

COLT 1956-1979

In August 1953 a disastrous fire completely destroyed the Livonia plant of General Motors in Michigan. It was the largest industrial fire to have occurred at that time and caused damage totalling \$55 million. It brought home the importance of specially designed fire ventilation systems in large premises.



Howard Lambie was

approached by an existing customer, Vauxhall, to discuss the provision of fire ventilation for Vauxhall's Luton factory. The number of ventilators required for such a system represented a great business opportunity. Howard agreed at once to Vauxhall's request. There was one problem. Vauxhall wanted a sample ventilator within 24 hours for executives to take with them to General Motors' headquarters in the USA as proof that the necessary

In the aftermath of the Jaguar Car Company fire in 1957, Colt direct-mailed industry, for the first time, on the subject of the benefits of installing Colt fire ventilation systems.

equipment could be found in Britain rather than imported from the USA. Unable to have a ventilator produced in time by the manufacturers, Howard came up with the enterprising solution of taking a CO ventilator from the company's trade stand at Olympia which could be adapted to open automatically to allow smoke and heat to escape in time of fire.

The Vauxhall order was seen at first as a one-off and nothing more was done with the idea after the Luton contract had been completed in October 1956.

Then a fire seriously damaged Jaguar's Coventry plant in February 1957. Michael Reaney at once realised the potential for Colt and the day after the Jaguar fire Colt Ventilation Ltd announced that it would market automatic fire ventilation to British industry. The company was helped by a letter from Coventry's fire chief outlining how such a system would have greatly reduced the impact of the Jaguar fire.

While the country's fire officers were enthusiastic in their support of Colt's initiative because it could save firemen's lives, there were other decision-makers who remained unconvinced. So began a detailed research project funded by Colt with the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research at the Fire Research Station. This led to the publication of Fire Research Technical Papers Nos 7 and 10 which set out the scientific basis of fire ventilation design.

Colt Fire Ventilation went on to prove itself time after time, no more dramatically than in the case of the fire which broke out in the trim store at Vauxhall Motors in Luton on 14 August 1963.

It was one of the main news items on the radio that morning. Jerome O'Hea, Jack's second son, was quickly dispatched to Luton with the company photographer, Norman Childs. Together with the Colt area manager, Roy Wallace, they were greeted by the Vauxhall fire brigade as heroes. As Geoff Neville, Vauxhall's chief fire officer, commented, 'The Colt ventilators were worth their weight in gold.' The fire ventilation system had allowed Vauxhall's own firemen to tackle the seat of the blaze and prevent it spreading to the assembly line next door where the new Viva was being built.

Jerome and Norman were keen to photograph the scene for Colt's records but Vauxhall would only permit them to use Vauxhall's own photographs. None of these showed how the ventilation system had confined the fire to the trim store so Jerome, Norman and Roy dashed off to Luton airport to see if an aerial shot could be arranged.

As luck would have it, they were able to hire a small helicopter which had only just landed at Luton. The resulting photographs were excellent and were widely used by Colt.

While Norman Childs' skill played a large part in the quality of the photographs, the helicopter pilot also made an important contribution. This was hardly surprising. It turned out that he was the pilot of the camera helicopter for the James Bond film, 'From Russia With Love', and had been returning from shooting in Scotland to his base in Kent.

Jerome O'Hea had been in the business for six years by this time. Before joining Colt in 1957, he had studied engineering at Cambridge. He was then sent to gain industry qualifications at the National College in London (now the University of the South Bank) before returning to Surbiton.

At this time Colt Ventilation Ltd was still using subcontractors to make all its ventilation products. The main subcontractor was a firm called Whittingham & Watt Ltd. Colt took a stake in Whittingham & Watt Ltd, so important had it become to the business, only to discover shortly afterwards that the firm was being investigated for tax evasion.

So, in 1960, to ensure the uninterrupted supply of goods, Colt had to acquire the factory, plant and staff of Whittingham & Watt Ltd. The pattern had been broken. From now on the company would be manufacturing as well as selling.

