

SOANS – A FAMILY BUSINESS

The Early Years

Soans is an unusual name, is spelled in various ways, sounds a bit foreign, but probably comes from the English word Son, which has evolved into Sons, then Soans. It may be Scandinavian, implying that my ancestors came to this country in long boats, intent on pillage & plunder. Many people might think that an appropriate background for a life in the Motor Trade!

What is indisputable is that our family can be traced back to 1655, based largely in Kent/north Surrey. Recent generations settled around Bromley in Kent. Soans' Business history in engineering & motor vehicles spans 120 years, 85 of them in association with Ford.



vehicle to be seen.

The story starts in Bromley, close to the Common, around 120 years ago. The Common still exists, but looks a bit different nowadays. Note: there is not a single motor

The Soans family does not come from a privileged background, far from it. My Great-Great- Great-Grandfather, was a wheelwright. James his son was a tailor who in 1884 was committed to the Bromley Union Workhouse. Three years later he absconded and never returned. Alfred, his son, was born in Bromley in 1841, and at the age of 29 married 24year-old Elizabeth Line at Bromley Parish Church. Alfred & Elizabeth had five sons & two daughters. Two sons, Percy (my Great Uncle) and his younger brother Charles (my Grandad) provide the family link for the title of this article – A Family Business.

Percy and Charles were quite entrepreneurial. In 1895, they built a shed at their parent's home, 5, Holmsdale Road, Bromley, and started repairing and selling bicycles. This was the heyday of the bicycle industry, with the "Safety" having replaced the earlier "Boneshaker" and "Penny Farthing". They formed a Partnership, 'Soans Brothers', and even began production of their own bicycle, the Mikado.



Soans Brothers Shop

Outgrowing the original shed, they moved into a shop at 149 Masons Hill, Bromley, where they offered a wide range of services as a cycle and hardware shop. The photo from the very early 1900's shows the shop front, proclaiming Soans Brothers "Agents for all the leading



Makes of Motors & Cycles", as well as having Motor Cycles listed there. The door also bears the name of Minerva Motors. Minerva were a Belgian company that began making bicycles about the same time as the Soans brothers, but then developed a clip-on engine for bicycles, before branching out into making motor cars. The UK became their largest export market and their single cylinder Minervette was the cheapest car that you could buy here. One of their leading dealers was Charles Rolls – soon to become better

known as the first half of Rolls Royce.

In 1905, in addition to the shop, the brothers leased a "house & premises" nearby at 40 Napier Road in Bromley. The house was probably used for an office & store, but "the premises" were developed to become a very well equipped Engineering Machine shop. These were still the relatively early days of motoring but Soans Brothers' work already embraced motorbikes & cars, as well as bicycles. The supply of spare parts was very different from today – often if something broke, you simply had to make a new one.

Soans & Dunns

In 1906, with William McHarry, who had married their sister Frances, the brothers took out a Patent together for a new design of road wheel that "facilitated tyre repair or changing". No further development of this invention has been traced however. Business clearly grew and in 1908 they linked up with another Bromley Cycle & Motor engineer, Edward Dunn, to form a new Partnership, Soans Bros. & Dunn. Meanwhile the Napier Road premises were being further developed and by this time were advertising their Engineering capabilities. Further expansion occurred three years later when they linked up with another local engineer, E. Haines Jones, who had premises in



Farnborough, a village a few miles east of Bromley. The new business was called Soans, Dunn & Jones and this name continued until 1919, when the name reverted to Soans & Dunn, with Mr. Jones having either retired or left. This new partnership enabled the brothers to

move to new premises – down the road to 93 Masons Hill, Bromley, where a new garage was established on a site that had previously been a “rustic works”, -the production of gates, fencing and seats. Earlier records show the site had originally been a pond, accessible from one end to enable horses to be watered and carriers to plim the wheels of their wagons. (“Plim” is a term for soaking wooden wheels in water to swell the spokes and rims in hot weather to counter the shrinkage of the wood.) It must originally have been a sizeable pond since a local history book of the time describes it as extending *“into the neighbouring field where it was overgrown with reeds & sedges, within which dwelt newts, croaking bullfrogs, fish of various sorts including carp, and other interesting creatures”*.

