CHAPTER XXVI

Since 1947 the annual production of Iron Fireman stokers had been increasing steadily, and by 1953 sales had achieved parity with the two immediate pre-war years; indeed, in the twelve months ending in April 1954, the number of machines delivered and installed rose to over six hundred. During these years the stoker department had been operating entirely independently from the Iron Fireman Manufacturing Company, who had, as reported in a previous chapter, generously waived the obligations placed upon Ashwell and Nesbit by the 1938 agreement in the light of wartime and immediate post-war conditions. While the yearly production of stokers had remained at a very low level they had agreed not to press for any form of financial return for the use of the trade-mark or for technical information, but in May 1953 the American company began to put out strong hints that the time had now come for a fresh agreement to be drawn up and in view of the greatly increased volume of business their request was understandable. Austin Ashwell did, of course, point out to them that it was still impossible to import parts from the States and that satisfactory arrangements had long been in force for the manufacture in the United Kingdom of all components. This position was naturally accepted, so that the American company now suggested that, instead of the purchase of parts from them, a licence fee should be paid for each unit sold. This was agreed in principle but a considerable correspondence ensued before the two parties were in accord on the amount of the royalty in relation to the range of models manufactured by Ashwell and Nesbit, which differed extensively from that of the American company. Another point of argument stemmed from the Americans' desire to confine the sales of stokers produced in England to the British Isles, but eventually this was resolved by the refusal of the Bank of England to grant a permit to remit royalties to the United States unless some export facilities were written into the agreement. Even so export markets for Ashwell and Nesbit were strictly limited to South Africa, where they had been represented for some years, and to the Irish Republic.

An important modification to the 1938 agreement was conceded by the Iron Fireman Company in regard to design. The original contract specified that "the Manufacturing Distributor (i.e. Ashwell & Nesbit) shall follow exactly the design as set forth and called for in the blueprints which will be furnished from time to time by the Manufacturer". This clause was modified by adding the words "except insofar as such design may be modified to suit operating and selling requirements by the Manufacturing Distributor, provided that the quality of the parts shall be maintained to a degree satisfactory to the Manufacturers." This meant that so long as they approved – as they had already done – such modifications as had been made to

their designs, Ashwell and Nesbit were not tied to exact copies of their models and parts.
The amount of the royalty payable varied according to the size of the machine, but overall it represented about 1½% of the total annual sales, and in the first year the amount paid was £3,300. Austin Ashwell in his report to the board on these negotiations did comment that the licence fees appeared high in relation to the profits from the stoker business; but he closed his remarks as follows: "We have had the use of their designs and trade marks for fourteen years free of charge, and bearing in mind the great importance to us of the name "Iron Fireman" we cannot consider either the alternative of cutting adrift or on the other hand disregarding the moral obligation to compensate the Iron Fireman Company for the very generous treatment we have had for so long."

As we have seen 1953/4 was the peak year for stoker production and thereafter the business declined slowly during the next four years, a period of marked increase in the competition from oil-firing, particularly in the southern parts of the country and in other districts distant from the coalfields. During 1957/8 the Clean Air Act of 1956 began to come into operation and this legislation had the effect of accelerating the fall in stoker sales as the use of bituminous coal for central heating in "smokeless zones" was expected to produce that "dark smoke" which the act was specifically framed to prevent. Although stoker fired boilers were generally comparatively free of smoke some quantity was produced at times when the fire had to be de-clinkered, and it was also true that the Iron Fireman was at some disadvantage against other makes of stoker due to the "stop and restart" method of operation, although the occasional emission of smoke which this caused could be greatly minimised by the use of jets which directed a stream of air over the top of the fire.
The whole position was reviewed in a letter from the managing director to the Iron Fireman Company, written in April 1959, in which Austin Ashwell set out the problems as follows:

