

VOLKSWAGEN

AKTIENGESELLSCHAFT



HISTORICAL NOTES | 4

Ivan Hirst

British Officer and Manager of Volkswagen's Postwar Recovery

HISTORICAL NOTES

A Series of Publications from Volkswagen Aktiengesellschaft, Corporate History Department

Ivan Hirst

British Officer and Manager of Volkswagen's Postwar Recovery

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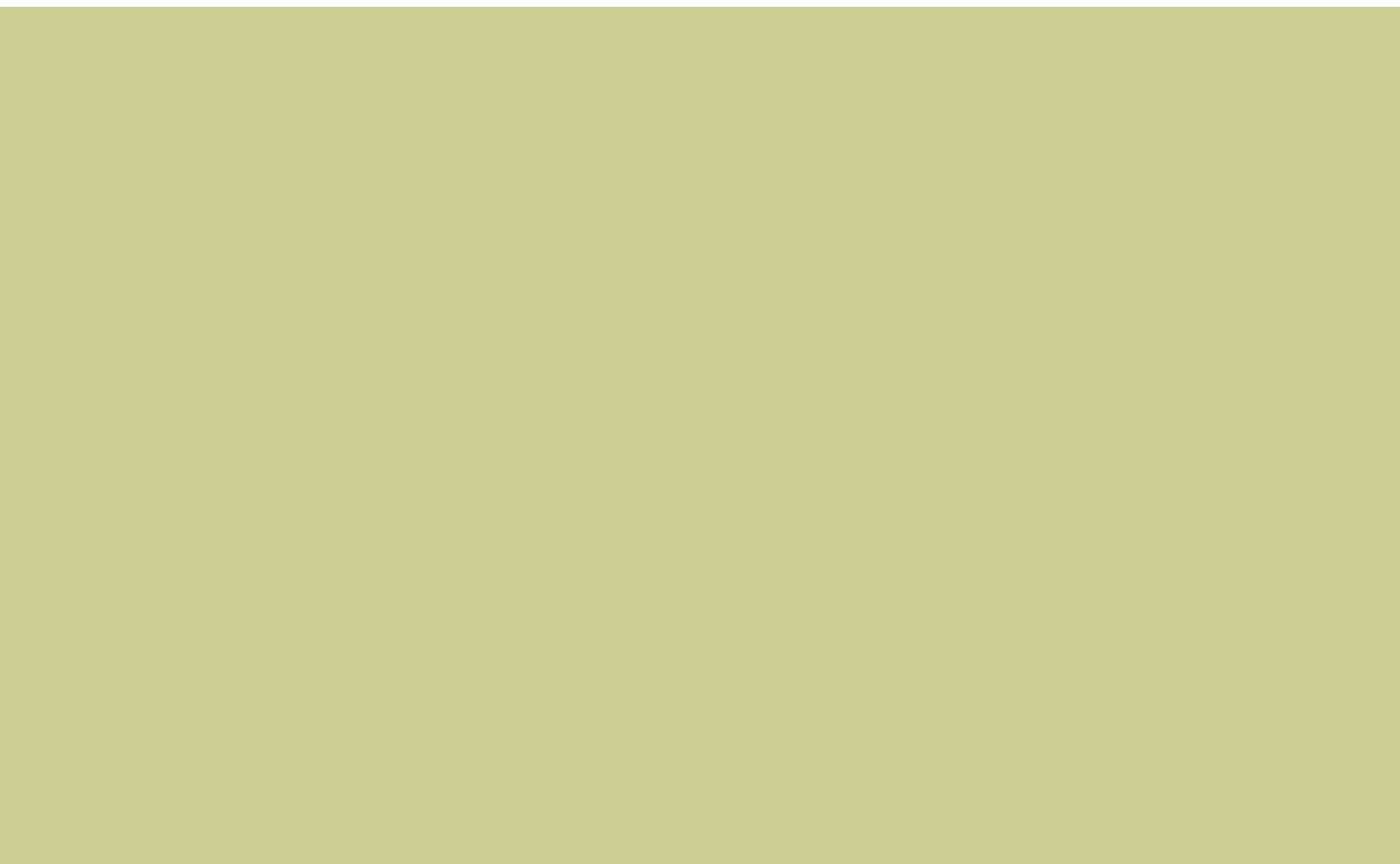
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1. Introduction





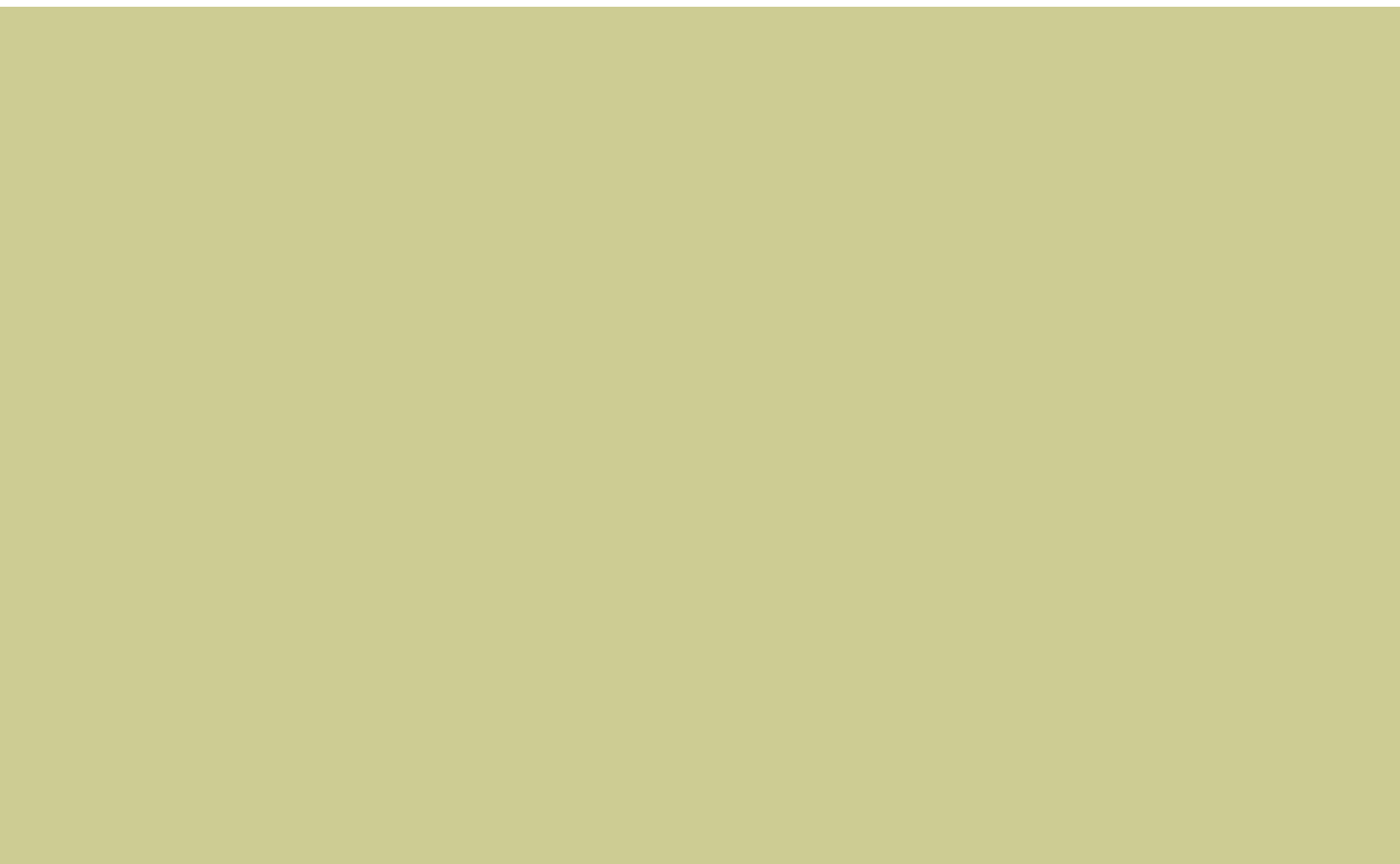
1. Introduction

Not only the actual survival of the Volkswagen Works in Wolfsburg after the Second World War, but also their present form can be largely accredited to the efforts of one Englishman: Ivan Hirst. The international press became interested in his life in February 2000 when he died at the age of 84. While ‘The Guardian’ commented, “Ivan Hirst. Englishman who made Volkswagen part of the German economic miracle”,¹ the ‘International Herald Tribune’ celebrated Hirst as the “rescuer of Volkswagen”.² ‘The Times’ described him as the “British soldier who got the Volkswagen Beetle on the road”.³ And in the ‘Automotive News’ he was the “British officer who revived VW”.⁴ None of these articles failed to underline the ironic twist of history: the decisive role in the reconstruction of the successful German automobile maker was played by a British officer.⁵

They also focussed on a previously little explored aspect of the postwar period: the Allied victory placed hundreds of German factories into Allied trusteeship under the Allied Control Council Law No. 52.⁶ In many cases, such as under the ‘North German Iron and Steel Control’ and the ‘North German Coal Control’, this entailed only general control and planning. In other companies, however, the realisation of interests demanded direct intervention. Given

that leading German businessmen had either fled or had been imprisoned,⁷ military staff had to take over company management. Numerous plants and factories remained under Allied control for months, indeed sometimes for years.⁸ And yet to date little research has been done on either the form of corporate management under the Allies or the biographies of these enterprising military men. Which professional qualities did these officers have to offer? What tasks did they master and what were their aims? What can be said about their motivations, background and indeed how their lives continued?