By that time the brothers had become agents for Brasier cars and Hallford trucks. Brasier were a well-regarded French company manufacturing rather nice cars, and the trucks were made by J & E Halls, a company started in 1785 in nearby Dartford that still exists today as specialist refrigeration engineers. Their trucks were used extensively in the First World War. The year 1911 marked a turning point: the business became Ford agents, beginning an association that was to last some 85 years. The increase in business with Ford soon led to further expansion. The outbreak of War three years later brought great changes, as the



Machine Shop was turned over to machining gun shell cases for nearby Woolwich Arsenal. At that time many such cases were machined from solid billets of steel – quite a big job. I still have a 3” one – fortunately empty and used as a door stop. The garage side of the business meanwhile was reconditioning vehicles returned from the front line, many of them the ubiquitous Ford Model T, which served as ambulances, trucks and staff cars. Vehicle sales to the public did continue throughout the War, but as the sales leaflet comparing the costs of running a van to a horse & cart shows, there was still much to do to convert customers to consider the internal combustion engine.

When the war ended the company bought batches of Model T’s from the War Office straight from the French

battlefields, unseen, and rebuilt them for civilian sale.

Post-war, business arrangements became much more formalised. Ford Motor Company drew up new contracts appointing exclusive Main Dealers around the UK, each with a designated area of responsibility, within which they could appoint sub-dealers to provide a full geographic coverage, a system that continued right into the 1990’s. Soans & Dunn were among the first to sign up to Ford’s exclusive new terms, in 1919.

1924 marked another development: Charles’s son Fred (my dad) then joined the firm, literally straight from school aged 15. He came home for lunch from school one morning to be told he wasn’t going back – it was time to earn his keep! That afternoon Grandad took him to buy some overalls and work boots, next morning he started work at 5/- (25p per week in today’s money) sweeping floors and serving petrol from cans – this was before the advent of pumps.

Ford on Show

Great-Uncle Percy and Grandad Charles drew up Revised Articles of Partnership in 1925, keeping the trade name as Soans & Dunn, but with no mention of either Dunn or the earlier partner, Jones, in the Articles. However only a couple of years later it was amicably agreed that the partnership be dissolved. By then all three of Percy's sons were working in the business, as was Grandad's only one, who was the youngest. It was felt that this might lead to difficulties in the years ahead (if it hadn't already!) as the next generation increasingly took over from the two founding brothers. Neither Partner particularly wanted to sell the business outright, nor to leave, so after much deliberation they agreed each to



offer his half of the business for sale to the other. After some months of counter-bidding, Great-Uncle offered enough and Grandad said "I'll take the money!"

Soans & Dunn (Post War)

Soans & Dunn continued to prosper, becoming one of the largest Ford dealers in the South East, moving to larger premises postWW2. However, as Percy's three sons neared retirement in 1963 the business was sold to Bristol Street Motors, at that time a firm of Birmingham-based Ford dealers who were expanding rapidly in the UK under their American owners.



The Move to Leamington



34 Parade

So in 1927 Grandad had a cheque in the Bank, enjoyed being a Ford Main Dealer and was undoubtedly good at his job. He therefore approached Ford to see if there were opportunities for a new Main Dealer anywhere in the country. It turned out that at that time Hastings, High Wycombe, Wembley & Leamington Spa were in need of a Ford Main Dealer.

This is where Great Grandma Elizabeth comes in. Her family, the Lines, came from Napton, just up the road, and her links to this area, coupled with a favourable report on the town from another great-uncle, Ernest, who was working in Birmingham in those days, made Leamington the favoured location. Back in 1919 when Soans & Dunn signed up to the new 'exclusive' agreement, Ford required all their Main Dealers to become "solus" - that is not to represent any other motor manufacturers. Midland Autocar in Leamington had been Ford Agents since 1912, but also represented a number of other companies including Rover and Standard, both manufactured locally, and were loath to give them all up in favour of Ford. A compromise was reached whereby Midland Autocar opened separate Ford premises on the Parade, close to their main Russell Street garage, until a full Main Ford Dealer could be appointed.

