

## HERITAGE CIRCLE

### John Griffiths, Made in Ipswich

John Griffiths of the Ipswich Transport Museum gave a well-illustrated talk to the March meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. He explored the development of industry in Ipswich. He explained that 100 years ago Ipswich was one of the world leaders in agricultural industry but manufacturing has declined markedly in the last 40 years.

From the Wash around the East Anglian coast there is no natural harbour before reaching Ipswich. Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft are ports but they are not natural. The site of Ipswich offered a protected harbour for sailing ships. This encouraged the development of manufacturing in the town, as did its location facing the continent of Europe.

The earliest known industry in Ipswich was pottery around 700AD but there is evidence of some earlier canalisation, possibly by the Romans, of the River Gipping which flows from Stowmarket. By the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Ipswich was a working port with a Customs House. Shipbuilding developed progressively in the harbour area because of the plentiful timber available in East Anglia.

A significant development for manufacturing came after 1789. Robert Ransome moved from Norwich to an existing iron works in Ipswich. He began to make self-sharpening ploughs which ingeniously had blades with harder cast iron on one side. Unfortunately, he set a tradition which ultimately undermined Ransomes as a company. He was too flexible and produced ploughs and other agricultural equipment with too many different designs, rather than more standardised products.

In the 1830s Ransomes bought a licence from Edwin Budding and began to produce lawnmowers. They became a world leader and in 1902 produced their first powered lawnmower, following this up in 1926 with electric mowers. Posters advertising Ransome mowers often used the secretaries of the directors as models.

The company was very innovative. In 1902 it made an early model tractor with an internal combustion engine. Similarly, electric powered trucks were used to move equipment around the factory site. During the First World War, aircraft were produced. However, Ransomes were particularly associated with manufacturing the trolley buses introduced into Ipswich after 1923.

Ransomes adapted tanks to clear landmines and made other military equipment during World War II. The post-war period saw the manufacture of forklift trucks and combine harvesters. However, photographs of the factory during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century suggest that the wide range of different designs of the same item meant that mass production methods could not be adopted which limited volume and made their products relatively expensive. This eventually contributed to the demise of Ransomes in 1989.

Ransomes and Rapier, an offshoot of the original company, concentrated on the manufacture of railway goods, including steam engines, rails, turntables and cranes for a global market. Perhaps one of its most famous products was the revolving restaurant at the top of the BT Tower which opened in 1965.

John Griffiths mentioned a number of other engineering companies in Ipswich which have now gone into receivership. He bemoaned the loss of manufacturing from the town. British Telecom is still a significant presence at Martlesham but it has mainly been a research and development facility. There are still some engineering works, such as Christy Turner, and Spirit Yachts is keeping alive the shipbuilding tradition. Many memories and artefacts of manufacturing in the town are now retained in the Ipswich Transport Museum.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 22 April at The Village Hall, Rickinghall IP22 1HD when Nick Sign will give a talk about Servants in Suffolk Country Houses. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, [www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net](http://www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net).

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