> "On the question of the general falling off in sales you are no doubt aware of the Clean Air Act which prohibits the burning of fuel in such a way as to cause black smoke, the enactment of which is left in the hands of local authorities such as city corporations and such. The interpretation varies enormously from one district to another, some going as far as to say that existing underfeed stokers burning bituminous coal must be taken out, others that existing installations can be altered if the amount of smoke emitted is cut down to a minimum. Great efforts have been made by such bodies as the Coal Utilisation Council, the National Coal Board, and the Underfeed Stoker Makers Association to obtain a national ruling as to how the act should be operated,

but so far this move has not been successful. An immense amount of spadework has, however, been done in various areas, in which we have taken a leading part . . . . Needless to say the Act is being made use of as propaganda for the installation of oil-fired and gas-fired boilers, even though in a very large proportion of the country the fuel cost is very much higher; but of course labour for clinkering out is obviated.

On the question of competition between the different makes, we find ourselves in many areas at a disadvantage because it is, of course, a fact that if any smoke is to be emitted it is at times when the stoker stops and restarts, which is frequent when under automatic control. There are several makes on the market which are continuous running and the sellers of these types make a very strong case for the smokeless operation of the continuous running stoker as compared with the on and off type such as the Iron Fireman."

Austin Ashwell went on to say that he realised that the three speed gear box was the part of the machine "on which the whole design is based" but ended his letter by asking directly "whether, in order to meet the competition described above we should put on the market a continuous running stoker with a gearbox of the pawl and ratchet type, so that the coal feed and air are adjusted automatically according to the steam pressure or water temperature in the boiler?" After an interval the Americans replied that they had no objection to a modification to the stoker by the introduction of a ratchet type gearbox, but eventually a "modulating" type of control was developed which, coupled with the continuing use of "over-fire jets" largely solved the problem.

On the use of stokers generally in smoke control areas, an order issued by the ministry in 1959 made the underfeed stoker an exempted class of appliance; a ruling which enabled bituminous coal to be burnt in mechanically fired boilers with considerably less risk than before of contravening the act. Largely as a result of this concession sales began to rise again slowly though there is no doubt that automatic coal firing had lost a lot of ground to other forms of fuel. In the course of their correspondence with Ashwell and Nesbit on these and related matters the Iron Fireman Company had introduced the question of oil burner manufacture. They were of the opinion that the complete transition from coal burning to other forms of fuel which had taken place in the United States some years before, could not be long delayed in Europe. They themselves had long since switched the bulk of their production to oil and gas burners and they felt that Ashwell and Nesbit would wish to do likewise. In 1954, to a great extent on the recommendation of E. W. Woolgar, the works had undertaken the production of a small horizontal flame

oil-burner but neither then nor later was the company willing to embark on the manufacture of any greater part of the Iron Fireman range. As a result of this decision, which was communicated to the Americans once again in 1959, they put forward the suggestion that their European agent, J. J. La Rus, should look for another firm in the United Kingdom to take on the full range of Iron Fireman burners. Ashwell and Nesbit could not object to this although considerable reservations were expressed about the use of the trade mark by another British company in view of its long association with Barkby Road, but after some little time Mr. La Rus was unsuccessful in his search for an alternative source of production and the idea was dropped. The small burner which was assembled by the works between 1954 and 1960 was known as the "Vortex" but although promising in principle it proved in practice to be uncompetitive with other more established makes, and altogether under 200 models were sold.

CHAPTER XXVII

After his half-century of service with the company Austin Ashwell had seven years remaining to him of active participation in the business. In 1953 he was already seventy years old and for many this would have been the year for retirement had there been a ready successor available. However he was, at this time, still in good health and Ashwell and Nesbit, under his management, was in the midst of the most successful period in its history. The other senior executive directors were also approaching retirement so that it was felt by the chairman that Austin Ashwell should be asked to remain in office for the present, while delegating some of his more routine responsibilities to his son who was designated assistant manager.

