

When the Directors of the original British Acoustic Film Company came to the Forest of Dean seeking an expansion site, they could have had little idea of the tremendous undertaking which was to grow from the industrial seed they were to plant. As their car turned up the hill into the ancient village of Mitcheldean, with its aged church and tall steeple, its little derelict chapel hidden away in a loft at the rear of the few crumbling shops one wonders if they had any prevision of the village expansion which would ensue or of the fleet of buses which would one day bring their daily load of workers from miles around.

Nevertheless, close by the old chapel where it is said Wesley once preached, they found the Old Wintle Brewery. What a comparison they must have made between old Mitcheldean with its hidden chapel, and a suggestion perhaps of proscribed dissenters, the old sandstone Brewery still reminiscent of huge dray horses and brewery wagons, and the London they had recently left with its air raids and wartime activities.

The Brewery at this time was in partial use only. Brewing ceased in 1930, but the manufacturing of malt was continuing in part of the buildings and the lease covering this activity had six or seven years to run. It is now a classic story that the Directors viewed the vacant property and then adjourned to discuss the matter over a packaged lunch eaten at the roadside. Here the decision was taken that gave birth to the Mitcheldean Factory.

Factories, however, consist not only of employees, but of floor space and plant. At the outset, it was realised that more floor capacity was necessary and the first additional building was built by the Ministry of Supply in 1941.

At the end of the war steps had to be taken to ensure a future for the Factory and British Acoustic Films turned to its old love the cine trade. In 1946 an agreement was made to manufacture Bell & Howell equipment under licence and Mitcheldean's second phase of life commenced. At this time the "maltings" building became available, as the lease to the tenants expired, and with this building as a machine shop the manufacture of the very successful and popular 600 series of projectors commenced.

Again like the growing child the factory soon began to burst its seams, and new buildings became an urgent necessity, but in this year of 1948 a man had arrived at Mitcheldean to control production who was to be a dynamic force in the factory's growth. This was Mr. F. Wickstead, who is now the Chief Executive.

From this point onwards the growth of production and the extension of the building accommodation has been phenomenal. Model after model from the Bell & Howell range was tooled up and commenced; each had its teething troubles, but these were overcome and production continued. The year 1951 also saw the start of another production - the Microfilm equipment for Burroughs Ltd. This became a highly successful undertaking which continued for some years.

It was clear that all this progress was satisfactory for new buildings were authorised and 1949/50 saw the addition of three bays for the manufacture of wooden cases. This was followed in 1953/54 by an addition to this building to house the Press Shop and automatic machine shop: 1953 also saw Mr. Wickstead become General Manager.



The Plating Shop badly needed new accommodation and this too was granted, so that 1955/56 saw the erection of a magnificent building for plating.

The building of the case shop had been necessary to cope with case manufacture which formerly had been sub-contracted to another firm and the auto and press shop moves dealt with machine shop expansion as well as creating room for the new plating shop; but the need to house the assembly shop activities in a new efficient building was paramount. This coincided with the time when Management decided to create separate Divisions. The Mitcheldean Factory then became the home of the Cine and Photographic Division of the Rank Organisation. Mr. F. Wickstead became the Chief Executive of this Division in 1958, and the decision was taken to amalgamate the selling and manufacturing activities.

The imposing building which meets the eye when one approaches the Eastern Avenue entrance was then built to accommodate both these activities. This handsome building certainly demonstrated the Company's wish to combine utility with a pleasant appearance.

From this stage in the development, production progressed with leaps and bounds, but almost unobserved by many, the end of the second phase of the Mitcheldean story was coming into view. The Microfilm order was reaching completion and the very severe competition in the "home movie" market from the Japanese and other countries was beginning to take its toll. The Company Management must have appreciated the trend very early for the third phase of our history opened late in 1960, a full two years before the severe curtailment of 8mm. cine manufacture.

This, of course, was the advent of Xerographic manufacture. An arrangement was established again with an American company to make Xerox copying machines at Mitcheldean; these machines are sold by Rank Xerox which is owned 50 per cent by Rank and 50 per cent, Xerox Corporation U.S.A.

A further addition to the factory, especially for this production, was authorised and built. In November 1960, the first line-production Xerox Machine was despatched. The details of the growth and success of this enterprise reads like a fairy story; one finds it difficult to appreciate that this complicated set up, originally planned to produce five machines per week, produced 100 machines a week in the space of only 27 months.

This was the position at February 1963 and so to today. The Xerox Production far out-stripped even these increased facilities, and the huge sum of over one million pounds was spent during the latter part of 1963. On further extensions this meant that the labour force which had hovered around the 1,200 mark was increased to the present day figure of 1,500 and this will increase considerably during the next four years. The current rate of production of 250 machines per week has seen a quite fantastic growth in somewhat less than 12 months. With such a growth rate the availability of technical labour at the right time has always been a problem and Management have appreciated that the only real way to meet this demand would be to train within and, therefore, vast training schemes have been implemented, not only to supply the technical requirements but also the very necessary craft vacancies. Also it will be recalled that the 914 product training was originated at Mitcheldean, and most of the U.K. and European Service Managers received their initial training at Mitcheldean. Looking forward to the future plans are already being made to augment existing facilities and manufacturing space to meet the ever increasing demand for these products.