee, Walker and Slater for Kendal, Milne and Co. and in shops for Lewis's Ltd., at Liverpool and Leeds. During 1938 and 1939 the company obtained orders for the supply of automatic stokers to the royal houses at Balmoral and Sandringham and this led to other work including new boilers and the re-organisation of domestic hot water arrangements. In March 1939 King George VI visited the company's stand at the British Industries Fair and discussed the operation of the "Iron Fireman" with Austin Ashwell, who had been especially warned to be present on the day of the royal visit. Subsequently a royal warrant as heating and stoker engineers to the King was granted to the company in the summer of 1941.

With a view to improving the purchasing power of the heating department and obtaining better discount terms the company made an application, in January 1932, to become members of the organisation known as the "Associated Metal Supply Company". This firm, which had been started in 1920, was an amalgamation of heating engineering companies for whom purchases of essential materials were made from various suppliers. Better discounts could be obtained in this way than by firms operating on their own and these were passed on to members in the form of an annual rebate. In order to join this association it was necessary for Ashwell and Nesbit to take up shares and, in July, 250 ordinary and the same number of preference shares were allocated to the company. In the first year of membership purchases through the A.M.S. amounted to £9,500 which earned a rebate of 2½%; and at the end of the following year both purchases and rebate had doubled. In 1935 Austin Ashwell took the chair at the annual dinner of the A.M.S. at the Metropole Hotel in Northumberland Avenue; such profits as remained after the payment of rebate to members were mopped up by this function at which members' representatives regaled themselves with a seven course banquet beginning with oysters and caviare. I am glad to say that such lavish hospitality continues to this day but in a somewhat reduced form as befits a more austere age.

In August 1938 T. G. Mellors informed his colleagues that he now wished to retire from the board. He had been a director for twenty years and chairman since the death of D. M. Nesbit in 1929 so that he considered the time had come for him to hand over to a younger man. His co-directors, however, felt that they could ill afford to lose his financial and accountancy experience at this time and persuaded him to remain for a further short period. Meanwhile Austin Ashwell made an approach to an old friend and leading accountant, Sir Harold Howitt who eventually accepted an invitation to join Ashwell and Nesbit as a director. This move enabled T. G. Mellors to reconsider his position and, in February 1939 he resigned in favour of George Tutin, who had been vice-chairman since October 1937. Sir Harold Howitt attended his first meeting of directors in March 1939 and thus began his twenty-five years association with the company.

CHAPTER XX

During the twelve months which followed the international crisis of 1938, Ashwell and Nesbit, in common with the rest of the country, were deeply involved in the national preparations for war; and the directors had to consider the steps which must be taken to safeguard the company and its employees in the event of hostilities. At the beginning of the new year and in the months which followed there was, of course, much public apprehension about the possible effects of air raids on congested areas and on places of business, where large numbers of people were congregated. As the works lay so near the main railway line it was thought to be particularly vulnerable so that some effective way of sheltering employees had to be found. In July it was suggested to the factory inspector that the brick kilns belonging to Barrow Bros. in Barkby Road might be used as air-raid shelters for the workpeople, although there would be insufficient room there for the staff as well. At first this idea was thought to be feasible but, after a test, it was decided that the kilns were too far away from the works to be reached within a reasonable time; so as an alternative, some lengths of concrete pipe, six feet in diameter, were laid in the field in front of the works buildings and covered with earth, making a convenient and effective shelter. It is a little ironical that the bomb which fell nearest to the works during the war was dropped on the brickworks.

As well as the protection of employees the question of war risks insurance came up for discussion but a suggestion that all goods in transit from the works should be specially insured was not accepted. Insurance cover for work in progress on contracting sites was also considered but finally it was decided to protect the company's interests by an amendment to the general terms of contract: however it did become necessary to make additional arrangements for unfixed materials on sites. The extra cost of war-time insurance eventually ran out at about £2,500 per annum.

Another matter which exercised the collective mind of the board was the position of employees who wished to join the territorial forces or who might be called up for national service. It was agreed that those in the first category should be given seven days holiday in addition to time off for the annual training period of a fortnight, but consideration of the requirements of the latter was deferred pending advice from the government or from the employers' associations. Eventually the directors decided to grant an allowance to all those with over two years service with the company, which would amount, in the case of married men, to the difference between their full pay at the time of call-up and their services pay and allowances,

after assessing food and clothing received from the government at 10/- per week. Single men would receive one third of the amount of the difference. This scheme, which extended to all employees qualified by service, ran initially until the 31st December 1940, after which each case was considered on its merits.

