

The history of 'The Brush'

Most people who live locally will have heard of 'The Brush'. They may know that it built all kinds of heavy electrical machinery, switchgear, and locomotives, even buses, coaches and trams, but do they know that it built hundreds of aircraft during both world wars and flew many of them to their destination from the field at the back of the factory?

When Tony Jarram came to the History Group in November he said that being asked to give a talk about the Brush was like being asked to give a talk about the complete works of Shakespeare. Where does one start? With Charles Francis Brush? No, by the time he came to Loughborough the Falcon works had been operational alongside the Midland Railway for twenty-five years.

In 1851 Henry Hughes bought a woodyard at Regent's Wharf beside the canal to build pony carts. He called it the Falcon works, probably after the house in Pinfold Gate where his wife had been brought up. The business flourished, and within ten years he was building small steam locomotives and looking for more space to grow the business. A site beside the Midland Railway looked ideal, so he bought it and the Falcon works had a new home.

Soon Hughes was building tramcars and railway wagons as well as steam engines, but after ten years trading conditions became more difficult as more competitors appeared, and the business was sold. The new owner planned to move the business into the new world of electric tramcars and electricity generation, but he needed a partner who could bring new skills.



Charles Francis Brush.

Enter Charles Francis Brush. He was an inventor and entrepreneur who was making arc lights and street lighting dynamos in Cleveland, Ohio. He wanted to expand into the UK, and in 1879 established the Anglo-American Brush Electric Light Corporation in Lambeth in South London. Here he and his team developed and built one of the first transformers, which was crucial to the development of their street lighting systems because for the first time it made long-distance transmission possible.



The Falcon works in the 1960's, showing the London shops in the foreground.

The site in Lambeth was limiting production, and Brush was looking for a new home. His search led him to Loughborough, and a deal was struck which resulted in him taking the majority shareholding in The Brush Electrical Engineering Co Ltd, based at the Falcon works. He built new

workshops beside the Nottingham Road (which are still called the 'London shops') and moved the entire Lambeth business there.

Brush now sold his American business to General Electric and focused his creative genius on the UK market. The steam tram business gave way to electric trams (which can be seen at Crich museum); coaches were supplied to the Great Central Railway; alternators and dynamos to Bankside power station. There was even a car built round a Vauxhall engine which never went into serious production. At this stage both the Brush and Falcon names were used, though in time it was Brush that came to dominate.



The Brushmobile (1903).

But trouble was brewing. The local authorities that were building most of the power stations were insisting on a minimum wage structure that was more than Brush were paying. At the same time the United Union of Coachmakers was calling for a strike, but despite the pressure from the local authorities the company refused to negotiate. In 1906 there was a strike which lasted six months, after which half of the strikers returned to work without winning any increase in pay.

The First World War created a huge demand for military aircraft and Brush were in the front of the queue – not only for their engineering expertise but also because they had a large flat meadow at the back of the works which made an excellent airfield! Over 400 Avro bombers took their first flight from the meadow, but 142 Short seaplanes built for HMS Ark Royal had to be packed up and sent by rail.

After the war aircraft production ended and the Falcon works reverted to what it was doing before the war. But twenty years later military aircraft returned to Loughborough when fuselages and wings of damaged Hampden and Lancaster bombers were sent to Falcon works for repair by a mostly female workforce.



The De Havilland DH89 Dominie (1943).

In 1943 Brush started to assemble the De Havilland DH89 Dominie, 335 of which had been built by the time the war ended. Fuselages and wings were assembled at Falcon works and towed to the Derby Road airfield (previously Loughborough racecourse), where they were assembled and flown to their destination.

After the war the bus, tram and coachbuilding activities ended and the company focused on building diesel-electric locomotives, transformers and heavy electrical machinery. In 1957 it became part of the Hawker Siddeley Group, which in turn was acquired by BTR in 1992.

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