

## **A HISTORY OF VAN MOPPES - I.D.P. LTD**

(Formerly Impregnated Diamond Products Ltd.)

T. Southgate

### **The Site**

Van Moppes-IDP Occupies a 100,000 square feet factory in Tuffley, Gloucester. Although access is from Tuffley Crescent, it is probably more accurate to describe the site as part of the industrial area of the Bristol Road, Van Moppes being directly behind Rhone-Poulenc.

Originally the area had been marsh land and was believed to have been reclaimed after serving as a waste site in the late nineteenth century. Evidence of early use occasionally becomes apparent during building work - there are rails below ground level from a Bath and Portland stone sawing enterprise and the ground floor of the main office block contains blast proof walls from being a NAAFI store. There is a large underground reservoir under the floor of the main works, although the purpose of this is not know.

### **The History**

The story of Van Moppes-IDP is really that of three different firms, the oldest being LM Van Moppes & Sons (Diamond Tools) Ltd, the next being Impregnated Diamond Products and the third being that of Van Moppes-IDP.

LM Van Moppes & Sons can be traced back to the arrival of Louis Meyer Van Moppes from Amsterdam in 1893. He set up a diamond merchanting business in London and the manufacturing grew out of this. The business prospered and offices were opened abroad, forming the basis of the current group of companies. In 1950, the company opened a specially built factory in Basingstoke.

Impregnated Diamond Products' origins can be found in 1932 in Belgium. Peter Neven, of Antwerp, patented a process for combining crushed Industrial Diamond ("Boart") with iron and other metal powders through heating the mixture to the sintering point and pressing. A company, Societe Anonyme Produits Boart, was formed to exploit this process. Production continued at the Antwerp plant until the early part of World War II when Peter Neven, his key staff and plant were transferred to Gloucester by the Admiralty. It was a dramatic move, completed less than a month before the German invasion of Belgium and involving stripping down the plant in less than two weeks and transporting across a heavily mined North Sea.

The principal output of the new company - Impregnated Diamond Products - was the production of cutting tools for the Admiralty and Ministry of Aircraft Production. The products were vital to the cutting of quartz for Radar production. Diversification followed and the company grew as a result.

One by product of Diamond Wheel production was the invention by the engineers at IDP of a process known as Spark Erosion, or Electrical Discharge Machining. This is a process used in many industries, world wide, particularly where phenomenal accuracy or machining of very hard materials are requirements. For a long time IDP manufactured machines under the Sparcatron brand and even expanded their factory to accommodate this. This business was subsequently sold to accommodate Drilling and Service, a Van Moppes company, which in turn was sold and now forms part of Hycalog, a major employer in Stonehouse.

By 1981, both firms were owned by Unicorn Abrasives and had been sharing Research and Development, sales and marketing resources for some years. As a result of the recession and over capacity, the Basingstoke factory was closed and production consolidated in Gloucester. Many staff moved from Basingstoke and several entirely new product lines, such as Diamond Tools and Rotary Truers, had to be established. After two traumatic years, production settled down.

The company is now part of the international Unicorn Abrasives group, based in Stafford. Approximately 120 people are employed by Van Moppes-IDP, with a further 15 employed by Unicorn's Diamond products Research and Development laboratory on the same site. There are two divisions, "Stone and Construction" manufactures saws and drills for operations including highway maintenance, stone processing and construction. "Precision Superabrasives" manufactures products such as high accuracy wheel dressing Rotary Truers for Aerospace, Bearing and Automotive customers; grinding wheels for the processing of uranium fuel rods; saws for slicing silicon wafers and components used in the manufacture of oil well drill bits.

## STROUD LECTURE SERIES AUTUMN 1995

Ray Wilson

A steady decline in the number of people attending the winter lectures at Stroud in recent years meant that some action was called for. The Secretary, Ray Wilson, put forward the proposal that for just one year the Society might run its own series of talks on the industrial archaeology of the Stroud