Agreement was reached for Grandad & his son, Fred, now trading as C. H. Soans & Son, to take on the lease of a shop at 34 Parade, and become the Ford Main dealer for much of central and south Warwickshire, but excluding Coventry, where a main dealer had previously been appointed. Behind 34 Parade was a narrow workshop running through to Tavistock Street, and there was a lock-up in Tavistock Street holding 4 or 5 cars. Both the workshops had cobbled floors so had probably been stables in earlier times. (McDonalds now stands on the site of the shop) Grandad & Fred opened for business on May 1st. 1928, and at the start business was tough. Model T production had finally ended the year before, having been in production for 18 years since 1909, with over 16.5 million built world-wide. The more refined replacement, the Model A, appealed to a smaller section of the market. Midland Autocar customers naturally remained loyal to that company and the existing Ford dealer in Coventry did not welcome fresh competition. Nobody in the town even knew who these new southern garage people were! Meanwhile the Country was heading for the Great Depression, and the Wall Street crash was looming. Gradually however, C H Soans & Son made progress, and five years later, in 1933, as the lease on the Parade shop was coming to an end, a move to more suitable premises became essential This led to the purchase of the old roller skating rink in Dormer Place, from the big engineering company GEC. During the First World War the rink had been used by the Standard Motor Company as sub-contractors to Sopwith, to manufacture aircraft wings, with the linen covering being applied & doped in near-by Victoria Park.





Dormer Place

The premises were far larger than the Parade shop and their purchase, together with the costs of adaptation from its industrial past and building a new frontage, large showroom, office and workshop facilities doubtless represented a significant financial risk for the young company. The building was finally demolished in 1990 to accommodate a large office block overlooking the Regal Cinema.

As business continued to increase as the economy gradually recovered after the Depression, the larger premises confirmed the wisdom of the move, allowing Soans to expand to meet the growing demand, as the Ford car range grew to include models from the £100 Popular to large V8-engined saloons.



At the outbreak of war in 1939, the business was turned over to reconditioning military vehicles for the Ministry of Defence. They were generally collected from the large army depot at Ashchurch near Tewkesbury, close to the present-day M5 junction. Just collecting the vehicles from the depot and getting them back to Leamington often took a full day as conditions there were chaotic. Most were War Office Transport 1 or 2 (WOT1 or WOT2) trucks and were Ford built. The showroom area was requisitioned for Rotherham & Sons, makers of precision instruments, who had been bombed out of their Coventry premises in the

Blitz. The two distinctive towers at each end of the building were used for ARP fire-watching duties each night.

When the war ended, production of new cars was severely limited by the shortage of steel and raw materials and the need to export, so domestic car sales involved a lengthy waiting list. Used cars gradually became more available, so the workshop became ever busier maintaining and repairing the many ageing vehicles still in use. Commercial vehicles were more important than cars for private motoring – here's an example (right) of vehicles that were supplied during that post war period to local companies. When Grandad Charles died in 1950 Fred, my dad, became Managing Director of the growing business. After a while Ford wanted increased representation in Stratford on Avon to match its growing importance as a tourist attraction. Stratford was part of our "territory", but eventually, agreement was reached with the Titchmarsh family for them to open Arden Garages as a new Main Dealer, with Dad as a significant shareholder to provide continuity & expertise. Arden developed in to a successful dealership and Dad later sold his shareholding to the Titchmarsh family, where in turn three generations of that family have worked in their business.



As life finally returned to normal the Dormer Place premises became increasingly congested. Parking in nearby streets became ever more difficult. So some storage premises were bought

in Trinity Street, Leamington, but it quickly became clear that further premises would soon be needed.



Westrock Warwick St

In due course, we acquired Westrock, a large house garden and assorted outbuildings situated opposite the Fire Station on Warwick Street between Grove Street and the Dell, from the estate of Granville Gulliman, a very inventive local character. Eventually a small workshop was built in Grove St. which relieved some of the pressure at the Dormer Place site.

