

<https://morrisregister.co.uk/brief-history-of-morris-motors/>

The Pressed Steel Company was formed in Cowley after a visit by William Morris to the USA to study steel body production, although the Morris Oxford and Cowley models continued to be produced until, in 1927, the “Flatnose” Morris Oxford was introduced. Attention was increasingly turning to the development of smaller cars, and the acquisition of Wolseley Motors in allowed Morris to enter the 8HP class with the Morris Minor in 1929. The 1929 slump and the early 1930’s depression severely affected sales of larger cars and Morris responded by introducing the £100 car, a Morris Minor fitted with a side-valve engine to reduce costs. The car was advertised as a £100 car capable of 100 mph and 100 mpg. The latter feats were achieved in two staged events, respectively at Brooklands in a supercharged model and during a controlled economy run.

Throughout the 1930s Morris introduced a large number of other models in the 8, 10,12,14,16, 18 and 25 HP sectors. The introduction of the Morris Eight in 1934 (for 1935 model year) further consolidated Morris in the small car market, and mono-construction began with the Morris 10M. In 1939 sales of Morris cars reached one million.

The main Morris factory for the greater part of the 20th century.

Location

The North Works and South Works, Morris Motors Ltd, Cowley,

These were situated on the west side of the Eastern By-Pass Road, the A4142, and separated by Garsington Road, the B480.

Date

Constructed 1921-1922, closed in 1992, and demolished 2001-2002.

Commentary

In the years immediately following the First World War, many British car makers faced declining orders and bankruptcy. Through astute business management William Morris managed to buck this trend. For Morris Motors, the 1920s were characterised by strong growth and development. Between 1921 and 1924, car production rose from 6,000 to 18,000 vehicles.

In order to meet rising demand for the company’s cars, new facilities were erected on the former allotments opposite the old Military College. Known as the North Works, construction began in 1921, and by 1926, the new works covered more than 40 acres.

The new building enabled William Morris to introduce a much more modern system of flow production, with the sub-assembly of axles, chassis, and bodies etc coming together in a final main assembly line.

Construction of the South Works on the other side of Garsington Road began in 1937 as Morris Motors, like other companies, began to gear up to the possibility of war. Paul Collins and Michael Stratton explain that the two buildings that were initially erected were taller than their predecessors; both were built with sufficient headroom for the production of aircraft, with the area behind laid out as an airfield, with runways and a control tower.

In 1912, Morris formally established a car company with a loan of £4,000 from the Earl of Macclesfield, a former customer. Morris Motors began designing and then producing its first car, bearing both Morris and his city’s name: the original Morris Oxford.

The Morris Oxford

The Morris Oxford may have been designed and assembled in Oxford, but it contained very little that was new in terms of parts. Having observed both Ford's model of creating the car parts onsite and Sloan's decision to contract with outsiders to manufacture of parts, Morris believed that the key to producing an affordable car, especially when starting up, was to buy in engines and running gear: both extremely expensive to design and build from scratch. The Oxford was thus designed in collaboration with an existing Coventry engine manufacturer and nearly all of its drivetrain consisted of components made externally. Far from being a weakness, in Morris's view, this collaboration guaranteed that the finished design was entirely the work of specialists: "the work is better and more cheaply done, while the cost and worry... is avoided". Although Morris and his team saved time and expense by employing external specialists, the design process still overran. In 1913, Morris' design was coherent enough to begin production and he established a factory in Cowley to assemble the Oxford.

The first Morris Oxford went on sale in March 1913. Like the Model T, the Oxford was a humble car. On the other hand, its two seats and output of less than ten horsepower were no more than the average working customer was likely to need. More importantly, it cost an extremely competitive £165 at a time when the average Oxford home cost £235 and an adult might expect to earn £67 annually. Automobiles, even if cheaper, remained an expensive product. Morris also began building his reputation within Oxford. William Morris attached himself to the cause of improving transport in the city. Already well-known and well-regarded as a local businessman from his work with bicycles, Morris introduced the first motorised buses to Oxford as a private operator. His buses proved far more reliable than the horse-drawn services in use at the time. Morris clearly had an eye for using controversy to create good publicity. When the bureaucratic city council refused him an operator's licence, he bypassed the need for one by accepting tokens as payment instead of cash; the council made the mistake of threatening him with arrest but caved in after protests from his supporters. Morris acquired much in a single stroke: proof of public goodwill, profit from the sale of the bus company, and a reliable means of mass transit for his workforce. By the outbreak of World War I, he had won one of the first and hardest battles for a new manufacturer: he could claim that his name, at least, was now established locally. Fame for his company, on a national level, could follow in time. In contrast to the bus controversy, William Morris ran Morris Motors conservatively and pragmatically, always conscious of his relations upon outside suppliers. Securing contracts for engines and running gear was by far the most important priority. By 1914, Morris' annual revenues amounted to over £150,000, and the company was outselling its key rivals Vauxhall and Austin. However, 85% of its profits up to that point were reinvested in order to fund further growth, both in the form of improvements to the Cowley manufacturing plant and negotiation of new contracts for parts.