Ivan Hirst represents one of the most interesting examples of management under the Allies. As Senior Resident Officer he was in charge of the Volkswagen Works between 1945 and 1949. While the plant’s chances of survival were regarded as very low in 1945,⁹ it had become the biggest automobile maker in Germany on his departure in 1949. Hirst’s biography reveals the influence of structures, policies and personalities on the course of postwar developments in Germany which also had a decisive impact on the history of Volkswagen.



2. Son of an Entrepreneur and Reserve Officer





2.1 A Family of Entrepreneurs

At an early age Ivan Hirst was familiar with the rhythm of factory life in his father's and grandfather's company: the smell of grease, the overwhelming noise of machinery, the sound of laughing or quarrelling workers, the sheer size of huge machine tools. As a child he experienced not only the rise of the company business – that is entrepreneurial skill and a pride in high-quality workmanship – but also failure and severe crises: the sheer will to survive.

The family business began in Oldham, which lies in the middle of the then largest industrial and coal-mining area, not far from Manchester. By the end of the 19th century Oldham had developed into a leading cotton spinning town of international repute. The giant textile machinery business Platt Brothers had its headquarters there. Within a few years, the company could boast 12,000 employees and a production volume which equalled that of the entire American textile machinery manufacturing.¹⁰ As industrial development boomed, wealth increased and so did the demand for luxury goods. A young man called Alfred Hirst, Ivan Hirst's grandfather, recognised this opportunity and opened up a jewellery and watchmaker's shop in 1884. Fred and Sam, Alfred's brothers, joined him and the business became known as Hirst Bros & Co. As wholesalers, they traded in watches, alarm clocks, jewellery, leather, glasses and optical equipment. While such a selection of goods may seem somewhat strange today, it was usual during this period to deal with these luxury goods together: at the end of the 19th century watch makers, goldsmiths and opticians shared the same precision mechanical skills.

The young entrepreneurs Alfred, Fred and Sam Hirst recognised that the demand for luxury goods and clocks would continue to increase. Indeed, watches and alarm clocks gained a new significance with the onset of industrialisation: the rhythm of factory life dictated a new exact division of time into hours and minutes. The Hirst business flourished and expanded rapidly. Hirst Bros & Co imported watches, watch-making tools and machine tools from Germany and Switzerland.¹¹ Now in the full throes of high industrialisation, the German Reich was famous for the quality of its precision mechanical and optical equipment.

The business was a success: the family grew. In 1887, three years after the company had been founded, Alfred Hirst and his wife Sarah Ann had their first child: Fred Hirst, Ivan Hirst's father. In the following years, Sarah Ann gave birth to two daughters. Alfred's son Fred naturally grew familiar with his father's business at an early age. He started work in the company immediately after leaving school. At the age of 22, Fred was already responsible for watches, optical equipment and jewellery: together these represented the most important business segment within the company. It seems Fred was imbued with the same entrepreneurial spirit as his father, and Hirst Bros & Co expanded fast. In the following years the company opened branches in Birmingham, London, Manchester and Glasgow. By now Alfred Hirst's brothers had left the business and had emigrated to Canada and Australia.

Florence Hirst with Ivan

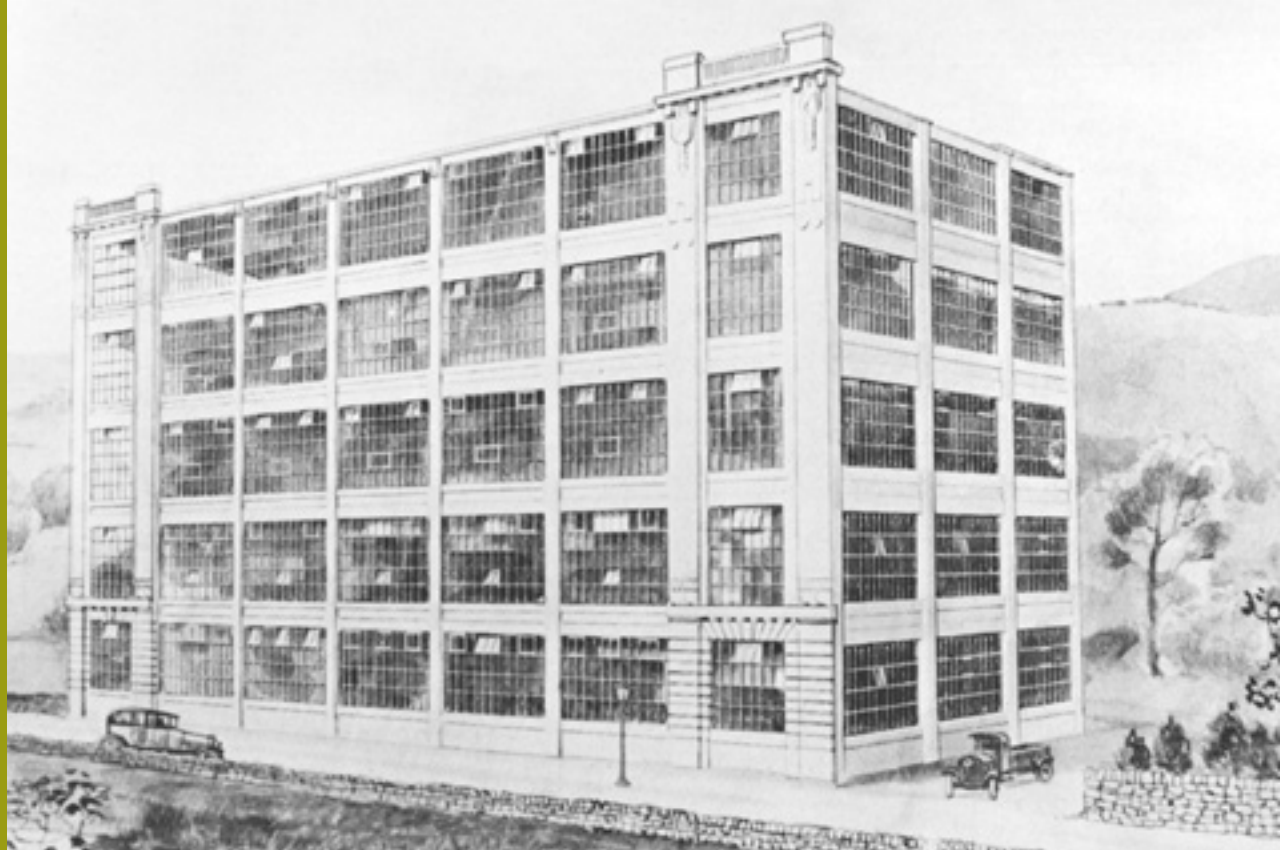


Business was severely interrupted by the First World War. The character of the company workforce changed once almost 100 employees had been called up. Given that the demand for workers continued to grow, women were now increasingly drawn into factory employment throughout the country – Hirst Bros was no exception. The structure of business changed too. While Hirst Bros & Co had been mainly involved in wholesaling before the war and had only produced a few watches in special commission, the demand for precision mechanical equipment now increased during the war. The army needed a whole variety of specialist equipment. Alfred and Fred Hirst showed flexibility and refocussed their business on the production of war time goods and concentrated on producing precision mechanical instruments for the Royal Flying Corps, the

predecessor of the Royal Air Force.¹² Such a thorough restructuring of the business was only possible because Fred Hirst was able to fully concentrate on the company after being discharged from the army for health reasons. The company boomed and by the end of the war it had 516 employees.¹³ It now ranked amongst the larger middle-sized family businesses of a size and organisation which allowed a flexible adaptation to the market.¹⁴

Ivan Hirst was born during the First World War, which historians have characterised as the primeval catastrophe of the 20th century. Florence and Fred's first child was born in 1916 in Greenfield, a village close to Oldham. His mother, Florence Clough, had married Fred Hirst in 1913. The Cloughs were a respected Oldham family. They had also traded in watches and jewellery, albeit on a

Tame Side Factory



smaller scale. Her father had been a town councillor for many years in Oldham. Florence herself was an independent and strong-willed woman who, unlike many women of the day, had learned a trade.¹⁵ As a seamstress, she had worked in tailoring and had acquired a keen sense for fashion and design. To her distress, her husband demanded that she give up work after marriage. Perhaps this hardened Florence's heart; for whatever the reason, Ivan had a very distanced relationship to his mother as a child. He mostly spent the summer holidays with relatives.¹⁶ Ivan Hirst was only able to build up a relationship to his mother in later life.¹⁷ She softened in old age. As a friend of the family commented: "She [Florence] has an unbelievable drive for independence."¹⁸