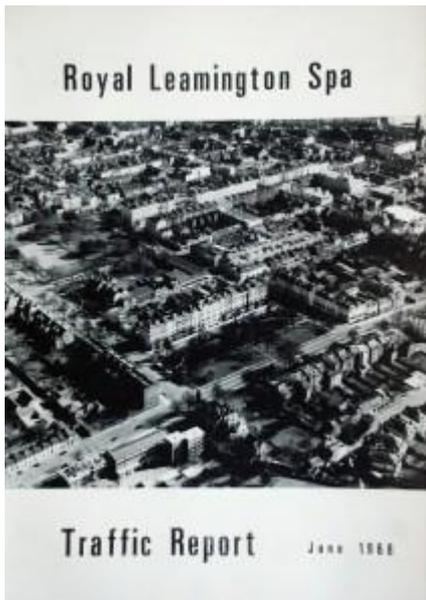
In 1961 there was a further development: I appeared on the scene. Most family businesses seem to have a life of three generations. I was that third generation. I had had a 5-year engineering apprenticeship at Jaguar Cars, a major manufacturer of high performance sporting and luxury cars, so life at a quite small family garage (with fewer than thirty employees) required quite an adjustment for a "Jack the Lad" who knew it all and the transition was not particularly smooth. I was however given business training by Ford to learn their methods, at their Training Centre in Detroit where American garage design certainly influenced future thinking.

It soon became clear that the new Westrock site would not be suitable for development as a modern Ford dealership. The frontage on to the main road was on a significant slope, there was limited parking, poor access and it was surrounded for the most part by residential housing. It was therefore sold for development to Blackburns, the Coventry builders. – Kwik Fit is based in part of it nowadays.



Kwik-Fit, Warwick Street (Allan Jennings)

The move to Sydenham



Stanleys Lane Bridge

In the early and mid-60's much thought was being given to the future development of Leamington, in terms of housing, industry, traffic and roads – rather like the recent Local

Structure Plan. A.C.Lloyd acquired planning permission to develop Sydenham Farm, partially for housing, partially for industrial use. Stanleys Lane, a turning off Radford Road, renamed Sydenham Drive was to be extended as a dual carriageway Eastern bypass to Leamington, and St. Mary's Road was to be extended across the Canal and linked through to Sydenham Drive. This was all exciting news for our company as it gave us the opportunity to relocate to a green field site (literally) and build a brand new state-of-the-art dealership too. National Benzole, a large petrol company, bought land at the junction of St. Marys Road and Sydenham Drive, (now the site of Parcel Force/Qpac) to build a large filling station to service traffic on the new by-pass, which we were to operate in conjunction with our new garage on the other side of the junction. However, things didn't quite work out that way!



attractions out on the outskirts of the town. Initially we built our workshops there – we dared not move car sales out there with hardly any passing traffic, so these were retained at the Dormer Place premises. Much of our advertising

Although the Sydenham Farm development went ahead the proposed by-pass did not. National Benzole withdrew, and Soans were left to build on a large plot of land in an area of Leamington that few people would have had any reason to visit. There were no shops, cinemas or any such



in those days had to publicise the area, Sydenham, as much as to promote our business. We used the large split "S" bought from a special Shakespeare exhibition that had been held in Stratford, to identify where our site would be. The workshops were finally opened on Easter Monday March 27th. 1967. We were to take part in a Daily Mail publicity feature, – A Day in the Life of a Racing Driver – with Graham Hill, the World Champion racing driver. In an action-packed day, Hill was to fly his own aircraft from Elstree to Silverstone, where he was due to race, practise there, then fly by helicopter to Sydenham, landing alongside Sydenham Drive, open our workshops with the large display of racing, sports & production cars, then take the helicopter back to Silverstone! He did all of that, and managed a successful day's racing too. All went really well and we hoped to put Sydenham and Soans firmly on the map – only for the oil tanker Torrey Canyon to run aground off the Scilly Isles that weekend. For days the papers were filled with news of the disaster and the Racing Driver feature was never printed. Business was tough for quite some time – a large workshop working well below its capacity was a heavy overhead to bear, but gradually work levels increased, staff numbers grew and Sydenham and our company became firmly established. Five years after opening the workshops, we developed the rest of the site. In 1972 we moved the sales operations in to a brand new showroom with a 20,000 sq. ft. covered display area alongside.