The dawn of the First World War, however, had the potential to destroy Morris's plans. The Great War led to the conscription and death of much of Britain's young male workforce and forced consumer goods production to be curtailed in favour of war material production. As a side effect, it would also normalize motor transport, creating a generation familiar with using it and requiring countries to build an industrial base capable of mass-producing it. The return to peacetime would bring its own challenges.

The Morris Cowley

William Morris continued to manufacture cars, although in smaller numbers, during the war, and even launched a new model. Named for his childhood home and the home of his factory, the Morris Cowley was almost as Oxonian as the Morris Oxford.

Within the company, Morris's leadership style was meticulous, autocratic, and hands-on. His bookkeeping was fastidious with regard to both the company's finances and improvements to

its products. An engineer by inclination, as well as a businessman, he personally suggested and then supervised a series of changes to the Cowley and Oxford models in order to improve their quality. By understanding his own products as thoroughly as possible – to the point of familiarising himself with the design and cost of each of their component parts – he was able to carefully document the cost at each stage of the manufacturing process and identify any items that could be sourced externally more cheaply. This would have been impossible for a motor manufacturer in any subsequent era: only the earliest cars were simple enough for an individual executive to understand them so entirely. Morris documented the cost of each of the 1915 Cowley's component parts; in part because there were only sixty-two. Morris also managed to turn many of the restrictions of the wartime economy into positive opportunities.

He used the repurposing of part of the Cowley plant for weapons production as a opportunity to cultivate positive relations with government officials and generate good publicity when, for instance, Morris volunteered the site for the manufacture of copies of a recovered German mine sinker. The lower sales volume brought about by the conflict also gave Morris time to fine-tune his designs and ensure their effectiveness. With a suddenly slack market for passenger cars, there was downtime to make incremental changes and improvements to the design of the Oxford and Cowley models, and also to prepare for the needs of the postwar market. The company had not been caught off guard by the outbreak of the war and would not be by its end.

Britain's economy suffered far more as a consequence of the war than that of the United States, and the 1920s would be a difficult decade for British industry, with severe inflation not helped by flawed monetary policy. The transition back to a peacetime economy might help a manufacturer of consumer goods in the short term, but the war's impact on overall levels of demand had the potential to cause problems in the long term. As a first step, William Morris, who had planned his approach to the postwar period well in advance, rationalised his company. He renamed it as "Morris Motors Ltd" (it had remained as "W. R. M. Motors" until 1919) and devised a formal, two-tier model line-up, with the Cowley as a cheaper entry-level model and the Oxford as its more upmarket stablemate.

In response to the increasingly protectionist global tariff policies of the interwar era, Morris also engaged in a form of vertical integration: having always been quick to identify the best-value component suppliers and negotiate new contracts where possible, Morris sidestepped the need to pay import duties by purchasing design blueprints from one supplier while persuading another to move its factory site closer to Oxford. The final, radical act that established Morris Motors as a mainstream manufacturer was forced by external circumstances.

The immediate postwar years proved a critical transition. In order to survive, Morris Motors needed to become the volume manufacturer that William Morris had always hoped that it to become. Demand was slowly growing, but inflation was growing even faster. The price of the Cowley had increased by £170 – more than 50% – between 1919 and 1920, and sales of the model were unsustainably low.¹³ The company faced the imminent prospect of failure. Morris intervened. He personally ordered that most of the Cowley's price increase be reversed in October 1920. In effect, he decided that, as of now, a mainstream car would be a cheaper product because, if a mass market for cheap cars did not finally emerge, volume sales would be impossible to maintain. Having patiently built his company, he was ready to make his prediction that a mass market would exist for cars in Britain into a self-fulfilling prophecy. The effect of the price change, which took place in February 1921, was dramatic. Between 1921 and 1924, Morris' production increased more than tenfold; between 1921 and 1927, almost twentyfold.¹⁴ By 1927, Morris cars were sold in 1,750 franchises nationwide. Rival manufacturers were taken completely by surprise. Morris Motors' market share rose

from approximately 10% in 1921 – an already healthy figure but not one that was sustainable in an economy lacking demand for cars – to over 40% by 1925.¹⁵ It would be no exaggeration to claim that Morris single-handedly created the mainstream automobile market in Britain.

With manufacturing now in the tens of thousands, Morris was able to buy out and integrate several of his key suppliers, including the engine manufacturer Hotchkiss. For the first time, Morris's company was large enough to be manufacturing components Morris himself did not understand in detail and could not personally inspect. Morris increasingly had to entrust improvements to specialists from within a new managerial framework, such as the engineer Frank Woollard who became the manager of Morris Motor's new integrated engine plant. Expanding production by means of space-saving technology and quality checks, Woollard ensured the engine production quadruples in less than two years, easily absorbing the vast increase in demand.

