

Other 20th Century Engineering Businesses in Axminster

Introduction

This document deals with four businesses which operated in Axminster during the second half of the 20th century, three of them mainly supplying farms with a range of supplies which they manufactured from steel, and one which specialised in making light-weight consumer goods from aluminium tubing.

Weycroft Macford Ltd

Weycroft Macford was established in 1948, and manufactured milking machines and associated dairy farming equipment in Poole. They also had a branch at Axminster fronting onto the Chard Road, close to the edge of the town, from which farms in East Devon, West Dorset and South Somerset in particular could be serviced. As well as their dairy equipment business, they had a Mobil petrol station on the site from at least 1961, if not before.

Weycroft Macford was set up in response to the rapid spread of machine milking, which became possible as mains electricity spread outside towns and into the countryside. Many other dairy farmers who did not have access to mains electricity were able to generate their own while they waited for a connection to the grid, using small on-farm generators.

When the company started out in business it had commercial links (probably via licensing deals) to established milking machine manufacturers, including Westfalia, but over time it developed its own technology. The technical designs were made by one of the directors, Donald Lewis, while his partner, Peter Graham Macdonald Smith, was the business manager.

Milking machines use a vacuum system to keep the four cups which attach to the cow's udder in place and working. A regular pulse in the vacuum pressure actively milks the cow and then draws the milk into either a sealed steel bucket, or into a clear jar which shows exactly how much milk that cow has produced. With bucket systems the milk is then tipped through a filter into a churn or tank, whereas with jar systems the transfer to a tank is achieved via a pipeline, using a milk pump. Over time bucket systems (suitable for traditional milking sheds, in which each cow had its own place, and the milker moved from cow to cow) gave way to jar systems (suitable for milking parlours, in which groups of roughly 8 cows moved through a central milking parlour with one or two milkers working in a fixed location).

There was also a fashion at one time for mobile milking parlours, in which the machinery was taken to the cows in the pasture. This approach was more applicable to the downlands of Dorset, Hampshire and Wiltshire (where the distances between pastures and farmsteads could be considerable) than to East Devon, but Weycroft Macford did make such systems at one time.

In 1967 Weycroft Macford developed the VP (vacuum / pressure) system for parlour milking. This combined a conventional vacuum-based pulsation system, with the use of compressed air to transfer milk from the recording jars to the bulk milk tank. The pressure system also ran the post-milking cleaning process. This removed the requirement for a milk pump, and provided a smooth and gentle transfer of the milk from the recording jar to the bulk tank. An

outlet valve below each jar provided the seal between vacuum and atmospheric pressure during the milking cycle.

Axminster Heritage Centre holds some photographs of the company's products.

In 1983 the business was closed and all of the staff were made redundant, but the site was then rented by Rodney Rendell (see below).

Whilst the complete milking system is no longer available, spare parts are still available via specialist suppliers to maintain the operation of Weycroft Macford milking systems.

Rodney Rendell Farm Service & Dairy Engineering

The Rodney Rendell Farm Service & Dairy Engineering business (generally more simply known as 'Farm Services') was established in 1983. It rented the former Weycroft Macford site and continued to supply some of the same equipment. However, the main objective was to provide a turn-key dairy service rather than manufacturing milking machinery, and in business classification directories the company was generally described as being involved in steel fabrication and erection. The Mobil petrol fuel station was retained, and the company also bought and sold used vehicles.

For just over 20 years the company helped a shrinking number of local dairy farms to expand their operations significantly, as the milk producing sector became increasingly concentrated.

By 2005 the site, together with an adjacent office building, had been acquired by Axminster Power Tool Centre Ltd, who applied for planning permission to re-develop the combined site for Axminster Dental Practice and a series of live-work units. The dental clinic moved to Weycroft in 2011.

Axe Vale Engineering

In 1961 Axe Vale Engineering Ltd was established by Emrys John (Sam) Pearse on a site near the station (previously used to hold cattle before they were transported by train, and now occupied by Axminster Tools & Machinery).

The company's main business was in the manufacture of fabricated steel structures, mainly (but not entirely) for use on farms. The range of products included steel gates, hay racks and other feeders, cattle crushes etc¹. They also supplied game bird feeders. Many of the products were made of steel tube, with the expertise resting in efficient pipe-bending and welding.

Sam Pearse, by then aged 70, retired in 1999 and sold the business. By then the nearby housing at Shard Park had been built, as had the nearby Tesco fuel station. Three years later, in 2002, the business was liquidated², and soon after planning permission was sought for the construction, on very much the same building footprint as had been used by Axe Vale Engineering, for the Axminster Tools & Machinery retail centre.

¹ For a fair idea of the sort of products made, see the present product range stocked by Mole Avon, based opposite Axminster station. Their expansion onto the former Jewsons site in 1993 and subsequent building works coincided with the final years of Axe Vale Engineering.

² Source: London Gazette, issue of 18 February 2002.

Phillips of Axminster (Engineering) Ltd

In January 1976 Raymond John Gilbert Phillips established Phillips of Axminster (Engineering) Ltd at Phillips House, West Street (close to the Shrubbery) to make light-weight folding chairs, shooting sticks, tables and similar from aluminium tubing and canvas. Their target market was not garden furniture, but people who were intermittently on the move, like artists, fishermen, visitors to outdoor events etc, and their designs became well known.

They also made some other more specialist items. For example, Axminster Heritage Centre has a spinning wheel with a light-weight Phillips aluminium frame in its collection.

At one time the company took space in one of the former brush factories at the foot of Castle Hill.

The business was wound up in September 2003.