After the war the Hirsts were not able to simply return to trading as in pre-war days because of difficulties importing from Germany. The 33 1/3 per cent customs duties on German luxury goods – and these included watches – were extremely high.¹⁹ In this situation, Alfred and Fred Hirst decided to take up watch-making themselves, a decision eased by the fact that domestic watch production was protected under import policy. The policy was designed to make provision for the re-employment of workers returning home from the war while avoiding laying-off the wartime workforce. The Hirsts chose to manufacture standardised watches on a large scale. First of all they needed to acquire sufficient manufacturing capacities. They found a suitable site for a new factory building in Saddleworth near Oldham. Here on the banks of the River

Tame, a watch-making factory was constructed between 1919 and 1920 and the Hirsts named it Tame Side. The factory was equipped with the latest technology; modern machine tools were imported from Switzerland. Watches and clocks from Tame Side became famous for their quality.²⁰

Even the architectural design itself reflected Alfred and Fred Hirst's spirit of innovation. Whilst visiting the USA, Alfred Hirst had seen a new form of industrial architecture. The entrepreneur was impressed by the rather sober aesthetics and functionality and decided to build his own factory in this fashion. Tame Side was constructed on the basis of a skeleton made of steel and cement. This provided the framework for vast windows which in turn allowed as much daylight in as possible. These huge windows were themselves a novelty and an expression of modern functionalism. Many local people objected. They felt this architecture to be a provocation set against other factories built in a more elaborate Victorian style. Despite criticism, the Hirsts stuck to their plans and built a thoroughly functional factory building. Indeed, they planned for the long term: the site was designed to allow for an expansion of the factory building to up to five times the original size.²¹

Being at the forefront of progressive architecture on an international level was a fitting reflection of the company spirit. Ivan Hirst's father and grandfather had often had occasion to travel

abroad before the War, including trips to the German Reich. While the trade in German watches was interrupted immediately after the war, tools and machine tools could still be imported. So the Hirsts already started trading with Germany during the early twenties, much to the enjoyment of young Ivan: his stamp collection now included numerous German examples. Ivan Hirst recollects: "I remember as a boy collecting postage stamps, and I have a collection of Deutsche Reichspost which were denominated in thousands and then millions of marks. Inflation had started."²² In 1924 the high customs duties on German luxury goods were suddenly removed and Hirst Bros & Co revived its watch trade with Germany. On a trip to Germany his father had discovered good-value alarm clocks. Production costs at Tame Side alone were twice as high. Fred Hirst reacted quickly and imported these alarm clocks to England.²³ Thus the family business brought Ivan into contact with Germany at an early age.

Ivan grew up in the village of Greenfield²⁴, not far from Oldham and his father's company. After going to primary school in Greenfield he went to Hulme Grammar School in Oldham.²⁵ Saddleworth, the site of the Tame Side Factory in 1919, was also close by. As a child Ivan often came to the factory. Both Ivan's father and grandfather wanted to get him involved at an early age. One of his most poignant memories is that of being given a key to the factory

Ivan's father Fred Hirst behind the wheel, next to him Ivan with his mother Florence sitting in the back



as a boy, a master key.²⁶ As Ivan Hirst recollected: “I think I knew what an automatic lathe was before I knew any Latin or Greek.”²⁷ Such an early experience of factory life can be regarded as typical for many sons of entrepreneurs during this period, as illustrated, for example, by recollections of Harry Brearly, the inventor of stainless steel: “I played with branded ends of bar iron before I went to school and like to think I learned my letters from them”.²⁸

Ivan Hirst's family also endowed him with an enthusiasm for the automobile. At a time when horse and carriage were still the norm, Ivan's grandfather proudly drove his family in his own automobile through town. Again the Hirsts displayed their sense for new developments and were continually enthused by new inventions: “I was very fond of my grandfather, [...] I think he had an influence on my life and I think it was he who gave me a love of cars. He was an early car owner. My father was a keen motorist.”²⁹

Young Ivan did not only experience good times during the inter-war period. While the removal of British customs duties on German luxury goods was beneficial to trade, it slowly proved to be a disaster for domestic production: it was no longer worthwhile. Ivan's grandfather and father fought desperately to save the com-

pany. They had a modern and highly efficient factory but could not reduce costs to a point at which competitiveness could be maintained in the face of cheap foreign imports. The number of watches produced at Tame Side continued to drop. The Hirsts sought orders elsewhere to utilise capacities represented by the factory and workforce. Among other ventures the company now embarked on the small-scale production of machine tools for precision manufacturing. In 1920 Hirst Bros & Co presented a single-spindle automatic lathe at the Machine Tools & Engineering Exhibition at London's Olympia, whose design was greeted with approbation even among German experts in the trade. Nevertheless, this diversification of products was not as successful as had been hoped. Ivan experienced this struggle for every single order at first hand. He was eleven years old when his father and grandfather were forced to give up the factory: in 1927 the factory on the banks of the River Tame was sold to a company which had formerly been supplied with gas clocks by Hirst Bros & Co. Later the factory was taken over by the Time Products group.³⁰ Ivan's grandfather Alfred died in the same year, though not before seeing the final defeat.

Ivan Hirst at 18 years of age



After the death of his father Alfred no longer felt compelled to serve the company and departed from Hirst Bros & Co. Despite the economic situation being the worst imaginable, Fred Hirst dared to start again in Oldham. He now focussed on the optician business and became a wholesaler for glasses and optical instruments. Fred Hirst maintained close ties to Germany and imported goods from the young Republic.³¹

Even in old-age Ivan Hirst proudly showed visitors the factory gates, the last evidence of his entrepreneurial family background. Despite great efforts to preserve the building as an industrial memorial, it was demolished in the 1980s. The steel and cement construction had started to steadily decay.³²

2.2 Student Years and a Love for a Lifetime

It was natural for Ivan Hirst to choose a profession which was associated with the optician business. At the Manchester College of Technology, today known as the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) he began to study optical engineering.

While studying Ivan Hirst got to know Marjorie Pilkington, who was to remain his love for the rest of his life. At first she was little impressed. He was too shy, though he had a friendly affable

expression which she found attractive. However he had little dress-sense and being very tall appeared somewhat awkward. Marjorie, who was two years older and at the time interested in someone else, ignored his initial approaches. Nevertheless Ivan did not give up. He waited for Marjorie every day outside the lecture hall. He simply stood there each day and waited. After a while Marjorie decided to speak to him and found him pleasant and entertaining after all. Such an approach was typical for Ivan Hirst: he was reserved, never pushy, but at the same time was stubborn and always knew exactly what he wanted.³³ As Ivan Hirst recollected, “I met my wife when we were quite young and clearly she was significant in my life.”³⁴

Ivan Hirst’s time at college was also important in terms of broadening his personal horizon. Previously limited to Manchester and its surroundings and his international stamp collection, he now began to travel. He took part in a university Anglo-German exchange programme and travelled to Berlin in the mid-thirties.³⁵ He was especially interested in technical developments but also in the people and their way of life. However he had little regard for politics and political ideas – from time to time he seemed to underestimate their significance.



Portrait of Marjorie Pilkington

During his visit to Germany, Ivan Hirst also had the opportunity to visit a factory: “ I remember as a very young fellow going in German factories as a student visitor, amazed at the earnestness, the hard work put in, an early start, break at nine o’clock for sandwiches, sandwiches taken at the bench, and back to work again, finish at four o’clock, out to the gardens, do the gardening. The ordinary German was a very hard worker, it was just built in him more than in Britain.”³⁶ While typical clichés about Germans are reflected here, Hirst never spoke badly of Germany, the nation which so fundamentally affected his life: it was both the nation against which his own country fought two World Wars and one to which his family had built up close ties.

Ivan Hirst’s participation in the university’s officer training camp was to prove to be a further turning-point in his life. While the sporting side interested him the most, he – acting in character – still took training very seriously. He took part in consecutive training camps and at the age of 18 he was appointed Second Lieutenant in the Saddleworth and Colne Valley battalion of the Duke of Wellington’s West Riding Regiment.³⁷

Ivan Hirst and Marjorie Pilkington – they were both now qualified opticians and were engaged – returned to the family business.

In Oldham they opened up a new work shop for the repair of optical instruments.³⁸ Despite having a business of his own, Hirst continued to participate in the annual military training camps. In June 1937 he was appointed Lieutenant, two years later Captain. During this period National Socialist Germany exploited the British policy of Appeasement in order to realise its revisionist aims. September 1938 is still indelibly etched into collective memory: instead of standing up to Hitler, Great Britain and France agreed in Munich to the destruction of Czechoslovakia. However the Western allies soon realized that Hitler could only be stopped by force. After the German invasion of Poland on the 1st of September 1939, Great Britain and France finally declared war on the German Reich.

