



The old showroom known to every traveller to the West, now in course of reconstruction

History of South Wales Companies—No. 16

R. S. BIRD LIMITED

IT IS SAD to realise that a large number of old family businesses are becoming absorbed and 'taken-over' by larger concerns. Their identities and their links with the past are often obliterated. Among those which have survived, is the business founded at Cowbridge by John Bird in 1796, and it has remained exclusively in the Bird family ever since. Known over a wide area as 'Birds of Cowbridge,' the title today is R. S. Bird Ltd., with a Branch at Carmarthen and a depot at Newport.

From the eighteenth century until World War I, the Birds catered largely for agricultural needs, but it is of interest to record that the first printing press in Cardiff was brought from Cowbridge to

Cardiff Castle by a second John Bird in 1791. Another John Bird (1816—1871) was twice Mayor of Cardiff (1862 and 1863) and he was a well known solicitor in the Vale. Other members of the Bird family were also Mayors of Cardiff.

After Mr. Bruce Bird and Mr. R. N. Bird had returned from the war in 1919, they looked for new sources of business, and in 1921 decided there must be a future for motor lawn mowers. The first machine was sold in 1921 to the late Sir Sydney Byass at Llandough Castle. A motor cycle with special sidecar was added to the Model T Ford Van which then comprised the firm's transport and this was used to take a motor lawn mower on

The Directors, Mr. Rodney Bird, Mr. Roger Bird, Mr. R. N. Bird and Mr. A. S. Pool (seated).



demonstration to prospective customers. This went on for several difficult (not to say heart-breaking) years, until in 1926 Messrs. Ransomes of Ipswich closed their Gloucester depot and gave the Cowbridge company tremendous encouragement by appointing them their first distributors and service engineers. Looking back, this great compliment was, no doubt, the foundation of the company's subsequent success, and R. S. Bird Ltd., will ever be grateful to Messrs. Ransomes. That was 37 years ago, and the relationship between the two companies is now, if possible, happier than ever.

It was in the same year of 1926 that the



The new entrance to the works in High Street, Cowbridge.

two brothers made the decision to concentrate on mowers to the exclusion of all else. This could have been quite disastrous, and, indeed, nearly proved so, but very slowly the business increased and it survived the slump which hit South Wales so tragically in the late 1920's. It is interesting to recall that in 1924 small garden tractors such as the Auto-Culto were also demonstrated but they proved even harder to sell than motor lawn mowers.

From the outset, it was realised that service after a machine had been sold, was of supreme importance to the owner. From small beginnings, a really comprehensive service organisation was slowly created, and today it is supported by factory-trained mechanics, outside engineers, a modern machine tool shop, an



Part of the commercial fleet.

electrical and oxy-acetylene shop, de-greasing and spray-painting departments and a vehicle maintenance department. The extensive stores, managed by Mr. M. Dauncey, contain over 20,000 separate spare parts each of which is card indexed and stock-controlled. Mr. Trevor Hayman is well known throughout the area having been senior outside service engineer for over thirty years. In 1935 it was decided to extend beyond the Severn and Mr. Bruce Bird went to Stroud. B. S. Bird (Gloster) Ltd., made good and their success is reflected in their extensive modern premises opposite the new market at Mercia Road, Gloucester. Mr. Bruce Bird retired from business in 1959.

The Allen motor scythe of which there are now well over 130,000 in use, was first manufactured in 1936 and since that date its distribution and its service have been entrusted to Birds of Cowbridge. Other manufacturers in turn granted the same concession, among them being SISIS turf maintenance equipment, Landmaster, Gardemaster, Roto Gardener, Rotoscythe, Autoculto and Autogardener, Monrotiller etc. In 1939 the company became the first distributors in Great Britain for Howard Rotary Hoes. During the second world war, Mr. R. N. Bird was approached by Col. B. C. Hartley of the War Office to advise upon and to obtain used grass cutting equipment for military basis over a wide area. Few new mowers were available and the search for machines which could be reconditioned took Mr. Bird over a great deal of the country. Mowers and sportsground tractors were also reconditioned in large numbers for Southern, Western and Northern Commands. Several hundred small tractors were imported from the U.S.A. during the war period and these contributed to our food supply throughout South Wales.

The post-war years have seen a con-

tinued expansion of the Company's interests. The premises have been greatly enlarged and modernised whilst a new and attractive entrance to the works has eased transport bottle-necks. An extensive demonstration ground has also been prepared. There are now over fifty employees and a fleet of 16 vehicles is constantly on the road. The new Branch of the main road at Bancyfelin west of Carmarthen, of which Mr. N. Jones is manager, has proved of great benefit to customers in West Wales. The buildings are extensive and were opened by Col. J. W. Buckley two years ago. A depot at 17 Llewellyn Street, Newport, from which Monmouthshire, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire are served is operated by Mr. A. Cox. The decision taken nearly forty years ago to stake all on the future of garden mechanisation has proved to be fully justified. Today, Birds of Cowbridge are probably the biggest distributors of rotary cultivators and grass-cutting equipment in Great Britain.

In addition, they serve Public Authorities, Industrial Organisations and Sports

and Golf Clubs over some nine counties. Normal overall stocks of machines average between 500 and 600 whilst at peak periods over 1,000 may be temporarily held. Seven competent outside salesmen bring these machines along to prospective customers so that the most suitable size and type for each individual need may be chosen after trial.

Business premises sometimes are quite out of keeping with their environment and certainly do nothing to add to local character and tradition. When it became possible to acquire a condemned property at the main street at the entrance to the works, the co-operation of the County Surveyors department was willingly afforded in planning a new entrance which would make the centre of the Borough much more attractive. The condemned building was demolished and the local Council have expressed their keen appreciation of the great improvement which the Company has brought about.

The old showroom is now being remodelled and some very beautiful stone arches will be seen to advantage. A new roof in traditional architecture will complete what should prove to be another attractive and interesting feature in the High Street. It was in the same building that Iolo Morgannwg, the famous Welsh bard, did a great deal of his writing and in fact died there in 1826. A plaque, inscribed in Welsh, was placed on the wall alongside the showroom and this was unveiled with fitting ceremonial and much hymn singing in 1926.

What of the future? Mr. R. N. Bird, the Chairman, realises that no business can stand still. It must either go backwards or forwards. With the enthusiastic help of his co-directors, Mr. Roger Bird (Joint Managing), Mr. A. S. Pool (Sales), Mr. Rodney Bird (Service) and Mrs. Ralph Bird, who has been on the Board since 1929, he intends that 1962 shall see still further expansion and progress.

A busy day at the Carmarthen branch at Bancyfelin.