In the year 1953/4 sales were just short of £1,500,000 and the nett profit before tax had risen to the highest figure so far recorded of well over £100,000. On this result the dividend was raised to 20% of the ordinary capital, inflated to £159,000 by the bonus issues of 1950 and 1952, but this was still a conservative figure in view of the large balance available for distribution. During the next four years trading results continued to improve – profits breaking all records in 1957/8 when sales reached the figure of £2,000,000 for the first time. This growth was, however, achieved almost entirely by the heating and ventilating department; works sales remained fairly static at between £220,000 and £320,000, a much lower proportion of the total than in the immediate post-war years. Manufacturing profits, also, were on the whole disappointing during this time with the welcome exception of the result declared in 1956 which was just twice as good as the previous year. A feature of the company's accounts between 1950 and 1960, as with industry in general, was the steady rise in overhead expenses particularly in salaries. The increase over the ten years was of the order of 150% but so long as high profit margins were obtained for contracting work such expenses were easily absorbed. Gradually, however, competition within the heating industry became much keener as more and more firms entered the field and smaller companies expanded rapidly to put themselves in the position of being able to tender for the larger contracts.

Nevertheless for the time being Ashwell and Nesbit were able to take advantage of an outstanding period of industrial reconstruction from which the London and Manchester offices got the most benefit. There were, of course, a number of important contracts in the public sector also, which included some of the largest ever undertaken by the company; but the private work, which absorbed the design capacity of the drawing offices and for which more satisfactory

terms could be negotiated, was always the more attractive and profitable. In 1957/8 for example this type of work represented 60% of the company's invoiced sales but this proportion has fallen considerably in more recent years.

As has been mentioned earlier London office had for some time found it difficult to obtain work in central London. Certain contracts were undertaken for old clients, such as the British American Tobacco Company at their Millbank building, and Kemsley Newspapers, but the major reconstruction of the metropolis passed Ashwell and Nesbit by. However, during the fifties there was plenty of work in the suburbs and in the home counties including valuable contracts at Cowley for Morris Motors and the Pressed Steel Company; work at the film studios continued and contracts with other customers such as De Havilland Aircraft and Shell-Mex were kept up. The aforementioned B.A.T. were once again building factories abroad and Ashwell and Nesbit were given the job of designing the engineering services and of providing the materials and supervision for various plants in West Africa.

In 1958 E. W. Woolgar, manager of the London office and a director since 1934, reached the age of seventy years and in the following year, as his health had begun to trouble him, he asked the chairman to accept his resignation. His experience was unrivalled as he had in fact worked for the company in almost every capacity open to him and at the annual general meeting in July 1959 Sir Harold referred to him in the following terms: "He always brings to our problems an expert knowledge of all matters concerning heating and ventilating, he is deeply respected by all the staff, and he is one of the most unassuming and modest people it has ever been my pleasure to know. It is true to say that he never thinks about himself. We wish him all happiness in the leisure which we hope his retirement will give to him . . . ." Unfortunately Mr. Woolgar was given little time to enjoy his retirement and died in June 1961.
Another personality who gave up his employment with the company during this period was Walter Charles who retired at the end of June 1957 after 55 years service. He had been the managing director's chief assistant at head office for many years as manager of the Leicester contracting department, but possibly his greatest contribution to his firm was the introduction and development of the automatic stoker business. Apart from this he was one of those, like E. W. Woolgar, whose long experience and profound technical knowledge will always be missed by any company. Just before his retirement he was successful in negotiating the largest contract to be undertaken by Ashwell and Nesbit since the Gretna armaments factory in 1916.

This was for the engineering services at the Muckamore Abbey Mental Colony in Northern Ireland which had been designed by the Belfast consulting engineer, J. R. W. Murland. At first the board expressed apprehension that such a large job might overstretch the company's financial resources which at that time were not in too healthy a state, but, after receiving certain assurances from Mr. Murland and from the main contractor, work was authorised to begin early in 1957.