On the 2nd of September 1939 Ivan Hirst was called up. He and Marjorie had to close their workshop in Oldham. While his father Fred Hirst remained in the optician business until the fifties, for Ivan this was to prove to be a departure without return from the business.³⁹

2.3 Military Career

Having attained the rank of Captain, Ivan Hirst was sent on his first assignment with the second of seven Battalions of Duke of Wellington’s West Riding Regiment. This Regiment had a strong tradition,

A German Student

“When I was a young student I went on a visit to Germany and in Berlin we were guests of the Berlin School of Optics and so in the evening we wore our funny little hats, as you would know, and drank beer, rather salty beer out of a Stiefel. They were very good this college, they assigned one German student to look after one British student and my friend said what were my interests. I said, well, I’ve just joined the Officer Training Corps of the University and he said you are a militarist. And I said no, not really, I like rifle shooting. I’m not very good at ball games because I’m slightly myopic and I couldn’t see the ball but I like rifle shooting so I joined the Officer Training Corps. He said you’re a militarist. I said, well, what are your interests? He said none, really, I’ve just joined the SS.”⁴⁰



Wedding

having fought in the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 and in Afghanistan at the beginning of the 20th century.⁴¹ Many other men from West Yorkshire were called up to this regiment which had its headquarters in Halifax, north of Oldham. Initially Hirst was appointed Adjutant in his infantry battalion. Indeed, Hirst spent most of the war in England. He rarely spoke of his personal experience of war. In the exceptional cases when he did, he unravelled his story in a precise, entertaining manner, without elaboration or heroic allusions – or indeed malice. In this sense he remained apolitical. Hirst did his job and tried to do it well. Nothing changed this conviction in later life.⁴² Hirst could at the time not have known how demanding the war years were to be. Despite the uncertainty of the times, Marjorie and Ivan decided to get married. The marriage took place on the 28th of March 1940 in Withington near Manchester. Ivan was in uniform while Marjorie made do without a proper white bride's dress. In the following years the young couple not only experienced the hardship of wartime but, after 1945, further separation and difficult years were to follow.

Following the German invasion of Poland, the British Expeditionary Force was sent to France. The Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment also received marching orders: on the 28th of April 1940 Hirst crossed the channel from Southampton to Cherbourg, Northern France.⁴³ A few hours after landing, the battalion continued by train to Blain in Western France where it was initially stationed. On the same day Hirst was appointed acting Major and was placed in command. As he later explained, "at the age of 24 I suddenly found myself commanding a battalion" and responsible for up to 800 soldiers.⁴⁴

The German invasion of the Benelux countries on May 10th 1940 deeply affected British politics. On the very same day Winston Churchill became Prime Minister. Churchill had begun his political career in Parliament as a Conservative MP for Oldham in 1900.⁴⁵ Unlike his predecessor Chamberlain, he was convinced of the necessity of fighting Nazi Germany. In his inaugural speech he openly warned the British public: "I would say to the House, as I said to those who have joined this Government: "I have nothing

to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.” We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war [...] to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime.”⁴⁶

Churchill immediately dispatched additional troops to France in order to back up the units already stationed there. France and Great Britain decided to join their forces and Hirst’s battalion was also sent to the front. Yet the Germans continued to push westwards rapidly and the first phase of the German Western campaign ended with a fiasco for the French and the British Expeditionary Force. German forces held over 300,000 British, French and Belgian soldiers encircled in Dunkirk. As Hitler hesitated, these men managed to escape to England between the 26th of May and the 4th of June 1940.⁴⁷

Hirst’s infantry battalion belonged to those troops not encircled and had drawn back westwards to the Somme-Aisne-Line, the point at which the German campaign had ended. Hirst was directly involved in the second phase of the German Western campaign known as the Battle for France. Fighting began early in June 1940 as German forces crossed the Somme and the Aisne. German tank divisions destroyed the remaining French line of defence and pushed into Central and Southern France.⁴⁸ At the Somme Hirst’s battalion faced Erwin Rommel’s 7th Panzer division. Later Hirst explained how this experience deeply influenced his attitude to the Germans: a German reconnaissance plane respected the Red Cross on a hospital train. In retrospect he could not dismiss all the

Germans as National Socialist war criminals: they had been equal opponents.

The Allies found themselves increasingly forced back into Western France. Hirst’s battalion was stationed at the port of St-Valérie-en-Caux. Within three weeks the Wehrmacht took one million Allied soldiers prisoner, a further 60,000 French and British soldiers died.⁴⁹ Hirst’s battalion was also involved in heavy fighting and had been forced to withdraw to the neighbouring town of Dieppe on the 11th of June 1940 after suffering high losses. Altogether 220,000 soldiers returned to towns along the North-western French coast in order to be evacuated back to Great Britain. Without British air attacks on the German Wehrmacht, Hirst and his battalion would have not been able to escape from Dieppe and return home.⁵⁰

On the 10th of June 1940, only four days after the beginning of the German offensive, the French government fled and by mid-June Paris had surrendered. The British now had to lead their struggle against Nazi Germany from home and Mediterranean locations. On the 16th of July 1940 Hitler gave orders to prepare for Operation Sea Lion, the invasion of Britain. While the German ‘Blitzkrieg’ left the British public fearful, German military leaders knew that before any land invasion could begin command of the air over the English Channel and over Britain had first to be established. The Battle of Britain began.

Two months after returning to England Ivan Hirst was appointed temporary Major. So although he was not awarded the full office, he already enjoyed the salary and had to do the job. In May 1941 he took part in a four-week infantry training camp for the

The reconnaissance plane of the German 7th tank division

Hirst's brush with Rommel's 7th Panzer Division in June 1940 left a marked impression. German tanks came down the Somme river and cut Hirst's battalion off. The British had some casualties and withdrew a short distance. They came across a deserted French hospital train with a red cross on the roof – the wounded had been left behind. The British sent in their own medical officer and stretcher bearers. The situation was extremely difficult: German tanks were approaching but the British couldn't move further back because the railway line had been blown. So together with another infantry battalion they took up a defensive position. Despite the apparent hopelessness of the situation in face of the German approach, their location on a railway line provided relative safety. For fear of losing their tracks, the tanks kept well away from the railway lines. Eventually a French breakdown crew repaired the track behind and agreed to take the train out. Repairs took a whole day – under air cover. The most dangerous part was getting the Red Cross train into safety. They waited until night. And yet the 7th German tank division did have an aircraft for reconnaissance. But the German spotter plane respected the Red Cross on the hospital train and didn't bring the German tanks up. "I met the pilot later in Germany just by talking," Hirst recollected: "I personally, and many of my colleagues, we didn't like the Germans when we met them across a machine gun but we said it's this damn silly war and we are all in it together. And so I had no bitterness against Germany and I don't think many of the British or Americans had. I know things went wrong with the 'Partei' and so on and the Third Reich and slave labour and all that and the camps and so on. Our relationships with the Germans in Wolfsburg were pretty good, we respected each other." ⁵¹

Duke of Wellington's Regiment.⁵² However after returning to his battalion he suffered a setback in personal terms: he grew ill and an operation followed which put a damper on his otherwise successful military career. He found himself in a low medical category. Hirst relinquished the rank of temporary Major and in September 1941 he was assigned to the Advanced Depot Ordnance Survey 46th division as Captain and then worked in a depot for dustbins.⁵³ As an officer, this was too much for Hirst to take. He felt under-challenged and applied desperately for other appointments. He applied to the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC) as an expert on the optical range finders for rifles. However, as Captain he would have been over-qualified within the Corps. An alternative task of appropriate rank was sought. A suitable post was found in tank maintenance. As an 'instrument man', an optician with knowledge of precision mechanics, Hirst became an engineer in a repair workshop for tanks near London on November 21st 1941. Six months later he was already appointed Ordnance Mechanical Engineer Class III.⁵⁴

2.4 Arrival in Germany with the Corps of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

October 1942 brought another turning-point in Hirst's life. Amalgamated with other technical units, his troops became part of the Corps of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME). The REME was set up as a reaction to the technical modernisation of the armed forces. Repair and maintenance work had increasingly become a serious issue within the British army as arms and equipment became more and more highly developed. The inflexible infrastructure of repair workshops presented a particular problem. These were mostly located well behind the front line. Delay was inherent to the logistics of such a system. As the war increasingly became a battle of technology, more and more soldiers were required for the maintenance of increasingly complex

equipment. Faced with this development, the decision was made by British army command to set up a special unit which was to be solely responsible for the repair and maintenance of British fighting equipment. Given that there was also a shortage of specialists, REME was also assigned with the recruitment of skilled technicians and mechanics. The new unit carried out most repair work on the front line according to their motto 'Arte et Marte' (with skill and strength)⁵⁵. This new infrastructure in terms of military technology proved invaluable during the course of six months of fighting prior to the victory of Montgomery's 8th army over the Germans in North Africa in May 1943.⁵⁶ By the end of the Second World War almost 160,000 soldiers had played a part in the REME. Aside from soldiers recruited as engineers, the REME also employed thousands of civilians.⁵⁷

So prior to the Allies landing on the continent, Advanced Base Workshops were introduced which were intended to operate directly behind the front lines. In June 1943 Ivan Hirst was assigned to the 22nd Advanced Base Workshop, a central point for tank maintenance work. Hirst was also promoted to Ordnance Mechanical Engineer Class II and thus returned to his earlier rank as temporary Major.⁵⁸ Hirst's field of responsibility was now significantly larger.