At the same time Colt had moved into Continental Europe for the first time. A string of credit squeezes combined with a downswing in the economic cycle in Britain prompted a search for more buoyant markets. The company had executed an order for a Dutch engineering firm in 1957 and already recognised the potential of the Dutch market. A leading Dutch building products business, Braat Bouwstoffen NV, headed by Bartho Braat, was introduced to Colt.

Braat Bouwstoffen NV was keen to introduce Colt Ventilation Ltd's products to Holland, Colt was eager to gain a foothold in a new market. Many at Colt shared the vision expressed by Fred Price when he wrote in May 1959 that 'It is vital for our future to be established in Europe rather than perhaps have our market affected by European manufacturers of powered equipment in ten years' time.'

A joint venture, Braat en Colt Ventilatie NV, was established in the summer of 1960 and Henk Mattern, one of Braat Bouwstoffen NV's managing directors, was placed in charge. Henk would become a highly valued member of Colt's Continental European team.

Ron McEleney, the pioneer of the Colt sales manual, played a key role in helping the transfer of technology to the Dutch team, spending several months in Holland away from his wife and young family. He repeated this exercise later when the Belgian and German companies were being formed.

Braat en Colt Ventilatie NV became responsible for marketing Colt's products in Holland and Belgium. These were manufactured in Britain but assembled in Holland.

As with Whittingham & Watt Ltd, it was another departure from Jack O'Hea's general business principles. Colt Ventilation Ltd for the first time did not have a majority shareholding in the new company, which was run as a 50:50 joint venture. Jack O'Hea was too shrewd a businessman to be inflexible. He knew a good opportunity when he saw one. Colt's experience of ventilation and Braat Bouwstoffen NV's knowledge of the Dutch and Belgian markets proved a winning combination. At the end of 1961 a second joint venture was established in Belgium under the name of SA Colt Ventilation et Chauffage NV. The way forward in Continental Europe was now established with Colt providing the products and the technology and Continental European nationals taking over the marketing and day-to-day management of the business.

Colt Ventilation Ltd's planned entry into Continental Europe, long before Britain joined the Common Market, was to be one of the most significant steps in the company's history.

The original 100,000 sq. ft. site was soon too small. A further 50,000 sq. ft. of factory and warehouse was added. Finally the Surbiton offices were sold and, in 1969, staff were transferred to these new Havant offices.

Colt Ventilation Ltd made great strides during the 1960s and early 1970s. Sales of less than £2 million in 1960 grew to nearly £9.5 million in 1972. In 1970, to reflect the company's expansion into Continental Europe, it became known as Colt International Ltd.

Colt had grown because Jack O'Hea had given his talented colleagues their heads while he retained strategic control of the business.

After Michael Reaney departed from the business in 1961, the post of general manager was filled by Godfrey Laurence. Jack O'Hea was building a family business which he wished to hand on to future generations. He had always foreseen the day when his two sons, Alan and Jerome, would take over the running of the entire group. In 1962 therefore Alan became joint managing director with his father while Jerome took over responsibility for research and development.

Alan's first-class engineering mind could be seen in the attention he

paid to the details of the business. Although he would often deny it, he was also very competitive and this entrepreneurial spirit acted as a spur to others. He was keen to see his executives use their initiative and encouraged them to regard as far as possible the businesses they ran as their own. He maintained a close overview, describing his own role as an enabler.

Jerome's qualities complemented those of his brother and were seen to great effect in the now



substantial research and development department. His great strength lay in the constant stream of ideas which flowed from him and he was an enthusiastic believer in the value of innovation. He also possessed a sense of vision and had a clear view of the direction the business should take. He became very interested in the process of management and the business would benefit considerably from this over future years.

In 1966, Alan and Jerome O'Hea became joint managing directors, one brother taking responsibility for sales and the other for manufacturing. Jack O'Hea remained as chairman until 1977 and always retained an acute interest in the business. But he had done what so many founders find so hard. In good time he had handed over effective responsibility to the second generation.

The British company in the early 1960s had grown rapidly. Its factories scattered over several locations in and around London were no longer adequate. The business was refused an Industrial Development Certificate to expand its operations in Middlesex. This prompted a search for an alternative location and brought Colt to Havant on the south coast. The area was being promoted as an industrial location with attractive government incentives on offer to tempt businesses to move.