One of the most successful offices during the fifties was that at Manchester where S. H. Tirrell had been in charge since 1948. He took full advantage of the valuable private connection, particularly in the industrial field, which he had inherited from his predecessors and which had been carefully nursed over the years; but as a good salesman he also broke new ground and made many new friends. The largest and most rewarding contracts came in the main from four major companies, Metropolitan-Vickers, Turner Bros. Asbestos, Lewis's Ltd. and the Dunlop Rubber Company. The work for the third and fourth of these was not confined to Manchester office but the large factory for Metropolitan-Vickers on the Wythenshaw estate and plants for Turner Bros. at Rochdale and Hindley Green represented possibly the most significant contribution by any one office, in a comparatively short period of time, to the company's overall results in the post-war era. Lewis's Ltd. preferred to work through Manchester office and after the rebuilding of their Liverpool store S. H. Tirrell was given the heating and ventilating services for their new shop at Bristol. Other industrial concerns, such as W. and R. Jacob at Liverpool also gave him substantial orders.

The climax came in 1957/8 when Manchester office sales topped £600,000, but just after the close of that year, in June 1958, S. H. Tirrell failed to survive a major operation and his fine record with Ashwell and Nesbit was prematurely terminated. The management of the office devolved upon his second-in-command, W. Green, who coped well with this sudden increase in his responsibilities. It was through no fault of his that the output of the office began then to decline as the peak of these industrial building programmes was already passed.

In Yorkshire and Scotland there was much less activity. The company's privileged position as sole heating and ventilating contractors to the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow and to many of the Hospitals in those cities was lost after the war when they ceased to be under private management, and alternative connections were hard to find. Leeds office maintained a flourishing stoker business but on the heating side there was a very limited volume of trade. In the midlands, after the retirement of Walter Charles, it was decided to dilute the activity of the Leicester office by opening a new branch

at Nottingham; and in 1958 a few rooms were rented in Mansfield Road with J. F. Howat, from Leicester, in charge. After a short period a lease was taken of 62, Clarendon Street, opposite the cemetery, and the small staff moved there in the summer of 1959. Since then the Nottingham office has grown up into one of the company's most successful offspring.
Looking at the company as a whole it can perhaps be said that the highest point of contracting output came in October 1956 when over 550 operatives were on the books. Thereafter over the next few years the numbers employed began gradually to decline.

In July 1959 it was decided that Austin Ashwell should share his executive responsibilities with the writer who was appointed joint managing director. For some months Austin Ashwell had been feeling the strain of carrying the business single-handed at the age of 76 and his health was giving some cause for concern; the chairman was still of the opinion that he should stay in office and that his influence should remain, but he did begin at this time to curtail his hours of work. However, a year later, in November 1960, Austin Ashwell suffered a mild stroke and the meeting of directors held earlier in the month proved to be the last he was to attend. His actual resignation took effect on 30th April 1961.
Austin Ashwell had been the mainspring of the company for so long. His father had not been granted a natural term of life so that Austin had never received the benefit of working under him or of being able to "take over" from him; instead there had been a long apprenticeship under Mr. Nesbit. The glamour of big business and rapid expansion was not for him but slowly and surely under his direction the firm had grown to prosperity and success after many darker years. Again one must quote the chairman: "He joined this company nearly sixty years ago. He has been the life and soul of its development over an extended period, and particularly since he became managing director nearly thirty years ago. He has stuck most manfully to his task during recent years when his health has not been good, and we are all very sure that in his own interests it was right that he should decide to retire. We wish him all happiness in his retirement and extend to him our grateful thanks for all he has done for the company, and therefore, indirectly, for many of you present here today, whose livelihood is in the company's business." So Sir Harold addressed the shareholders on the 21st July 1961. For the writer he was always the pattern to follow in integrity, wisdom and dedication. His influence on Ashwell and Nesbit was profound and always for its good, and few were his errors of judgment.

Conclusion

The year 1961 was the end of an era. By then all the veterans had departed and with them had gone a great accumulation of experience. Ashwell, Woolgar, Swift and Charles, four men who had spent their working lives with Ashwell and Nesbit, had retired. Tirrell had gone before his time was up and F. W. Margrett, the manager in Scotland, had also retired. Sir Harold Howitt, however, remained, presiding over a much younger board, but still supported, on the non-executive side of the table, by Joseph Adamson and C. A. B. Elliott. The other directors, in addition to the writer, who was now managing director, were T. D. Bagnall, Mr. Woolgar's successor in London, and R. A. S. Lomax, who had been elected in February 1958.