Early in 1944 Hitler had brazenly declared that the Allies should try to land on the continent: Germany would "know what sort of welcome to give them".⁵⁹ In fact preparations for the Allied invasion, operation Overlord, were already well underway. The Allies knew that the landing in Normandy was vital to freeing Europe and that a breakthrough was necessary. Despite previous losses and defeat the British made a tremendous effort to make this operation a success. The 36,000 soldiers – including Ivan Hirst⁶⁰ – employed by the Corps of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers had an important part to play during the operation given that

Waterproofing 1943 in Arborfield



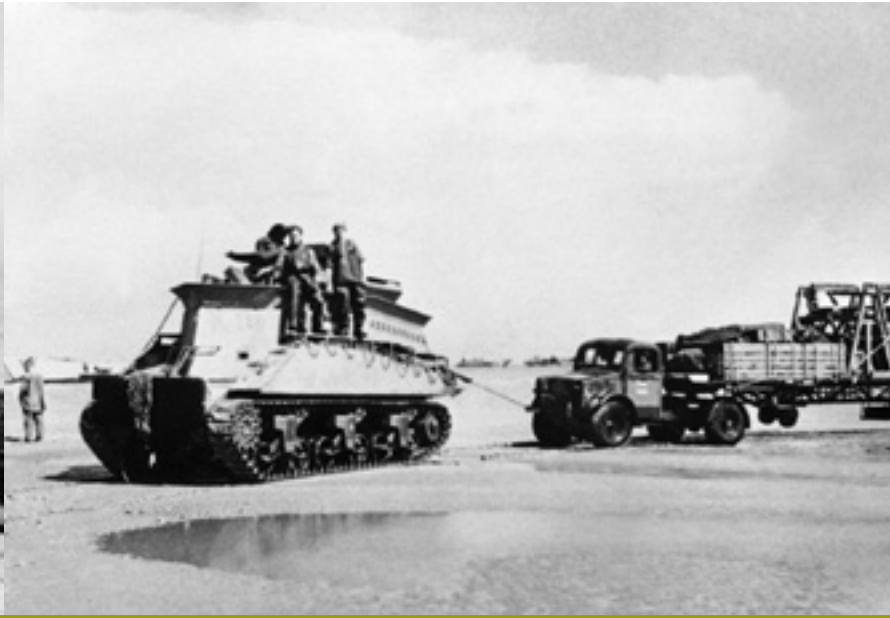
the landing represented such an exceptional technical challenge: the whole artillery had to be brought ashore as quickly as possible despite the absence of fixed harbours.⁶¹ Prior to the operation REME had the task of waterproofing all vehicles and weapons and to make sure equipment was designed to be as light as possible, to allow soldiers to push ahead quickly and to prevent equipment from either sinking into the sea or getting stuck in sand or mud.⁶²

During the night of the 6th of June 1944, the German forces failed to notice that the Allies had sent an advanced party which managed to land in Normandy: in the morning hours larger units followed under massive fire-protection from the Allied navy. The Allies successfully pushed their way inland. The success of the operation relied on the ability of the Allies to get 619,000 soldiers and 96,000 vehicles on land within only 13 days – before the 18th of June 1944. Now the Allies had 86 divisions ready and waiting protected by a massive Air Force presence while the Germans had 56 divisions and inferior air presence.⁶³

During the landing the REME soldiers had to quickly rescue equipment left behind on the beaches in order to avoid unnecessary losses even before the onset of fighting. Above all they had to prevent the build up of a tailback which would have brought the entire invasion to a standstill and could have led to its failure.⁶⁴ The REME fulfilled its job well. Despite extremely difficult conditions less than 5% of vehicles were lost.⁶⁵

Ivan Hirst returned to mainland Europe for the second time as a military man, as Second in Command of the 22nd REME Advanced Base Workshop. This visit was to be longer – and he was to be assigned a role beyond his previous expectations. In August 1944 he dryly commented: “I didn’t have a gallant landing at the invasion. My driver stalled the vehicle and we had to get out of it and push it up the beach.”⁶⁶

The Allies made progress on all fronts. Even the German Ardennes offensive in December 1944 did not bring a turn around. The remaining German reserves had been used up. The Red Army



REME salvaging equipment after landing, 1944

advanced to Berlin. In the West the Allies were able to cross the Rhine and push further inland. REME units played an essential part in the campaign in helping to secure the crossing of the Rhine and immediately followed the troops on their march towards the River Elbe.⁶⁷

The Allied troops advanced at such a pace that REME had a serious problem. The troops covered up to 300 kilometres a day which meant broken-down tanks had to be left behind. Given that the whole point of REME was frontline service, the Corps commander decided to set up a central base for tanks and heavy artillery.⁶⁸ Early in 1945 a suitable location for tank maintenance was found in Lot, to the south-west of Brussels. The factory taken over in September 1944 – Société Gregg d'Europe – had in former years produced mine cars until the factory had been seized by Krupp. The machinery was in good order because the Germans had had to

leave the 11,000 square metres factory extremely quickly. Ten ton cranes and a site railway connection were ideal for the repair of tanks. Hirst went on ahead, secured machinery and equipment and explained the situation to the workforce. On the 2nd March 1945 his unit reached the factory and set up the central tank repair workshop.⁶⁹

The Royal Engineers first had to remove 3,000 tons of refuse from the factory site before relocating machinery with a total weight of 350 tons outside. Specialist machine tools were imported from England. By the time they had finished they had created a systematic repair line: inspection on arrival included high power jet cleaning. Light artillery was also removed and dealt with separately. Once the fault diagnosis had been carried out, the tanks were moved on into one of the three repair lines where they were overhauled and when necessary even newly painted.

REME – 22nd Advanced Base Workshop

As Second in Command Ivan Hirst acted as plant manager and organised the whole repair process.⁷⁰ At the end of March, four weeks after the REME unit had arrived, the first tank had been overhauled. The workshop now had the capacity to handle up to 100 tanks simultaneously with up to 25 tanks ready each week. The REME was also assigned with returning tanks and vehicles back to frontline troops.⁷¹ The only real bottleneck was the labour shortage. Hirst tried to take on practically the entire Belgian workforce. He made efforts to take over the entire Flemish workforce which was made up of over 600 civilians. Given that accommodation was also in short supply, the British set up a temporary camp in front of the factory gates. As plant manager Hirst was responsible for the smooth running of the workshop. He allocated the Belgian workers to areas requiring little qualification while British specialists were employed in the safety-risk areas such as welding. In order to main-

tain sufficient control at least 50 per cent of those employed directly in tank maintenance were required to be British. Again and again the maintenance base in Brussels suffered from delays because of the lack of workers. The 22nd Advanced Base Workshop also had to continually react to new demands and to support special campaigns. At the same time the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers had to compensate for the shortage of spare parts. The engineers went to all possible lengths to get as many tanks into action as possible. The stipulation, for example, that spare parts should not be stored more than 14 days in advance was ignored insofar as it was detrimental to the course of repair-work. If necessary, storage time was doubled. In other cases REME engineers improvised and designed their own substitute spare parts with only basic materials.

In the workshop in Brussels much of what Hirst became familiar with was relevant to a modern automobile factory: forging, weld-

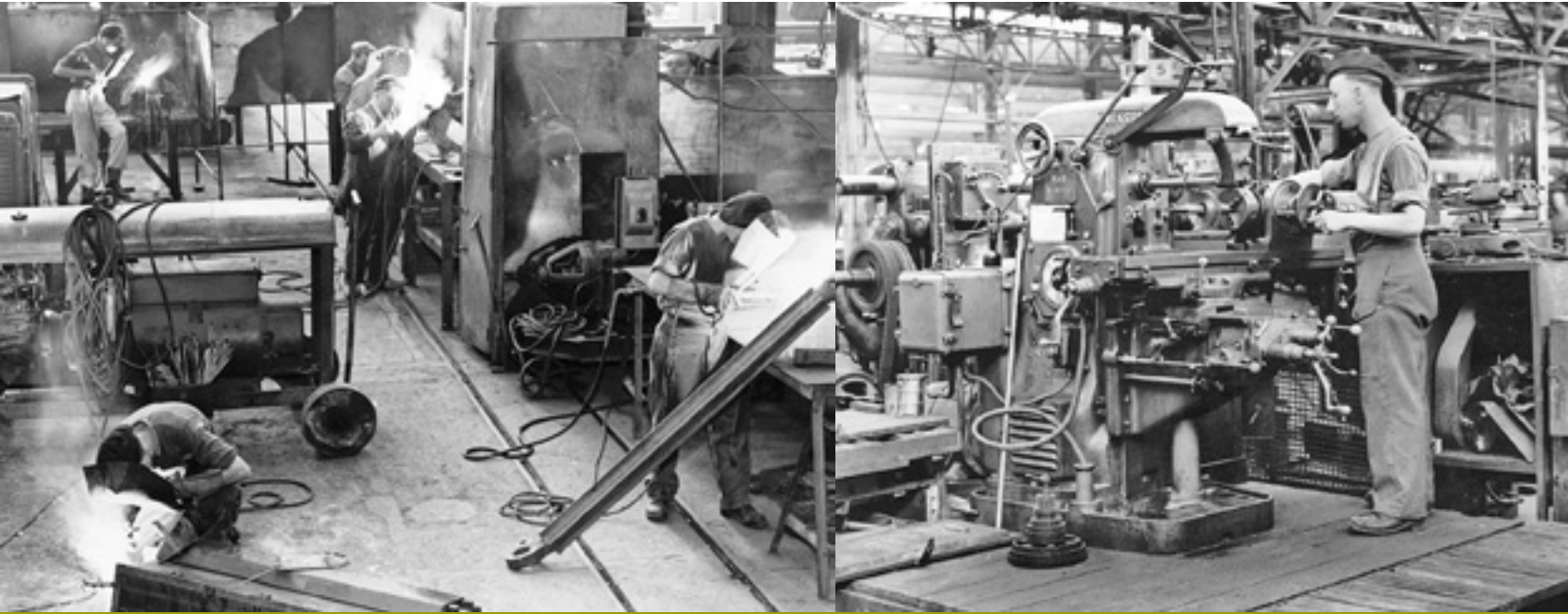
REME – 22nd Advanced Base Workshop

ing, machine rooms with highly specialised machine tools, an electrical workshop, sheet metalwork, a paint shop, and even a textile workshop for the manufacture of tank and lorry covers. Moreover he became practiced in dealing with management problems which he was later to face again in a similar form: creating a workforce, providing accommodation, communicating with workers of different nationalities, solving problems caused by a shortage in spare parts and keeping production going.

