

The Pressed Steel Company

Morris formed a joint venture with the Budd Company and Bankers J. Schroeder and Co. to form The Pressed Steel Company. By 1930, the reluctance of other manufacturers to place work there, led to Morris Motors relinquishing their shareholding in that business. Pressed Steel went on to flourish, making presswork for many manufacturers including Hillman, Jaguar, Austin, Rover, Rolls Royce and Standard.

When Morris started up, its production methods were very much based on the old coach building methods. This was also true in the trim shop where dealing with leather was very much from that coach building tradition. Pressed Steel was a totally new technology imported from the States. Because there was no traditional craft basis to the work carried out there, the labour force came from cotton mills, mines, farms and depressed economic areas. Throughout the life of business in Cowley there was always some separation between the two operations. Pressed Steel became unionised a lot sooner than Morris Motors. The two operations nevertheless enjoyed a great camaraderie and shared sporting and social activities. One area where Pressed Steel differed was the high number of injuries its workers suffered. A hospital was set up within the works as well as a dental clinic. Welfare was important to Morris and sporting and social events were very popular.

Injuries

‘It was very dangerous. You see, what happened, there were people working there from the farms and from shops and from all walks of life that had never seen this machinery before and they were handling it and they were trying to work as fast and as hard as they can to earn as much so they were taking risks, and of course there were terrible accidents in there. There were several men walking around with their hands off and then in the press shop these great big presses, as I said, they came up from the bottom and down from the top and they rammed the metal and one day a chap had got a panel stuck

in there. It was tied up and he couldn't get it out, so the foreman went in there, he got his head up underneath and he was pulling and pulling and down this press came and of course his head was in there and his head was just like red paint. All over the press . . . it was terrible.' Alec Robinson, (Pressed Steel 1927-70)

'One of the first impressions I got when I went into the factory – each stanchion had a First Aid kit on it, a stretcher on it – right the way through the press. Loss of fingers thumbs and hands was commonplace in the factory. I see one bloke had his hand off one day. He'd just turned around to say something to someone who was walking past, and before you could get at him, his hand was gone. The presses they operated were huge things, the size of a house, two-story house. Presses that came down weighed tons. He didn't even know that his hand was gone. He went to take the next panel – that was it, he never felt it.' Norman Brown, Pressed Steel, Radiators, 1935-47

From "Making Cars, A history of car making at Cowley . . . by the people who make the cars" published by the Television History Workshop in 1985.

Also "Making Cars at Cowley" G. Bardsley & S. Laing 1999

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