

REPORT BY M. BEECH

For the past fifty years there has been a very close alliance between the village of Mitcheldean, on the periphery of the Forest of Dean, and major industry.

The occasion of this half a century of amicable liaison was suitably marked by a presentation made last Wednesday, when Rank Xerox gave a rather special gift to the Mitcheldean Parish Council. This gift was rather symbolic of the links which have bound the industry and the place together for so many years. It was a splendid gold Chain of Office to be used by the present, and future, Chairman of the Mitcheldean Parish Council.

The story of the progress and prosperity of the industry which came, almost by chance, to this ancient small township, would have seemed like an impossible dream to those who had lived through the poverty stricken days of the 1920s and 30s in the Forest of Dean. For, as that industry grew and flourished so its success was reflected in an enhanced way of life, and a greater prosperity, for the people of that area.

Just before the last war, Mitcheldean was a rather tired medieval village which still bore noticeable traces of its past history. It was dominated by the spired Church dedicated to St. Michael and All Angels which had its origins in the thirteenth century. The church was even more prominent than the once very impressive old Brewery which had been built by Thomas Wintle in 1868. His brewing venture had lasted for many years and had brought work for many local people. In 1923 his son, Francis Wintle put this family business up for auction, also the considerable amount of property which belonged to the Brewery was to be sold. The place was taken by another firm of brewers but it would seem that little of consequence happened there until the early years of the war.

At the outbreak of the war key firms based in the London area were advised to leave. The British Acoustic Film Company which was later to be known as BAF, was one of these firms. In 1940 one of the co-directors of this firm Tommy Law came to Mitcheldean to look at the Brewery buildings, with a view to bringing their company to Mitcheldean.

One can only guess what their first impressions of the place were! Even so the decision was made to bring their company to Mitcheldean. And so began a new era of industrial life for the Forest of Dean.

It took some time to effect the move from London to this new country venue. There was tidying up to be done. For this work a local firm was employed. Working for them was a fifteen year old local boy - his name was Les Tuffley.

By 1941 things at the old Brewery were in some sort of order and a band of twenty pioneers came from London to begin the work of the BAF in Mitcheldean. Amongst that first contingent was the late Henry Phillips and he was to remain with the Company based in Mitcheldean for all his working life.

There had been a local man working in the Brewery for Colletts of Gloucester. His name was Sam Newman and he had been head Malster. When BAF took over he went to work for them and was to prove to be an invaluable source of local knowledge. Indeed Sam Newman can best be described as a first class liaison man between the newcomers and the locality. Also recruited with the first local employees was Les Tuffley, by this time aged sixteen, and he also stayed with the company for the rest of his working life.

Perhaps there was quite a bit of adjusting which needed to be done between locals and this influx of Londoners. There is no doubt that the Londoners were more than a little taken aback by the cultural shock of country living.

Things did go well, and, under the able guidance of the boss, Tommy Law, BAF very quickly became established in their new quarters.

The Mitcheldean Gas company knew that things were going well because in a short time the Works were using more gas than the whole of the village put together. Many housewives got very annoyed because if the Heat Treatment department at BAF was busy it was often impossible for them to get enough gas to cook a lunch!

Eventually the Mitcheldean Gas company was to be bought out and the building became the site for the Head Security Officer's home.



Across the Atlantic, in America, there were other interesting things happening. Things that would, in the course of time, and by some strange twist of fate, affect this small corner of West Gloucestershire. Things that were to compose a very important part of the immediate industrial history of the Forest of Dean. For, in America, a certain Chester Carlson had, after much patient work and research, established a process for producing 'dry' copies of documents, letters etc. which did not require the use of dark rooms or wet chemicals. In the early stages he called his process by a name which did not roll to easily off the tongue but which in fact did very aptly describe it - 'Electrophotography' was what it was then called. In those early days it would have been quite impossible for anyone to know that in a few years this would revolutionise the whole process of communication. It was also to coin a new word which is now known and recognised worldwide.

BAF in Mitcheldean prospered. In 1946 there was an agreement to manufacture, under licence, cine equipment for an American firm called Bell and Howell. So there was a need to expand and increase the work force.

In 1948 a new Production Manager came from the Midlands to BAF Mitcheldean. He was to be one of the company's great acquisitions and certainly he was to be, for them, an unqualified asset. That man was to become something of a legend in his lifetime in the locality. Indeed there is no doubt that he was one of the best things to happen to the Forest of Dean for a long time. He was Mr. Fred Wickstead. After just three years with the company Fred Wickstead was to become General Manager. Then, in 1958 he was to become Chief Executive of the Rank cine and photographic division which had its headquarters at Mitcheldean. The factory was to be the largest British Manufacturer of home movies and projectors. They also made equipment for the cinema. In 1948 BAF had become Rank Precision Industries which was a part of the Rank Organisation.