Frontline fighting moved increasingly towards the River Elbe. On the 11th of April 1945 American tanks moved into Wolfsburg, the home town of the ‘KdF-Wagen’ (‘Kraft durch Freude’, or ‘Strength through Joy’, car) and occupied the Volkswagen Factory. It was used to repair salvaged vehicles and machinery. Given that all the parts for the Kübelwagen (‘tub truck’) light military vehicle

were still available the US military decided to have as many assembled by VW workers as stocks allowed. The vehicles were to be allocated to the occupation forces.⁷²

After Germany capitulated in May 1945 the Royal Engineers were assigned two tasks: While repair and maintenance work on equipment and vehicles belonging to the British Army continued, the REME was now also to supervise production at all important industrial sites to make sure Allied demands were met. For this purpose the REME set up units for each Corps district which were responsible for establishing repair workshops at every industrial centre within the British Zone. German labour was used as soon as possible. The costs of occupation needed to be reduced as far as possible by a nation itself suffering from considerable wartime debts.⁷³ Naturally the Volkswagen Works was the location of one



REME – 22nd Advanced Base Workshop

such central repair workshop – the REME 30th Control Unit Workshop. Here almost everything the British engineers needed was available. Once Lower Saxony had become part of the British Zone, REME units had taken over from the Americans in June 1945.⁷⁴ While stocks lasted, the production of the Kübelwagen continued – albeit slowly.⁷⁵

At this point Hirst was still in Brussels. Once operations were running smoothly at this base Hirst was assigned command of the No. 4 General Troops Workshops also in Brussels.⁷⁶ However British officers had also been asked to apply for an assignment in Germany. Any prior links to Germany were considered advantageous and Hirst had of course his experience of Germany as a student and as an optician and his family's business relations to the German Reich. He offered his services.⁷⁷ The military government, which

was known as the Control Commission for Germany (CCG) from 1st of June 1945, was thankful for every qualified applicant. In the postwar situation it proved increasingly difficult to find staff suited to building up a bureaucracy. Many capable men had been sent off to fighting in Eastern Asia. Not exactly the best were left. There were complaints about excessive alcohol consumption, laziness and corruption linked with some members of the Control Commission. Complaints about British staff in Germany were even heard in Parliament. One Major put on records in the House of Commons on the 25th of July 1946: "We have too many of the wrong sort of people out there. Their sole aim in Germany is to make their stay as pleasant as possible."⁷⁸

REME – 22nd Advanced Base Workshop

Working for the CCG was not attractive. Staff were involved in building up a bureaucratic apparatus which would, once in operation, make them superfluous. All positions were temporary and there was no obligation for a permanent term of contract under any circumstances. CCG staff also forfeited pension rights. But Hirst was not yet thirty and not yet concerned about his pension. He thought working in Germany would be interesting and initially the pay seemed good. He would receive the same salary as a London civil servant plus the married allowance (another 25 per cent) and substantial tax benefits.⁷⁹ Having no children, Marjorie and Ivan Hirst were not tied to their home in England. A further consideration was the huge wave of soldiers soon to return to the British job market: over the next few years three of the five million soldiers employed were set to return.⁸⁰ And his father's small business did not represent an attractive option either. In this situation Hirst

chose the option which was most appealing in the short-term: he decided to go to Germany.

While Hirst was on holiday visiting his family, British politics experienced a dramatic turnaround. Churchill, the wartime hero, lost the General Election in July 1945. Public opinion had become convinced that he had no vision for postwar Britain. The Labour Party with its slogan “Let us face the future!”⁸¹ seemed to touch the nerve of the public's hopes. Whichever party Hirst actually voted for, this slogan could certainly have been his motto too.

In the meantime the offer of a new post was made in Germany: “I went back to Brussels, borrowed a truck and put my kit on the truck and borrowed a driver and we went to Germany”.⁸² His first stop was in Hanover, at Military Government headquarters. Here he expected to receive further orders on the task ahead. Once in Hanover, however, he was simply told to “take charge of the big ex-

The Volkswagen Works, 1945



Nazi factory there”.⁸³ Hirst had already heard quite a bit about the ambitious National Socialist Volkswagen project and could hardly wait to get there. In England he had already read a lot about it and in his REME workshop in Normandy he had once taken a salvaged Volkswagen Kübelwagen apart: “We took it to pieces to see what it was made of and I was impressed with it.”⁸⁴

Hirst searched for Wolfsburg, as the town was now known, in vain. As it wasn’t on the map he had to ask where the small place could be,⁸⁵ stopping at the neighbouring town of Gifhorn: “I arrived in Wolfsburg and called in on the Military Government in Gifhorn to say I was around. It was a Sunday afternoon, I was not a very welcome visitor, I didn’t stay very long. I went to Wolfsburg and found the army there and found a bed in their mess and drove to look at this factory, and there it was.”⁸⁶



3. The Volkswagen Works Under British Control 1945/46





The Volkswagen Works



3.1 Arrival in Wolfsburg

Early in August 1945 Ivan Hirst arrived in Wolfsburg: “It was a hot day, lovely weather, late summer”.⁸⁷ The Allies had agreed on the political order of postwar Germany – The Potsdam Conference had just drawn to a close. And Hirst arrived at the Volkswagen factory: “At the place, there was a terrible stink, terrible smell. All the drains had been damaged in the air raids and never repaired. The toilets were not working. Completely unhygienic. Terrible.”⁸⁸ With the exception of the REME workshop which was not his direct responsibility, the 29-year-old Major could find only very few men actually working on site. Large parts of the factory site seemed to be totally derelict.⁸⁹

While the town of Wolfsburg had not been subject to severe bombing, the war had of course taken its toll. Ivan Hirst’s memory was of a town much resembling a building site – but one already

abandoned two years previously. The camps made of huts and shacks which dominated large parts of the town contrasted starkly with the monumental style of the factory buildings. Originally plans had been made for a town of 100,000 inhabitants. Unusually wide streets and generously designed individual housing blocks had been built on the Steimkerberg and in the town centre. In its rudimentary form the town had represented a modern and car-friendly environment.

However, in September 1945, Wolfsburg had only 25,000 inhabitants, including refugees and displaced persons.⁹⁰ The broad streets were damaged and overgrown with grass. Major Hirst found this was a situation which needed quite some time getting used to: “I remember dropping a wheel of a Beetle down a nasty hole in a drain and it didn’t do the front axle any good.”⁹¹ He was puzzled by



The town of Wolfsburg

the unusual way German girls were dressed in rather peculiar red skirts. He soon got the explanation: the skirts had been made from old Nazi flags with the swastika removed.⁹²

In the streets an almost Babylonian mix of languages could be heard. The town housed nearly 9,000 former forced labourers and other displaced persons (DPs) and their number was continually growing. The Allies had chosen to set up a central DP camp in Wolfsburg, given that the town was located directly on the boundary between the British and Soviet occupation zones. The list of nationalities represented in Wolfsburg was endless: Hungarian, Polish, Russian, French, Danish, Yugoslav, even Swedish, Argentinian, Brazilian, Australian, South African, Mexican, Cuban, Turkish and Iranian.⁹³ The English of the military authorities came to dominate, first more American than more British English. And in between there was a mix of all imaginable German dialects: Wolfsburg also

acted as a magnet for German refugees. Local dialects were complemented by those from Eastern Prussia, Silesia or Bessarabia.

