

# BIRCHINGTON ENGINEERING FACTORY - 1964

Story by Ray Webster

Photos by Bruce Seattle

One of Thanet's home-grown industries, which started 18 years ago in a disused church hall<sup>1</sup> on a capital of £2,000, now has three factories and its assets run into six figures. It was in 1946 that Col. Harold John Taplin, veteran aviator and inventor, came to Thanet with the idea of starting a business that he could pass to his two sons<sup>2</sup>. He eventually formed the Birchington Engineering Co. Ltd.

"It took some doing, though," he told me. "I had to argue with the town council<sup>3</sup> for a long time before I could persuade them that they could not live by taking in each other's washing." Birchington Engineering soon began to specialize in cold drawing of metal, and today they are one of the finest exponents of this art.<sup>4</sup>

## BIG NAMES

"We have never had to advertise or employ salesmen on the roads." Col. Taplin told me. "All our work is done on recommendation. And nearly every big name in manufacturing is now a customer of ours."

Cold drawing is a specialized section of the engineering industry. Basically it entails passing strips of metal or heavy metal wire through a series of dies - ever decreasing in size - until it is stretched out and down to the required size<sup>5</sup>. There is nothing hit-or-miss about this technique. One can't afford to be casual when you are dealing with measurements, the accuracy of which has to be down to *one tenth of a thousandth of an inch* - or a tenth of the thickness of a cigarette paper.

When I visited the works, one of the main contracts in hand was the manufacture of T-shaped wire for use on model racing car tracks. The factory was then turning out some 80,000 feet of this a week, stretching it from an original length of 15,000.

## PICKLED

In between each process, the wire or metal has to be specially treated in gas-fired ovens and "pickled". The company's gas bill runs at something over £2,000 a year. From that small beginning in the church hall in Albion Road, Birchington, the company has built a new factory alongside it, built in 1950.

In May last year the company acquired more premises in Marlborough Road, Margate, and formed a subsidiary, Dinton Engineering Ltd. Col. Taplin's son

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<sup>1</sup> It was the disused Primitive Methodist Chapel, not a church hall - built 1875, sold 1895

<sup>2</sup> John (the elder son) and Michael

<sup>3</sup> Margate Borough Council, who had taken us over in 1935 & closed down our Parish Council.

<sup>4</sup> In about 1969, two Birchington residents were on holiday in Scotland and telling a local man where they came from, were surprised to be told, "Oh, that's the place where they make the most accurate extrusion in the British Isles!"

<sup>5</sup> These are known as extrusions

Michael is chairman of this company. This company is unique in two aspects. Although less than a year old, it is one of only two companies in this country at present producing card-readers for computers. These plates contain 1,000 poles or contacts, and it is on these that punched cards bearing a particular code react.

The second unique feature of this new venture is the "Taplin Twin". This is a model engine for motor-boats, designed and developed by Col. Taplin. Up to 10 years ago, Co. Taplin's model engines were the 'Rolls Royces' of the model aeroplane world. Planes powered with them won titles all over the world. In fact, Col. Taplin used to build the planes as a hobby.

### **PRIZE-WINNER**

The "Taplin Twin" is a worthy successor to its aero-engine fore-runner. Boats powered by the "Taplin Twin" at present hold the German and Belgian Blue Ribbands for speed, and the engine was awarded a special silver medal at last year's European Championships at Nuremberg. Col. Taplin spends most of his annual holidays on the Continent, going from one model boat contest to another.

But when I asked to see the famous "Taplin Twin", I was disappointed. "We have never been able to make enough of these engines," said Mr Michael Taplin. "We have always had about 300 to 400 customers on our waiting list. Now we have these new premises, we are hoping to catch up and eventually build up a stock of them."

Co. Taplin recently designed a model jet engine for boats, similar to the Doughty jet. The first batch sold so well that they have made a second batch of 600. Now they confidently expect the new orders to come pouring in for this new engine.

### **PROFIT-SHARING**

Col. Taplin must be one of the few employers - and his pay roll numbers about 50 - who, year after year, receives Christmas presents from his staff. But then this is an unusual firm. "All my employees are share-holders without shares", said the Colonel. "Twice a year a proportion of the net profits are set aside for distribution among the staff. Each man receives a share according to his wages, length of service and his general conscientiousness."

At Christmas, the married men get two chickens each and the bachelors receive cigarettes or some other present. Officially Col. Taplin may have only two sons - but I suspect that he likes to think of his family as being about 50 strong.