Although Morris was becoming less autocratic, he remained the principal shareholder and deliberately rejected the concept of a board of directors in order to retain the freedom to make executive decisions. Throughout the period he retained a veto power over decisions made by those in charge of subsidiary divisions even as he increasingly relied on placing experts in managerial positions. William Morris also deliberately avoided being acquired. He rejected a buyout by Austin in 1924, and by General Motors in 1926 (an intriguing decision by GM given that they had purchased the rival firm Vauxhall a year earlier). In contrast, Morris Motors purchased Wolseley in 1926, thus bringing an upmarket marque into the family in the mould of a contemporary Audi or Lexus. Expansion also came from the spin-off brand MG, launched in 1923 by a subsidiary manager as what would today be known as a "tuning company" – a company that takes a stock automobile and creates a sporty version – in the style of AMG's relationship with Mercedes. The new brand enjoyed a mild premium, slightly sporty image, of a kind that is very valuable today. Yet, despite this expansion and attempts at niche products – a six-cylinder model, a takeover of a French manufacturer, a car aimed at the Australian market – the company's success still rested on the core Oxford and Cowley models. Many of the other products, often created in short time frames, made sense on paper but failed in practice. Understandably for a firm that had enjoyed massive, market-changing success as a consequence of the Oxford and the Cowley, they were largely sticking to what they knew. The gradual development of a simple model range, over the course of a decade, had paid dividends and as the 1920s drew to a close, the reliable Oxford and Cowley remained Morris Motor mainstays.

The global Great Depression beginning in the late 1920s and lasting for much of the 1930s provided further challenges for Morris. And with sales of the Oxford and the Cowley stagnating and the firm's market share dwindling, a new model appeared precisely what the company needed.

The Morris 8 Although the Great Depression was far less catastrophic for the United Kingdom than for many international economies, Britain was not immune from the global economic challenges of the 1930s. As unemployment rose and wages fell, domestic demand for cars declined. Morris' output in 1933 was approximately four-fifths of what they had produced in 1925. Worse still, he was losing his grip on the British market. American rivals like General Motors and Ford were gaining ground and had better experience diversifying their produce models. Morris Motors had remained stubbornly mid-market on the insistence of its founder, who had resisted a move towards smaller-engined cars – against his engineers' advice – several years earlier. Now the company would witness the drawbacks of that narrow strategy.

Morris's share of the UK market fell to only a fifth in 1933 from nearly one third in 1930. The automotive manufacture now employed 10,000 staff at Cowley (12 percent of the Oxfordshire), and in order to safeguard both their jobs and the manufacturer's image locally, things needed to change. William Morris replaced several senior managers among them Woollard, who left acrimoniously. The main beneficiary of the shake-up – so it seemed at first – was Leonard Lord, who had overseen the upmarket Wolseley unit, who was promoted to the central Morris division in 1934. Lord immediately oversaw a major investment in the Cowley plant, such that its capacity reached 100,000 vehicles a year. Following this – a move that, incidentally, rendered Oxford's automotive manufacturing capacity greater than the entirety of what was now Nazi Germany – Lord's main focus was standardisation. He continued the company's integration, both horizontally and vertically, and brought the Morris, MG, and Wolseley ranges much closer together. This three-pronged "standard, sports, and luxury" structure was not dissimilar to that found at other manufacturers: comparable to the Ford/ Mercury/ Lincoln triumvirate or combinations of the five key brands produced by General Motors. It also involved considerable sharing of mechanical components between models, in an early equivalent of Volkswagen's platform-sharing system. Beneath their different bodywork and interior designs, vehicles across Morris's three-marque range would share drivetrains and engines, which themselves would be standardised and manufactured in individual factories.

New models soon followed, along similar lines to modern European product cycles. The previous American-style approach of annually updating models with incremental changes was replaced with a system of creating entirely new models intended to last a few years. The Morris 8, the small entry-level car that the firm desperately needed, was introduced in 1935 and proved an instant success. By the outbreak of World War II, Morris had sold more than 200,000 8 models, and over a million cars in its still relatively brief history.

The Morris 8 was the first of a new range of numbered models that came to include the upmarket Morris 10 and Morris 12. The numerical naming system was perhaps a sign that Morris had outgrown its need to market his vehicles based on local pride or Oxford's civic reputation, or, perhaps, a symptom of William Morris' increased detachment from his company.

Morris was becoming gradually less involved in the operation of his company, and displaying more of an interest in developing a personal legacy than a business legacy. He had been knighted in 1929, ennobled in 1934, and by 1938 had become Viscount Nuffield, named in honour of the Oxfordshire village where he now lived. He had established a company in his name and not only led it to become a market leader but also built the market for it to lead, almost single-handedly. While it would be a stretch to say William Morris had put the already-famous city of Oxford on the map, he had made it Britain's car-making capital, perhaps alongside Coventry, whose rising status was also thanks to his work. By popularising driving in Britain, he had set in motion historic changes to the national infrastructure. By expanding British carmaking, he had made just as much impact on national culture, creating a touchstone industry that had become a source of pride. He had now been officially recognised for it.

Becoming Lord Nuffield did not change Morris's relationship to the company in a consistent manner from the 1930s onwards. At times, his behaviour was that of a man who felt that, having created a business empire from humble beginnings, he needed nobody else's advice or aid in making decisions as to how it should be run now. At other times, it appeared that Morris had lost interest and now wished to dedicate his career to philanthropy instead.