It was during this immediate pre-war period that the government at last began to try to mend the gaps in the nation's defences which had now become so obvious after years of neglect. Militia camps were hastily erected and wooden huts sprouted like mushrooms in the environs of army barracks. Plans for new armaments factories and large hospital extensions were hurriedly prepared and footwear and clothing manufacturers looked for ways and means of enlarging their premises to cope with the expected demand for army boots and military tunics. All these preparations naturally increased the demand for heating and ventilation although in many new barrack blocks such amenities were somewhat primitive, as the writer can confirm from personal experience. In March 1939 the company were awarded contracts by the war office for work in several large militia camps such as those at Hereford and Farnborough in Hampshire; the latter being a job of over £60,000 which involved extensive underground mains. About the same time orders were received for the heating and mechanical ventilation of a number of basement conversions to air-raid shelters in public buildings, which included Somerset House, where preparations were being made for the storage of archives under war conditions. These were not quoted contracts but were charged on a time and materials basis. There were also jobs for the installation of services in ordnance factories at, among others, Walsall, Stone and Stafford, the latter being done jointly with Young, Austen and Young for Bovis Ltd. Later, in 1940 the company were given the heating work at the so-called "shadow" factory at Swindon, at a cost of nearly £100,000. None of these jobs could be compared in size with the enormous armaments factory at Gretna, built during the first world war, but, nevertheless they absorbed a high proportion of the company's capacity. In the contracting department the total cost of materials and productive labour went up from £253,000 in the year 1938/39 to £387,000 in the following year.

The annual general meeting of the company was held just one week after the declaration of war. The minutes of this meeting and of the directors' meeting which preceded it do not record any mention whatever of this momentous event; but minutes of meetings being what they are it is doubtful whether in fact the day passed without some reference to it and to the prospects of Ashwell and Nesbit

under war conditions. Few people really knew what to expect but as far as possible the company were prepared to meet any contingency which might have been foreseen. Certain pre-conceived arrangements were put into effect including the establishment of a fire-watching rota for all male staff. Those on duty slept on camp beds in the offices, a procedure which caused some difficulty when a certain senior and rather prim female member of the staff insisted on working late. Warnings to her to keep under cover while male trousers were removed probably did not go unheeded. At a request from the authorities the works buildings were camouflaged with paint, which turned out to be a rather expensive operation, and during 1940 the company were asked to provide facilities for roof spotting of enemy aircraft and galleries were erected at convenient points outside the works to allow easy access to the roofs. In general there was very little interruption of production during the war; agreement was reached with the workmen's representatives to allow them to continue work during air-raid alerts in daylight hours, and, as we have previously indicated, no bombs fell on the company's property in Barkby Road. Indeed the whole of Leicester suffered very lightly.

The London office was less fortunate when, in November 1940, fire bombs damaged the roof of the house seriously enough to make evacuation necessary. Austin Ashwell promptly placed his house at 37, Pembroke Square, Kensington at the disposal of the company and the London staff duly took over. It was not a particularly large house and they were at fairly close quarters; but work was carried on without very much delay. Austin Ashwell was a widower, his wife having died in 1936, and in any case spent a good deal of time at Leicester, where he had rooms in the Lodge. Subsequently he rented a house at Old Woodhouse, near Loughborough, before buying a property in London Road, Leicester.

Very soon after his election to the board Sir Harold Howitt was asked to be vice-chairman, and, during 1941, when George Tutin was absent for six months through illness he was taking the chair regularly. He acted as chairman at the general meeting of shareholders in October 1941, when, during his address, he expressed the hope that Mr. Tutin would soon return to business. However, at the next meeting of directors, in November, the latter asked to be allowed to vacate the chair permanently and Sir Harold was unanimously elected in his place. George Tutin's long connection with Ashwell and Nesbit was not completely severed and he remained a director until November 1945.

Harold Howitt was at this time a man of fifty-four years, having been born at Nottingham in October, 1886. A partner in the firm of Peat,

Marwick, Mitchell & Co. he was a most distinguished member of his profession and had been created a Knight Bachelor in 1937. His record during the First World War was outstanding, including the award of the D.S.O.; and he was four times mentioned in despatches. For some time he had been much sought after by various official bodies to give them the benefit of his knowledge of economic and financial matters and in 1939 he had been invited to join the Air Council. Later he served on the Air Supply Board and on the Council of NAAFI. The affairs of Ashwell and Nesbit Ltd. could hardly have been in better hands.