

Tom Hamilton – Engineer (1922-2008)

I'm not sure where Tom's engineering capabilities came from. It probably wasn't hereditary – his father was a ploughman, and mother a bookkeeper. Obviously something fired his imagination, because he took an early path to that profession when the family moved down south from his native Yorkshire, by studying at Wycombe Tech. It wasn't long before he was applying his mechanical skills, and many of us have seen the photos of he and Connie sitting in the MG PA sports car he rebuilt from the ground up. Connie can still quote the registration number, over 60 years later.

As a young engineer during the war he worked for the De Havilland Company, in charge of wing production of the Mosquito bomber and reconnaissance aircraft at Hatfield. Afterwards, he worked for several companies and had notable achievements at many of them. At Road Machines in West Drayton, he worked on the road-laying machine for the start of the M1 motorway. In fact, he actually “drove” it for the first couple of miles until he taught someone else how to take over. Then, while at Ivers Lea Packaging in Slough, he designed and built one of the world's first tea-bagging machines in the garage in his spare time. At Power Specialities in Slough, he worked on several projects, including his beloved RotoScythe lawn mower. That was the basis for his round-the-pole lawn-mowing system he used in the back garden, which fascinated visitors from all around the world.

However, it was his job at Martonair which was to shape his future career, when he was introduced to the fledgling pneumatics industry. Few people grasped the subject and realised the potential in the way he did. After a few years developing the business for Martonair, he decided to branch out on his own, and formed Hamilton Controllers Ltd. He had spotted the niche in the pneumatics industry, whereby companies were producing components, but nobody was manufacturing complete bespoke control systems. Soon he had clients including EMI, Ready Mix Concrete, and Tweedy Bakeries to name but three. The company soon outgrew the garage, then a small unit in Slough, before moving to much larger premises in Uxbridge.

At the tender age of about 50 he made the mistake of thinking he could wind down a bit and retire. 5 years later Hamilton Design was formed, to manufacture the innovative new seed sowing machine he had designed. As the business grew, he was first joined by Richard, then Tim, Tommy, and for a short while by Jilly. Again, it all started from the family home

in Stoke Poges, but soon moved to Queens Lodge in Burnham, and finally to the current premises at Nethercliff Nursery in Littlewick Green.

These were just a few of his achievements, and there were many more besides. However, working with Tom could sometimes be frustrating, as there were two ways of doing things: “Tom’s Way” and the “Wrong Way”. That isn’t to say that there wasn’t the odd failure along the way.

Among the favourite stories is one of his early designs during his time at British Aluminium. It was just after the war, and Tom could see an opportunity in the leisure industry for a small boat for use in boating pools and lakes. Naturally, it was to be an unconventional design, so paddles or oars were out of the question. Instead, it had a vertical tube in the middle of the hull, through which went a shaft. At the top was a handlebar, and under the boat were two hinged flaps. The idea was that you pulled one side of the handlebar, which pulled the flap through the water, acting like a paddle. When you pushed that handlebar, the flap would hinge backwards, ready to take another stroke when the handlebar was pulled back again.

The beautifully crafted aluminium boat was taken for its maiden voyage to a small lake near Rickmansworth, and carefully lowered into the water. Tom clambered aboard and prepared to set off in the craft that was to make his fortune. He pulled and pushed on the handlebar, but there was a slight problem. The handlebar stayed still, and the boat went round and round!! He left it by the lake and walked away. On the very few occasions that we thought he was headed in the wrong direction with a design, we would just say “Remember the Boat”, and have a good laugh.

Above all this, he was a kind and gentle family man, and his 62 years of happily married life to Connie is testament to that. Together with Connie, he built the family home (quite literally) and it grew and grew as the family expanded. Tom was a ‘home bird’ at heart, and the family was all-important to him. He felt a duty to provide for them, and was generous and fair to all his children and grandchildren, giving all of us a great start in life. He was particularly proud of his grandchildren and their achievements and potential.

He will be dearly missed by us all, and life without him will never be the same.