It is not intended to describe the events of the next seven years in detail; they are too near to us, and those concerned, with one great exception, are still alive and active in business. This is no place to enter into realms of possible controversy and only time will tell what effect some of the decisions taken will have on the future of this company. The changes which took place in the organisation and structure of Ashwell and Nesbit were fully documented and must still be fresh in the minds of those most concerned with the fortunes of the firm.

To mention the building of the new foundry bay, which was completed in 1962, the tightening of the connection with the machine-tool industry, the formation of the joint Anglo-American subsidiary, Snyder Ltd., and the eventual sale of the whole production unit to the Marwin Group, is to give the barest outline of the progress of the works during the period. All this was bound up with the search for new outlets and fresh capital; the attempt to expand the contracting side by the link-up with Associated Fire Alarms Ltd., and the acquisition of the subsidiary, J. Wontner-Smith Gray involved a massive increase in the issued capital, but led to no improvement in the company's liquid position. The difficulties encountered by the A.F.A. Group resulted in the sale of their ordinary shares in Ashwell and Nesbit to the Industrial and Commercial Finance Corporation, who, being already holders of some of the equity, were thus given a controlling interest. For them the next logical step was the separation of the production engineering side from the contracting business, between which the only real trading connection, by this time, was the Iron Fireman stoker. Finally there seemed to them to be only one economic way to ensure the proper development of the plant at Barkby Road, and it was, therefore, in June 1968, sold to one of the most progressive and fast growing machine-tool groups in the country, in whose development also I.C.F.C. had an interest.

After twenty-four years at the head of our affairs the chairman retired in January 1965. He still maintained a lively interest in the progress of the company, however, and such was his vitality and enthusiasm it was particularly sad to read of his death in December 1969 at the age of eighty-three. He always gave clear and wise counsel throughout his long connection with the company and it was a privilege to serve under him. His financial advice was, of course, invaluable, though the search for new sources of capital, which concerned him so much, did not lead us on the course for which he had hoped.

Sir Harold was followed in the chair by Joseph Adamson and at the same time C. A. B. Elliott resigned due to ill health. Meanwhile R. A. S. Lomax had been appointed joint managing director in the previous year with, naturally, a special responsibility for the works. W. A. McPhail and Eric Morland, of Associated Fire Alarms Ltd., served as directors for short periods and were succeeded by two of their colleagues; subsequently, after Mr. McPhail had resigned from his company, R. G. Hooker represented the A.F.A. Group until their holding in Ashwell and Nesbit was transferred to I.C.F.C. in March 1967. Thereafter S. E. Blackstone was the nominee of the latter organisation until January 1969 when E. B. Ralph took over. After the sale of the works R. A. S. Lomax became a full-time executive of the new company formed by the Marwin Group but remained on the board of his old firm, and in December 1968 Peter Charles, son of Walter, was appointed a director after he had assumed the position of manager of the Midlands area.

I cannot close this narrative of the dealings of Ashwell and Nesbit Ltd., without reference to the death of Austin Ashwell in the spring of 1966 in his eighty-third year. Unfortunately he was not able to enjoy a long retirement and the onset of a serious diabetic condition following the stroke which was the immediate cause of his resignation in 1961 steadily weakened him during his last few years. After his father and David Nesbit he had played the predominant role in the affairs of the company and we owe him much.

This company started as a one-man business in 1879, grew into maturity and nearly outlived its strength. It now faces the future in a very different form from that in which it started. It has, in common with many small companies survived difficulties and even crises over the years. Adequate finance has usually been elusive and nearly always a problem, and in the light of modern credit restrictions and heavy taxation this has never been more true than it is today. The

success or otherwise of a firm of this kind lies particularly in the hands of those who serve it. In ninety years there have been many in all ranks of employment, but one thinks especially of those who served it longest whether as directors or as more humble employees. To them this inevitably inadequate history must be dedicated.