



# Rubery Owen History



Rubery Owen can trace its roots back to the day in 1884 when John T Rubery and his 2 brothers established a modest little factory in Booth Street, Darlaston and settled down to the business of manufacturing 'light steel constructions'. Less than a decade later, the brothers had left the business and J.T. was looking for a partner. That Partner emerged as a 24 year old engineer from Denbighshire, Alfred Ernest Owen, and Rubery & Co. was formed in 1893.

From an initial production that consisted mainly of light steel roof work, the business expanded into factory construction to feed the growing 'bicycle boom' and then as the bicycle became the motor car, attention turned to components for product itself as well as the factories in which they were produced.

As early as 1899, Rubery and Co were awarded a Gold Medal at the Richmond Exhibition for a chassis frame assembled from rolled sections and solid round steel bars, as AE Owen had been one of the first to realise the limitations of traditional production methods – rightly named as one of the Pioneers of the British Motor Industry, AE Owen was also an early Motorist himself – he was, for instance, the first man to take a car into Aberdovey, North Wales and indeed, on entering the town was stopped by the local policeman, who would not permit him to proceed until he had been invited to mount the seat beside him – unfortunately, half way through the town, the car backfired, much to the affright of the Policeman, who thought he was being shot, and immediately forbade further travel – the car was imprisoned that evening, and old residents report that the following Sunday, the Minister prayed very earnestly that God would take away the 'Devil on Wheels' from the town.

However, the "Devil on Wheels" would afford the company significant opportunities for growth and in 1905 the Company became Rubery Owen and Co. By 1910 Mr JT Rubery had retired and sold his interest in its entirety to his partner, and AE Owen's sole Proprietorship was marked by the entry of the firm into yet another world of transportation. By 1911 Rubery Owen had issued a small catalogue of Metal Aircraft Components – quantities were extremely small in those early days, but AE Owen was always eager to try out a 'speciality' – in the years following, the works were constantly visited by the pioneers of aviation and when war broke out in 1914, Rubery, Owen and Co was almost the only firm in a position to supply the British Government with small aircraft components in any significant quantity.....

The Firm fought its way through the Depression of the early '20's and by the end of the decade, the business was expanding again with new opportunities in 'Chassis Development', 'Road Wheels' and 'Structural Steelwork', these this time being the Engines for Growth.

By the time of AE Owen's early death in December 1929, the business organisation that he had created was widely recognised as being unique in character – consisting as it did of a number of contiguous but separate operations each producing its own particular class of goods from Motor Frames to Motor Wheels, Structural Steel to Aviation and Metal Aircraft. The firm at that time employed 1600, and AE Owen was recognised as being as much a pioneer of industrial welfare as he was in industry itself – a recreation ground, with bowling greens and tennis courts, had been opened in 1912 (a decided novelty in the grim setting of Black Country Manufacture) and Rubery Owen was also one of the first firms in the Midlands to establish an Institute, with canteen, Staff Dining Room, Billiards Room and Reading Room. The Company was also a founder member of the Industrial Welfare Society.

When AE Owen's 2 sons, Alfred and Ernest, took over the reins at the beginning of 1930, they realised that a great tradition had to be maintained – and developed. The Structural Steel departments flourished, with some of the Country's best known sporting Stadia – Manchester United, Wolverhampton Wanderers, Derby County, Millwall and Twickenham – having new stands erected as a result of Rubery Owen Structural Steelwork. These activities, combined with the ever increasing growth of the motor industry and of course the advent of the Second World War meant that the company continued to expand, significant parts of its production capability being required for the war effort.

By 1951, the Group consisted of 28 member companies employing over 12,000 people in operations as diverse as Aerospace (Aviation Department, Messier Ltd), Domestic Equipment (Easiclene), Fork Lift Trucks (Conveyancer), Office Furniture (Leabank), Nuts, Bolts, Chains, Tools, Agricultural Implements and of course Automotive Components (Chassis, Wheels etc) to name but a few.

Harold McMillan's famous phrase "you've never had it so good" could have been tailor made to chart the growth of companies such as Rubery Owen through the '50's and '60's – the period saw significant and sustained growth for a Group of Companies that described itself as a "diversified, flexible, multi-national based enterprise" that manufactured more than 12,000 different components, assemblies and machines on a worldwide basis, employing more than 15,000 people in a group of 88 companies and operating on 5 continents! The diverse field of activity had increased still further, such that to the 'interests' of the 50's outlined above, the spectrum was now even wider – earthmovers, fuel pumps, automated warehousing, integrated handling systems, yacht and boat building, foundry and welding plant and equipment, machine tools, farm equipment are just a few of the activities that can be extracted from a 1969 "Products and Services" brochure.

The '70's were a difficult period – with the early '70's came fuel crises and fluctuating fortunes particularly due to smaller numbers of cars being produced in the UK, at a time when production in both France and Germany was expanding significantly; and though there was the occasional 'highlight', by the late 1970's things were difficult again as a result of considerable rationalisation in the UK Aerospace industry as well as the Materials Handling/Forklift Truck sector. These, allied to the continuing difficulties and disruption in the UK Automotive Industry, meant that The Group was significantly exposed and suffered as a result.

In 1981 the Company took the momentous decision to close its main Darlaston factory, with over 6000 jobs having been lost during the course of the previous 5 years, and from that point on the company took the decision that it would pursue a strategy of 'orderly exit' from its traditional manufacturing and engineering businesses – successful and growing manufacturing businesses were sold to organisations with access to larger amounts of capital and therefore better placed to drive their growth, whilst other operations were rationalised or even closed.

The story of RO can really be viewed as a microcosm of the change in British Industry between the late '60s and early 90's – for a whole variety of reasons, what the company used to do is no longer done in this country anymore. Our fortunes, as a supplier of components and other assemblies under long term contracts to manufacturers of finished goods, were largely in the hands of others and in many ways our hands were tied. The lessons that we have learnt have been valuable ones, and the fact that we are still here is testament to that! Indeed, many of our contemporaries, businesses that used to do what we did, are no longer around and in many ways the fact that we are still in existence is as much of an achievement as the original growth and expansion of the business.

The last major manufacturing interest was sold in 1993 and since then the company has focused its attention on 3 key strands – Property, Investment, and a number of independent operating subsidiaries. Yes, it's smaller than it used to be in the late '60s and early '70's, but it's still innovating and it's still active.

As we approach the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the firm's founding, we are investing heavily in our operating companies, and as the world faces different issues – climate change, social responsibility, the internet age etc – we hope that we are doing our bit to contribute, and see real opportunities to be at the forefront of the evolution of a new type of "British Industry" and "Industrial Revolution".