It was a great honour for the Mitcheldean factory that the cameras which went with Sir Edmund Hilary on his expedition to the summit of Everest had been supplied and tested there. In the year 1957 Les Tuffley was to become Works Convener and worked hard to maintain a good relationship between the shop-floor workers and the management.



The Rank Organisation, and in particular the Mitcheldean Factory was to be taken, literally, into a new industrial dimension by the then Chairman John Davis. Who was later to be knighted. He was a brilliant financier and a dedicated and confident industrialist.

When the Rank Organisation were looking for diversification into new areas of business the Haloid Company of America were thought to be a possibility. They were, primarily a company that dealt in sensitised paper which was used in the world of photography. They had, however developed a copier for what was to be an emerging market. Tommy Law set up a meeting between the American company and John Davis with the Chief Engineer Stan Pratt. The three went to look at the copier. It was a dry copier the principle of which had been the brainchild of Chester Carlson back in 1938. The Haloid company needed what Rank could offer, and the Mitcheldean factory in particular, which included finance, contacts with America and a large production unit. It was going to be a risk because many large American companies had not been interested in the product - but John Davis decided that the gamble was well worth taking. It took some time for the Mitcheldean factory to get prepared for this diversification. Meanwhile in 1959 the first 914 Xerox machine was produced. This was the birth of Xerography for this was what the process was to be called. It was in fact the greek word for 'Dry writing'.

In 1960 the first 914 was made in Mitcheldean. It was the beginning of what can best be described as an industrial miracle - An explosion with the reverberations reaching far out. Mitcheldean was to be the cradle in Europe for this baby called Xerox which grew so rapidly that major adjustments had to be made to cope with its growth.

Production of machines increased to meet an ever growing demand. The 914 had to be adapted and manufactured to suit European markets. Success was rapid in the early 60's and with the tremendous increase in demand for this revolutionary copier the workforce grew.



Rank Xerox were able to quite easily accommodate the men who were put out of work because of the closure of the local mines which had, for many centuries, been the main source of employment for men of the Forest of Dean. These men were willingly employed by Rank Xerox - and in return they gave a good day's work for a good day's pay.

Expansion means building and buildings need land on which to be erected. This was often to be something of a problem for the management at Rank Xerox - and Fred Wickstead in particular. By this time, Les Tuffley was a well regarded member of the Forest of Dean District Council. He well remembers how, as Chairman of a committee delegated to decide whether Council owned land in Mitcheldean should be used for housing or for a very necessary extension to the factory. He used his casting vote for the factory extension knowing that, at that time, employment was rather more important than housing.

The increased housing did come. The District Council made houses available for key workers. Rank Xerox themselves were to build houses and flats for their employees. There was also a great deal of new housing built in the vicinity of the factory by independent developers.

Today looking at the vast 67 acre factory complex which has evolved in Mitcheldean, it is a matter of great pride for those who are Forest born to realise that almost all of it was done by local labour provided by the now, very well known building firm of W.F.Giles and Sons Cinderford. Architects were Gordon Payne and Preece who were to become Preece Payne Partnership. The building firm of W.F.Giles and Sons was an old established family business which was to respond wonderfully to the contracts which they won, often in competition with much larger concerns, for the tremendous expansion work at the Rank Xerox site in Mitcheldean.

W.F.Giles and Sons was very fortunate in that it was under the direction of a man - Mr. Basil Marfell, who had been born, and brought up in the Forest village of Drybrook. He was a gentleman with certain inherent tendencies. One of which was that he would never give up! Having made a commitment he intended at all costs that it should be carried out. Basil Marfell had taken over the firm of W.F.Giles and Sons so the responsibilities were very much his concern.



In the event the boss and the workforce of that firm had a dogged determination which was to bring them, successfully, through many worrying times which included, on at least one memorable occasion, working at night, by floodlight, to meet a deadline!

It was no easy matter for this firm to move from 'bricks and mortar' into the sphere of structural engineering, which indeed they had to do, and they were always under extreme pressure from the time factor... For more than forty years W.F.Giles and Sons have been on the Mitcheldean site in some capacity. Today's extensive factory complex proves that Rank Xerox were well justified in placing their confidence in this Forest of Dean Building firm.

The Rank Xerox Mitcheldean factory - and indeed a large part of the civilised world was launched into the age of Xerography in the years of the 1960s. The next fifteen or so years was to be the real halcyon years for those involved in the production and marketing of this - at that time - a quite unique product.

