

The end of the Hoffmann ball bearing factory at Stonehouse

Stephen Mills March 2024

This large factory has been a local landmark since the 1930s, but much of the site is currently in the process of being demolished and cleared for redevelopment.

The factory was originally an offshoot of the Hoffmann Manufacturing Company whose main facility was at Chelmsford in Essex. With the threat of war looming, and because of the strategic importance of bearings, the Stonehouse 'shadow factory' was developed, with most major construction taking place between 1938 and 1940. It was assumed that this would be well out of the way of the German Luftwaffe, although aerial reconnaissance maps recovered after the war confirmed that they knew exactly where it was! It was only because of problems elsewhere in the world that planned bombing raids never materialised. The site was well chosen as it stood close to the Great Western and Midland Railways, eventually having its own rail spur used to supply coal directly to the on-site powerhouse and send products out to the wider world. Throughout the war and well beyond, the factory produced numerous variants of roller bearings, vital for so much military equipment ranging from tanks and railway waggons to aircraft – apparently, each Lancaster bomber used around 950 Hoffmann bearings. Also produced were innumerable steel cores that were despatched to munitions factories to be turned into bullets. The new Stonehouse factory incorporated blast walls and steel shutters for the north-facing roof windows that allowed the building to be blacked out at night.

In 1969 three major British bearing companies, Ransome & Marles, Hoffmann, and Pollards were brought together by the Government to form RHP, and Stonehouse became the new company's aerospace division, manufacturing specialised bearings for aircraft engines, gearboxes, as well as airframe bearings for control and ancillary items. In 2005, the business was bought by SKF Bearings who in 2019 announced that the 10.43 acre site would be closed as part of its programme of consolidation. The factory finally closed in 2021 with the loss of 185 jobs. By the end of February 2024, much of the main manufacturing building had been demolished - the end of what was a stark reminder of troubled times!



Photos showing construction of the main building and concrete footings being laid c1938



The factory is to the left of Stonehouse station. OS map 1953 (courtesy Ordnance Survey)



An example of the company's wartime morale-boosting images featuring a radial aircraft engine



*An eerie light hangs over the factory in this wartime night photo.
Power was transmitted via numerous overhead line shafts*



Demolition of the main building well advanced (Feb 2024)



The original main entrance (Feb 2024)



The end draws nigh...