In 1978 I became Managing Director with dad as Chairman of the company, 50 years after he and Grandad had opened in Leamington. There were regular promotional activities to draw customers to Sydenham. To mark our 50 years in Leamington in 1978, we processed down the Parade and out to Sydenham with a brass band, old cars & motorbikes, shire horses, and even a steam-roller. Life was simpler in those days with no requirement for Health and Safety Risk Assessments! The business continued to grow quite well. and we started to expand into other areas, – body & accident repairs, heavy goods, parts, self-drive car & van hire, and a driving school. We grew steadily, establishing a depot at Southam, breakdown & recovery work, and caravan repairs.



We set up a subsidiary company, Soans Vehicle Contracts, leasing all makes and types of vehicles to customers across the UK. We won an award from the Chairman of Ford of Europe for Outstanding Customer Service and were one of the first garages in Britain to attain the British Standard 5750 Quality Award for our total business. By the 1990s we employed over 160 staff and Soans the company was securely based. But the motor industry was changing fast. By this time Ford were dealing with over 400 separate

main dealers in the UK, giving them a far from efficient distribution chain. This was at a time when Ford products and processes were becoming increasingly standardised right across Europe. Quite logically Ford wished to rationalise distribution and control the selling of their vehicles by consolidating their sales network. That meant grouping dealers together under common ownership with an increased manufacturer involvement, a move which did not really fit in with the style and ethos of a family business, and after prolonged discussion and negotiation, it was agreed in 1996 that the Ryland Group would take over Soans. So ended our 85-year association with Ford.

Life after Ford

Ryland took on all our employees except, understandably, me. They rented our existing premises until a new, smaller dealership was built on Tachbrook Park Drive, later tagged 'Leamington's Motor Trade Alley'. As they wished to retain the goodwill of the name, they traded as Ryland Soans until in turn selling the business on to Allen Ford who are now the Ford dealers in Leamington. As Ryland wanted the Soans name, our company, with its sole employee, me, had to change its name, so we became CHS Developments Ltd. (CHS being the initials of Grandad, the founder of the business). CHS Developments owned the Sydenham garage, plus a bit of adjacent land, and has gradually acquired some more buildings on the Estate, some of which have been rented out to local companies or to local charities.



Plan of Redevelopment Proposals

The business changed from a garage company to an Industrial property company. I was supposed to retire but somehow I have never quite got round to that, as my children have both established successful careers outside the motor trade and therefore outside the old family business. Recent Government pressures on meeting the Country's housing needs with the regeneration of surplus brownfield land has seen Soans old site being re-zoned for housing use. This generated a planning application (currently under consideration) jointly with Orbit Properties, to redevelop the whole site for social housing.

Throughout this history of the business the emphasis has been on material items such as land and buildings. Such things do not in themselves make any business successful, far less a family business. The motor trade is primarily a service business, which by definition primarily depends on the people providing that service. *This* is where a family business often differs from other businesses: – the people who work in it.

Staff

The picture (right) is from 1972 when we opened the new showroom and canopy sales area. A number of those in the photo were still at Sydenham when the business was sold 24 years later. With a family company the owner's name is "over the door" – there is someone there who has invested their time, their money, often their whole life in building that business. They need it to succeed. There is someone there to be responsible for almost everything that happens in that business, rather than some distant Board of Directors who



have simply employed a manager to run things for the benefit of the Shareholders. In a family firm, where the employees are directly involved in the business itself, there tends to be a different relationship to that business – they know the owner has been in it for the long haul and is not likely to be moved on to manage another branch in perhaps six months' time. There is a greater continuity of employment. A greater understanding of long term relationships develops, both with customers and employees.

Soans had many long serving staff, some with over 50 years' service, and quite a number who were with us for considerably more than 25 years. Some who had joined dad in the very early days in Leamington stayed right through to their retirement.

Many of our staff were highly competent and in turn drove the growth of the business.

Equally we had very many customers who had known us for many years. ***I cannot stress too highly that it was the staff who made our company a success, not the land & buildings that we worked in.***

So there we have it: 120 years of a Family Business – from a shed in a garden mending bikes in Bromley, to a proposed development of some 140 new dwellings in Leamington Spa.

Richard Soans. October 2014

Images from my private collection, edited by Allan Jennings.

Tags: 1950s Leamington, All People, Businesspeople, Wartime, Workplace