It was ideal for Colt. In 1963 all UK production was moved to a new purpose-built factory in Havant. Over the next six years there was a gradual transfer of all the company's activities to Havant. In 1969 the sales and administration functions left Surbiton after 28 years. This coming together for the first time of sales and production, however, did nothing to relieve manufacturing's reputation as the poor relation, a problem never convincingly tackled until much later.

At Havant the research and development department found itself in purpose-built laboratories. It flourished under Jerome O'Hea, with his flair for innovation, and Jim Holt, with his expertise in technical marketing. Jerome encouraged a spirit of controlled anarchy in the research and development department which made launching new products a way of life. Jim Holt did much to turn Colt's technical approach from an art into a science. This combination produced a constant flow of new ideas from which were developed the products which kept Colt at the head of its field.

Fred Price was the marketing man *par excellence* at Colt during the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps the campaign for which he should be best remembered was one which had nothing to do with marketing Colt but everything to do with capturing the spirit of the moment in the Britain of the late 1960s.

1967 had been a gloomy year for Britain. In November the government announced that sterling was to be devalued, an enormous blow to the country's economic prestige and morale.

A month later Fred Price issued his usual New Year message to the UK staff. Referring to the poor economic climate, he suggested that everyone could help by working an extra half-day a week without extra pay.

That message struck a chord. Five typists in the order department at Surbiton took up the idea, which had now become an extra half-hour each day rather than a half-day each week. Jack O'Hea marshalled all his staff on to the back lawn, received an overwhelming vote in favour of the idea, informed the papers and organised a press conference.

At a quiet time of year for news, the idea caught the mood of the moment and was taken up enthusiastically by the national press. The 'I'm Backing Britain' campaign was born. It received support from Prince Philip, the Prime Minister Harold Wilson, the Confederation of British Industry and all the political parties. The entertainer, Bruce Forsyth, recorded a song which took the title of the campaign.

Colt cancelled price rises on its ventilation products and reduced prices on its heating equipment. Workers at the Havant factory joined in despite the disapproval of their national union leaders. Housebuilders reduced their house prices, Boots froze the prices of all its own goods,



SETTING THE PACE FOR 1968

Wilson praises 'Back Britain' girls

BY OUR INDUSTRIAL STAFF
MR. WILSON yesterday congratulated Colt Heating and Ventilation of Surbiton, and its girl workers, for

FIVE GIRLS BRITAIN CAN BE PROUD OF

DAILY EXPRESS
Interview
PLAN
your visit
to the
Boat Show!

IT'S a moment of
great contrast
and the two men
have with the
most illustrious
of men.

They offer
extra work
for nothing,
and whole
firm
follows...



as one of
FIVE young
office girls
blazed a trail
yesterday for the
rest of the country.
Their pure selling
spirit, a "Back Britain"
girl team's work each
day for Britain.

Promise

The Colt-inspired 'I'm Backing Britain' campaign was front-page news for several weeks. It gave an opportunity for individual citizens to do something positive for the country.

I'm Backing Britain



Half an hour a day without pay
ALL FOR BRITAIN'S SAKE



MR. WILSON, M.P., MEETS THE GIRLS WHO SET THE PACE. FROM LEFT: MISS JANE AND MISS JANE.

Unity with decentralisation' was the phrase coined to describe the Colt philosophy during the early 1970s. What it meant was giving as much freedom to the individual companies within the group as was compatible with Colt's overall interests. Much of this stemmed from the implementation within the UK organisation of Management by Objectives.

MBO is a management style, rather than a technique or a system, and acts as a catalyst for change. This was certainly the case with Colt. It provided the vehicle for decentralised management which enabled the board not only to delegate complete responsibility and authority to managers but also to make them accountable for their own spheres of activity.

Decentralisation began under Alan O'Hea and Fred Price as a means of fostering once again the entrepreneurial drive which had already brought Colt so far. Sales, installation and service were reorganised into six regions. Roy Fairchild devolved the company's centralised accounting function to the regions to enable regional managers to control their own finances. Historical financial accounting was replaced by management accounting.