The scene on the streets in Wolfsburg was one repeated throughout Europe: 21 million refugees were on the road, either fleeing from their homes or on their way back. The terror of war was still present. Many men – husbands, sons and fathers – were prisoners of war or missing. On the 6th and 9th of August 1945 the launch of two American atom bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the beginning of a new era: the atomic age and the East-West conflict. In Hirst's memory the atom bombs remained ever linked to his arrival in Wolfsburg.⁹⁴ Nevertheless: “... it was a good weather that summer, everybody was very happy that the war was over. The song, I'm not musical, but the song at the time was 'alles geht vorüber' ('everything will be over sometime') everybody was in that mood.”⁹⁵

Officers' mess



Hirst found accommodation in a small flat in what had formerly been the factory guest house. The same building housed the REME officers' mess: "And, as one did in those days, I just said I'm in the neighbourhood, can you put me up? So I became a member of that mess."⁹⁶

The Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers had already set up a large workshop in the Volkswagen factory. It had three areas: a repair workshop for British military vehicles, one for engines and one for spare parts.⁹⁷ Eight percent of the workforce was employed in this REME workshop.⁹⁸

Initially the British army and the Military Government did not see the Volkswagen Works primarily as a car factory. The Allies were convinced that there was no long-term perspective for the factory. Dismantlement prior to export was the plan – whether sooner or later. It certainly seemed that there were potential tak-

ers enough, an English automobile company was interested and, as Hirst reported, the Australians were particularly keen.⁹⁹

It appears the British authorities believed that young Major Hirst was suitably qualified to winding up this rundown factory. Yet he could barely speak German (with only one year of German at school) and his personal contacts to Germany belonged to the past. This low British evaluation of the task was also reflected in the reporting structures. Hirst had to report to the British military authorities in Hanover who were only responsible for affairs within the region of Lower Saxony. This conflicted with the fact that Hirst was subject to the command of the Mechanical Engineering Branch at provincial level which was responsible for the automobile industry and engineering.

Yet although the omens seemed bad at the time, Ivan Hirst did prove to be the right man at the right place. Indeed, he did not sim-

REME workshop



ply go about closing down the crumbling giant but created the foundation for successful company development. The young officer had three decisive qualities: first and foremost, he had a passion for cars and engineering; secondly, he was a great improviser – something he had practiced everyday as a REME officer; and thirdly he had an exceptional talent for social relations. He made a huge number of acquaintances in the course of his working life and his extremely friendly, winning and yet modest character always made a good impression.¹⁰⁰ Hirst was never to speak to the workforce with the arrogance of a victor but always maintained the more friendly tone of a well-meaning boss.

3.2 The Crucial Order

Immediately on the day after his arrival Major Ivan Hirst arranged to meet the factory manager instated by the Americans: Rudolf Brörmann. During the war Brörmann had been responsible for quality control.¹⁰¹ Initially Ivan Hirst was rather suspicious of the

Germans and was concerned about whether co-operation would be possible. While the Americans had already arrested several incriminated National Socialists and others had fled, the Germans were still in his eyes the enemy who had threatened his home country for many years and had dramatically affected his life. During the initial few weeks Hirst remained aloof and distanced.¹⁰² Although in later years Hirst – as a true British gentleman – had only good things to say about the German people in general and German VW workers in particular, one ironic comment did slip through in an English publication: “After a few days at Wolfsburg, it had become clear that almost all of our former enemies were eager to co-operate with us in restoring order to their country. One or two local worthies even claimed that as Hanoverians they owed loyalty to the British Crown.”¹⁰³ Naturally the British officers found such expressions of duty amusing. Instead of facing fearsome Nazis, capable of every crime imaginable, they often came across simple-minded petty-bourgeois local people, aside from the few ambitious men

Ivan Hirst



who strove to keep the factory going at any price. Nevertheless the British avoided any humiliating demonstration of their superiority. When one British officer suggested flying the Union Jack on factory grounds his colleagues immediately vetoed the idea.¹⁰⁴

Rudolf Brörmann belonged to the group of those previously in charge who didn't "leave the sinking ship" after defeat but had put all their efforts into saving the Volkswagen Works. He was familiar with the factory and its problems, and he knew the town as a member of the local council.¹⁰⁵ So initially he provided Hirst with valuable information.¹⁰⁶ The mood was downcast. Buildings had been destroyed or damaged, machinery broken. The equipment needed to remove the debris was lacking. Indeed, every commodity was scarce: there was a shortage of workers, food, housing and work materials. The list was endless. Of course on the Wolfsburg side there was reason to be pleased that the factory was being used as a REME base and that the Control Commission for Germany had allocated Major Hirst as an administrator. But Brörmann and

many of his German colleagues didn't want to see the factory survive as a repair workshop: they wanted to see it operate as an automobile factory. They had already put a lot of energy into the project. Indeed, Volkswagen was the only automobile factory in Germany which was still able to operate at all, despite damage. As became evident, although the Allies had dropped well over 2,000 bombs on the factory site and created a great deal of chaos, only 8 per cent of machinery and roughly 30 per cent of the factory buildings had actually been destroyed.¹⁰⁷

At first production was limited to the construction of a few 'Kübelwagen'. In Hirst's eyes this was unfortunate: it was a military vehicle unsuitable for civilian peacetime use. Moreover, assembly was anything but efficient. The production of the 'Schwimmwagen', VW 166, first completed in 1944 had to be stopped under de-militarisation orders. The only consolation Hirst could offer Brörmann was the permit to continue with the production of the 'Kübelwagen'.¹⁰⁸

Colonel McEvoy



As chance would have it, the REME headquarters in Bad Oeynhausen assigned to the 21st Army group included a British officer, Colonel Michael A. McEvoy, who was not only familiar with the Volkswagen but also fond of it. Before the war he had worked on the development of racing cars at Mercedes Benz while living in Stuttgart. At the beginning of 1939 he had seen the KdF-car in Berlin at the international automobile exhibition – and still remembered every detail.¹⁰⁹ McEvoy had given the orders to set up a REME base in Wolfsburg. He was responsible for all REME repair workshops throughout the British zone. These represented the engineering backbone of the British army in Germany. Being in such a position he was well aware of how desperately the British army needed cars. The Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers were already more than busy trying to keep the few vehicles they had on the road. New vehicles were a real necessity.¹¹⁰ As Colonel McEvoy dryly commented, there was little point in demolishing the factory as long as the British Army and the military government were in dire need of additional vehicles.¹¹¹

Colonel McEvoy soon had Hirst on his side. The young Major looked up to this man of senior rank. Looking back, Hirst gave him the highest praise he could: recognition of his technical expertise –

stating that he was “a very able automotive engineer”.¹¹² Ivan Hirst found the plan to start mass-producing cars again at Volkswagen very attractive. He could also be sure of support from the remaining rump of German management – with Brörmann at the forefront. So both officers worked on convincing the British of the significance Volkswagen could have. At a time when desperate demands were an everyday occurrence, they both realised words alone would not be sufficient. So they thought up a plan: Hirst scoured the Volkswagen site for the vehicle in the best condition, got it painted in khaki and sent it to headquarters in Bad Oeynhausen. McEvoy then presented the car and the straightforward saloon met with approval. Given that production could be covered by the German part of occupation costs, it was an easy decision for the British. In political terms it was also an important decision: so long as dismantlement was still a threat it was going to be easier to protect a factory producing cars for civil use than one associated with armaments.

However the production of cars was an issue which involved all the Allies. Although there was some concern about the Soviet position, the delegate for the USSR surprised everyone by taking a generous stance, categorising the KdF vehicle as a “social project”.¹¹³ A new consensus was reached: the Volkswagen factory

was given a new lease of life for another four years during which it would not be dismantled and shipped abroad as a reparation payment. With an eye to the Volkswagen presented in Bad Oeynhausen, the British then placed the decisive order. On the 22nd of August 1945 Lieutenant Colonel G. L. Lock, as representative of the Military Government in Hanover, issued the order for 20,000 Volkswagen saloons, 500 vans with 500 trailers for the post office and 200 khaki coloured trailers for the British Army.¹¹⁴ The Allies were to receive these vehicles by July 1946.

Hirst was now no longer simply an administrator: he had become a manager. The young Major found it far more appealing to make cars than to close down a factory: “At this point we didn’t know whether it would be possible to build the saloon because the press shop was in a very poor state after the bombing”¹¹⁵. This seemingly foolhardy project would never have got off the ground without the readiness to take risks and a considerable over-estimation of what was possible. The production order itself – for 20,000 vehicles – was ambitious to say the least. Yet this order secured a new, albeit uncertain, future for the Volkswagen Works.

3.3 Creating a Communication Network

Hirst was enthused with the idea of producing cars in the Volkswagen factory. As a Major with wartime experience he knew how to set up a hierarchy of command, organise a large workforce and complete projects on time. In order to be able to work properly Hirst set up a command centre where he had control over all operations. No decision of any significance was allowed to be made without his knowledge. He put all personnel decisions – recruitment and lay-offs – under his control.¹¹⁶ Any official meetings with British officers had to be reported to him immediately – insofar as they related to the factory.¹¹⁷ Even order forms had to first come to his desk for confirmation.¹¹⁸ In addition, Hirst set up a translation office in order to overcome the language barrier between the Germans and the British.¹¹⁹

His natural reserve meant that he initially concealed his growing command of the German language, continuing to speak only English – which also helped him to exert control over the Germans. Recognising the communication demands of the day, he negotiated favourable conditions for long-distance calls and telegrams with the Reichpost and organised a telephone with a high priority switch which allowed quick connections to many places.¹²⁰

The pirate telephone

Ivan Hirst had plenty of ideas about how to get his projects and the factory working well:

“One thing I was able to do was, the telephones were not working very well and the British Army had what was called a high power set, an ordinary telephone but with a Verstärker [amplifier] built in. These were for issue in the British Army down the hierarchy only to major generals. But I got a pirate one made by the local Army signals unit and had it on my desk so I could switch that on to high power and I’d get an immediate clear the line priority because the signal operators and the Reichspost thought it was a General speaking and I would get through anywhere. I was ringing Army headquarters, asking for the War Office, asking for an outside line and telephoning my wife in London.”¹²¹

