

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1977)
Heft: 1735

Rubrik: Business news

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BUSINESS NEWS

SWISS PRECISION ENGINEERING COMPANY CELEBRATES CENTENARY IN SWITZERLAND AND HALF CENTURY IN BRITAIN.

During 1976 the Swiss company of Sphinxwerke Müller & Co AG of Solothurn, is celebrating its 100th anniversary. At the same time in Great Britain the subsidiary company Müller & Co (England) celebrates its 50th anniversary.

For a precision engineering company, Müller had unusual origins. One of the co-founders, Josef Müller was running the family flour milling business with its associated bakery. Having inherited the business from his father, Josef Müller was seeking more ambitious outlets for his talents and soon came to the conclusion that the family business had its limitations.

At the same time his fellow countryman, Jakob Schweizer was endeavouring to capitalise on an invention which he had just completed. This was an automatic machine for the production of watch screws. Hitherto the

Swiss reputation for the fine precision work involved in watchmaking had been founded on the painstaking hand work of 'outworkers' who, in their own homes, turned the screws on hand lathes and slotted each one individually with a file. This produced neither the quality nor the quantity demanded by the growing watch industry.

In 1872 the two men met and each realised the possibilities that a partnership offered. From then onwards the Müller family milling business became of less importance. In 1876 the company of Müller & Schweizer was founded at Solothurn in the premises of the old mill, known as the Schanzmühle.

The next notable stage in the development of the company was in 1886 when a hydro-electric generating plant was constructed four-and-a-half miles from the works at the village of Kriegstetten on the river Oesch. Power was transmitted to the factory to drive an electric motor which had replaced the steam engine, which itself had been a replacement for the original gas engine. The generating equipment was designed by Charles Brown who became one of the founders of Brown, Boveri & Co. The installation was Europe's first long distance electrical power transmission system for industrial use.

The Schweizer design of movable lathe headstock has remained basically unchanged in today's Swiss automatic screw machines, compared with the fixed

headstock of modern American automatics. The town of Solothurn also owes much of its present prosperity to the efforts of the two men and their successors in the company.

Following the death of Josef Müller, the company was then run by his children and in 1916 was transformed into a joint stock corporation. The company is still a family concern and has among its directors descendants of Josef Müller.

In 1926 following expansion in Europe, a company was set up in England as a sales and distribution organisation. This was evidently successful as in 1932 a factory was established in London at Park Royal.

Mr. P. B. Hartmann, together with other Swiss technicians, came to England for this purpose and his influence in the establishing of one of the largest independent automatic precision turned part companies in the United Kingdom, is still very much in evidence. His 50 years' active service with the company covers a period as Technical Director and from 1949 to 1971 as Managing Director. He now serves in a consultative capacity and at 75 years of age still plays an important role in the fortunes of the company.

Unfortunately, during the early part of World War II the factory was bombed. The decision was made to move to Cleobury Mortimer in rural Shropshire. Despite wartime restrictions on materials and labour, a factory was built and

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production established. The factory was used to produce parts for the war effort, including components for 20 mm cannon shell fuses.

Following the war, the British company reverted to its peacetime activities of producing precision turned parts in a variety of ferrous and non-ferrous metals. Sizes of products range from the smallest screw to larger components up to 42 mm diameter.

The factory is equipped with 250 modern automatic machines (single and multi-spindle) of Swiss, American, German and British origin. As many operations as possible are carried out on the automatics for economic production. There are very comprehensive facilities for carrying out second operations and finishing work including machines, many of which are automated, for processes such as turning, drilling, slotting, milling and thread milling, tapping, reaming and several types of grinding. The company has a staff of skilled tool designers and toolmakers. To produce the type of fine work for which the company is renowned, the tools have to be made to extremely fine limits. Virtually all the tools required are made on the premises.

The high quality is maintained under the supervision of the Quality Control Department with a combination of shop floor and final inspection. There is a well-equipped Standards Room with some of the most up-to-date inspection and testing equipment available.

However well-equipped a factory may be, it cannot manufacture a consistently high standard of products without a competent workforce. Müller are fortunate in having a high standard in their training department which enables work's apprentices to be given all necessary training in auto-setting, tool and gauge manufacturing. Over 98% of the skilled men have been trained by the company.

Mr. R. Burki, whose family have been involved in screw making for many

years, became an apprentice at Sphinx Works, Soleure in 1926. Soon after qualifying he joined the technical team which was sent to England in 1932 to set up the U.K. factory. In 1970 Mr. Burki was made a Director having held various technical and managerial posts. He celebrates 50 years of continuous service with the Müller organisation.

Over the years, the emphasis on manufacturing has changed from the actual production of bench type automatics to manufacturing and supplying customers' requirements in high-quality precision turned parts. These cover all industries including manufacturers of meteorological instruments, scientific and electrical instruments, computers, record players, domestic appliances and optical instruments. In fact, anywhere that precision turned parts and screws are required manufactured to very fine limits, Müller can justifiably claim to be among the top suppliers.

Since the early days in the Schanzmühle, the Müller organisation has grown considerably. In addition to the original premises which have now grown to employ approximately 400 people, there is a company at St. Louis in France producing screws and turned parts; a branch factory at Pruntrut in the Jura district of Switzerland producing carbide tools; and a subsidiary company Fevisa SA in Geneva producing high precision parts, gears and pinions. There are sales offices or agents in most European countries, including a sales office for the British company in London.

A further activity of the company is to act as stockholders and distributors in the U.K. of Small Tool products made at the works of the Swiss company. These tools are all produced very precisely and a speciality is the inclusion of diameters which are extremely fine. Included in the range are twist drills from 3.00 mm diameter down to 0.05 mm diameter (this latter finer than a human hair), and taps and dies in threads from 5.00 mm down to such minute thread sizes as 0.30 mm.

A more recent addition to the tool range is the specialist range 'Solodur' solid carbide drills, for use in drilling printed circuit boards. These tools are supplied to a wide range of industries, but especially those concerned with fine work such as jet drilling, instrument making, dental trade, and electrical and electronic apparatus.

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