MBO brought out the need for management development and training and was able to identify potential among managers. In 1968 a management services division was established which covered all areas of training and development, personnel and corporate planning. Jerome O'Hea's vision had created this environment within the business long before it became fashionable elsewhere and continued the tradition begun by Jack

O'Hea of concentrating upon the company's greatest asset, the people it employed.

In 1971 Alan and his brother Jerome decided it was not in the best interests of the business to have separate managing directors in charge of sales and production.

Alan became sole group managing director. In this position he was instrumental in maintaining the entrepreneurial management style of the business. Demanding the highest standards of quality at all times, he nevertheless gave his senior colleagues free rein. While this extensive delegation sometimes failed to spot trouble, notably in the UK, it also brought about excellent results on the Continent, especially in Holland and Germany.

Jerome took responsibility for those Colt companies not involved in the core ventilation and heating activities. As well as the building products operations still carried on as W H Colt (London) Ltd, these also included a longstanding investment in an engineering business known as the High Speed Group. He was also given the specific task of seeking out new opportunities for investment.

Thanks to all these changes, the board of the company felt in 1971 that Colt International Ltd was 'far less centralised, much more flexible, and altogether better prepared for the future'. In the following year it became possible to give the Continental European companies the same degree of autonomy and operating freedom.

Until this point the Continental European companies had been run as joint ventures with Colt's Dutch partner, Braat Bouwstoffen NV. In 1972 Colt had the opportunity to buy out the Braat interests thus making the German, Dutch and Belgian companies wholly owned Colt subsidiaries. The German and Belgian companies had already been renamed as Colt International GmbH and SA Colt International NV respectively; the Dutch company followed by changing its name to Colt International BV.

The importance of the company's Continental European operations was recognised by placing them alongside rather than beneath their UK counterpart. To achieve this, a new group structure was established with the operating companies reporting to a newly created holding company, Colt International & Associated Companies Ltd (now called Colt Group Ltd).

The key executives involved in ensuring the smooth administration of all this change were Roy Fairchild and the new company secretary, Charles Lennard. Courteous, kind and thoughtful, Charles Lennard joined Colt in 1972 after spending many years with the company's auditors, Morison Stoneham. He continued to handle all company secretarial matters with impeccable efficiency until his sudden death in 1991.

Trading elsewhere on the Continent expanded with the setting up of a French company, Colt International SA, in 1973 and an Austrian one, Colt International GesmbH, in 1974.

In the UK soaring inflation was one of the most difficult problems faced by the business community in the middle 1970s. Under the astute financial management of Roy Fairchild, however, Colt International Ltd quickly got to grips with rising prices and turned inflation to its profitable advantage. With British industry suffering from recessionary times, Fred Price, who became managing director of the UK company in 1975, turned the company's attention towards exports and won several substantial overseas orders for the British company, notably in the Middle East, where a Dubai office was opened in 1976.

For the O'Hea family, the late 1970s were marked by several major events. Jack O'Hea, who had been awarded an OBE in 1976 for services to the export trade, retired from the chairmanship in 1977 at the age of

80 and became life president. Alan O'Hea became chairman as well as managing director.

On 5 May 1977 Colt's contribution towards quality assurance was recognised by a visit from the Duke of Edinburgh. This also served as an early celebration of Jack O'Hea's 80th birthday, which occurred a fortnight later, and an open day was organised for employees and their families.

Jack O'Hea lived to see the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the founding of Colt in 1981, an event marked by another royal visit, this time from the Duke of Kent.

Jack continued to make regular visits to the company's New Lane headquarters in Havant until his death in October 1984 at the age of 87. By the time he died, the small business he had begun in 1931 was turning over more than £53 million and employed nearly 1,400 people in Britain and on the Continent of Europe. Still imbued with the spirit of innovation which he had given it, Colt's future as a family business was firmly in the hands of Jack's two sons.



Jack O'Hea had a firm belief that 'people are our most important asset'. He is seen here with his Havant based employees, many of whom have achieved 25 or more years service with the company.