The success which came to Rank Xerox at Mitcheldean during that time was, for the locality, like a pebble in a pond - the ripples spread out and touched many things. There was to be a new, and previously unknown prosperity generated from the growth and success. Not only that, but Rank Xerox were to show great generosity to charities and worthy causes. In 1966 some of the employees attended the presentation of the Queens Award to Industry for Export Achievement. Rank Xerox had very quickly captured an International market. It was estimated that by 1967 Xerox machines worth sixty five million pounds were in use throughout the world. It was also interesting to note that until his death, and up to 1966, Tommy Law, the man who had way back in the early years of the war brought the industry to Mitcheldean, was holding the position of Managing Director, Rank Xerox.

The changes that were wrought in those almost incredible years would take much space and time to write. They did include the designing and making of many new, and more compact, and sophisticated machines. Their design and manufacture was the result of much expertise and technology.



So many people were to be known for their work at Rank Xerox and a great deal of loyalty and dedication was shown by many people to this firm which had given so much to so many. For, by the end of the decade of the sixties there was a workforce at Mitcheldean of three thousand.

The Xerox Corporation were to become very, very interested in the undoubted business qualities of the man who had brought Rank Xerox to this peak of success - Fred Wickstead. They intended that his expertise should be used in a wider field.

In 1971 the dedication and contributions which had been made, by this one man to industry and to employment in the Forest of Dean was officially recognised when he was to be given the O.B.E.

Also in 1971 Fred Wickstead went to America. This in itself was a rather notable event because he was the very first non-American to become an officer of the Parent Company and one of his responsibilities there was to set up world wide expansion of the company. He was also a Director of the Japanese based Fuji Xerox.

After two years in America the Wickstead family returned 'home' in this country. Fred Wickstead went to London where he was to become the "number two" in Rank Xerox. In 1975 Mr Fred Wickstead O.B.E. retired. He will always be remembered as the man who was most closely associated with the success and fortunes of the Mitcheldean Factory. His name will always be synonymous with the place - where he was always held in high regard for never, during all his years at Mitcheldean, did he lose contact with those who worked there at all levels.

For a few more years the Mitcheldean factory was to flourish. The workforce reached its peak of over five thousand. Then inexorably the tide began to turn.

There were several contributory factors to the decline which was to set in during the late seventies. These included intense competition from Japan. It was also the time when the Xerox patent expired. This meant that other firms were able to manufacture, and market, similar products at competitive prices.

There was to follow, for the Mitcheldean factory, a serious time of retrenchment. It was necessary to drastically trim the workforce. Many voluntarily took early retirement and the company were to offer facilities for re-adjustments which were necessary to the lives of some of those who were to leave.

As far as possible encouragement was given to those who left and started up businesses in their own right.

With the spirit which brought the factory through the years of its early beginnings, a period of consolidation had to be started. Some of the factory space was made into small units and is today used by small industries. This is known as the MEWS but is, in fact, an original part of the Old Brewery. To the great credit of Rank Xerox they have maintained this building in a commendable way and have actually managed to preserve, in it, the structure and character of the original building.

The factory is now re-established. With careful management it has been increasing its workforce, which had in the years of decline dropped to 1200. Today the company employ 2000 people with an additional 800 people being employed by businesses who share the site with Rank Xerox.

The Mitcheldean site is now the European centre for the production of a range of copiers and printers. It has also invested heavily in becoming a world leading manufacturer of Electronic Assemblies.

And what of the village of Mitcheldean? It is no longer a run down place. There are still very obvious traces of the ancient township although the church is no longer the dominating feature. Streets, which once were uncomfortably narrow, have been widened to take the traffic which, as would be expected, increased dramatically over the years. There is marked modernisation of shops and houses. It all now stands at the corner of the Rank Xerox site which is very much the dominating feature of the whole district.



A good community life still flourishes here. There is a superb recreation field and a community centre. The heart of the village is the old market house, given very generously to the Parish Council, some years ago by Rank Xerox. The people all feel a deep gratitude to the company which came there, fifty years ago and gave the locality a whole new way of life by sharing its prosperity.

This happy liaison of community and industry represented by the members of the Mitcheldean Parish Council, management with guests, from Rank Xerox, met in the Hospitality Suite at the factory, last Wednesday for the presentation which will, no doubt do much to strengthen the links. The splendid gold chain of Office was presented by Gerry Lane, Director of Mitcheldean Manufacturing Operations. It was received on behalf of the community, and the Parish Council of Mitcheldean by the Chairman - someone who has - boy and man watched it all happen - Mr Les Tuffley.