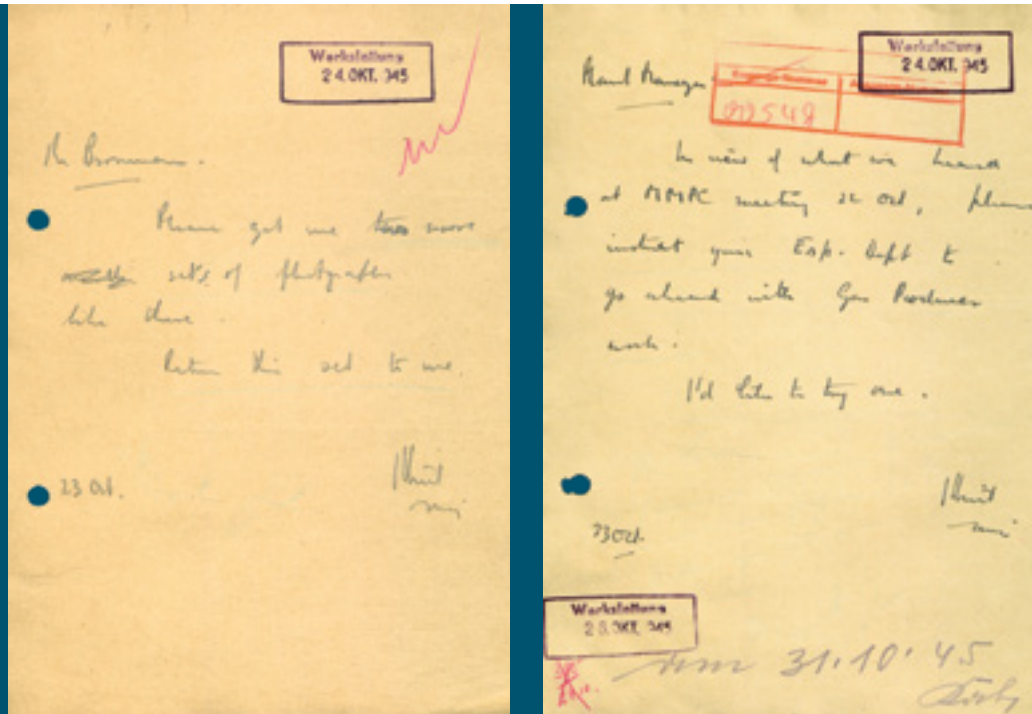
During this initial phase Hirst only had a few members of staff to fall back on, and was certainly in a difficult position. The members of management who had survived were familiar with every nook and cranny of the factory. Most of them were substantially older than Hirst and more experienced. Fortunately for Hirst they were not united. Plant manager Brörmann was extremely authoritarian and ruthless in his approach to questions of organisation. He had already managed to alienate everyone. Even the local German authorities worked against Brörmann. In August 1945, shortly after Hirst's arrival, they lodged a complaint to the Military Government: "After the appointment of Mr Brörmann it has become clear on various occasions that he acts arbitrarily and proceeds in a dictatorial manner regardless of any other interests."¹²²

The words chosen were strong but even here Hirst remained entirely pragmatic. Technical knowledge was the relevant issue here and Brörmann had it. Decades later Hirst could still recount Brörmann's entire career in the car industry. The Englishman recognised Brörmann's achievement without any qualification: "He was eager to see the factory continue and start car production in earnest. He was an enthusiast [...]."¹²³ Both men had the same aim: they wanted to get automobile production going in the Volkswagen factory. This was all that counted in Hirst's eyes. So even though he increasingly began to recognise the strength of hatred against Brörmann he was still prepared to defend his German plant manager whose management style was autocratic and derogatory in the extreme when dealing with the workforce.¹²⁴ Another reason for the acceptance Brörmann enjoyed on the British side was the simple fact that at the time there were hardly any German managers

around to choose from. Hirst was always on the look out for capable men. Hirst re-established traditional contacts, benefiting for example from contact to the former 'Reichsverband' automobile industry association. Nevertheless the demand for managers and engineers remained acute.¹²⁵

Hirst began to work on establishing a new management style in the factory. He was puzzled by the work mentality of his German staff which had been moulded by National Socialism: "They really had not operated as a normal factory, a normal company and sometimes these quality things were very difficult to trace."¹²⁶ He was repeatedly shocked by their inability to show initiative or make decisions off their own back: "It was not that we on the British side were clever but our German friends were still in a state of shell shock, partly, I think they were suffering from the mentality of the Third Reich, they had to have orders to do things and had no initiative. That's how I felt. And, well, they were shell shocked from the bomb damage and they'd lost heart, they'd lost the will to perform properly." And as Hirst added in a friendly, jovial manner: "But when we talked about it, they'd get on with the job."¹²⁷

A new era began in the Volkswagen factory. Hirst had overcome his initial suspicions of the Germans and now introduced his own, typically English ideas of how colleagues should behave and how to deal with the workforce. The authoritarian management style of former years was replaced by a new one. Direct contact with workers was now desirable, and staff were encouraged to pursue an open-door policy: colleagues were always welcome to meet up without any formalities. Hirst pointed out that close co-operation between colleagues would eliminate unnecessary tensions.¹²⁸ He

Hirst's notes, 23th October 1945

was a man who disliked long words and lengthy official channels.¹²⁹ Numerous little notes scribbled by Hirst in pencil are a reflection of his spontaneity and direct approach. They listed questions to be raised and orders to be given – short and sharp. Major Hirst could become extremely unpleasant if his orders were ignored.¹³⁰

Asked about his management style in later years, his answer was somewhat impatient: “I’ve been asked what is style in writing. I’ve always said there is no such thing as style in writing, it’s clarity, directness. I think if I had a management style, it was just directness. If you like something say so, don’t like it, say so. And above all, human relations, get to know the people you are working with”.¹³¹

Hirst didn’t just want management responsibilities to be shared with the Germans. In England he had seen how workers and managers co-operate together: “The management side and the employee side sat ideally around a round table and there wasn’t real fighting confrontation but everything was cleared there with

open conversation and it worked. So I said it would be a good idea to have a work’s council.”¹³² This reflected his understanding of democracy and above all his desire to achieve consensus and open discussion.

Employee representatives in the Volkswagen factory held their first meeting in August 1945 without being legitimised by democratic election. As stipulated by occupation law, Hirst consented to such a meeting in Autumn 1945 under the condition that a British officer approved the agenda and that afterwards the minutes were submitted.¹³³ Any mention of political issues or affairs relating to the management of the factory was strictly forbidden.¹³⁴ Early in October 1945, Hirst meticulously instructed Brörmann that workers involved in preparing the election were allowed to leave their workplace a quarter of an hour earlier so that they could all appear punctually for the preliminary talk at 4.30 pm.¹³⁵

On the 27th of November 1945 the democratically elected factory representatives met for the first time. In December 1945 the trade unions began to get reorganised on a regional level and Hirst allowed them to hold meetings on site.¹³⁶ Of course his readiness to promote worker interests had limits. In 1947 the trade union demand to introduce a labour director was categorically refused. In the eyes of the British the model of co-determination in the mining industry was not an option.¹³⁷

Hirst put together a team of staff during the very first weeks: two secretaries, a chauffeur and an 'errand girl'. Hirst found himself fully stretched just looking after production but administrative work represented an increasing load. Hirst turned to the Industry Division in Hanover and asked for an assistant. Later Hirst claimed that his inquiry was regarded as a lucky coincidence. In Hanover there was one member of staff, Richard Berryman, many were very glad to be rid of: "A real character. A maverick, a wild horse with a

lot of energy. You never knew where he would be next. He came to me ... he'd been at the Hanover office of the Industry Division and I think they were very pleased, when I asked for an assistant, they were pleased to send him because he made such a noise wherever he was and wanted everything his own way." Hirst's understanding of Berryman's character was such that they were able to work together very well even though the latter wasn't even suited to his new post: "Berryman was extremely eager, very hardworking, but he hated administration, which is what I wanted help on, the office work." Instead of sending Berryman back to Hanover, Hirst recognised where his abilities lay and got him involved in production in February 1946. Here he proved invaluable.¹³⁸

Another member of staff, Karl Schmücker, was exactly the opposite. Hirst recalls: "A quiet man, I liked him a lot." During the First World War Schmücker had spent four years as a prisoner of war in Britain and so his English was very good: "He embarrassed

The start of factory representation

“We never interfered, we might make a suggestion, what about safety, what about health or something, but they drew up the agenda, I signed it, put a stamp on it and after the meeting they brought up the minutes. [...] Next meeting Karl Hieber it was, he became quite a figure in Wolfsburg Karl Hieber, came up as chairman and said here is the agenda and I looked at it, signed it, fine. Thought he'd go away and he said here are the minutes. I said but the minutes of the meeting corresponded to the agenda I just signed. He said: 'Jawohl!' Karl Schmücker explained, my assistant, he said I think you don't understand, sir. This is the way it was done, we had a Betriebsrat in the DAF and the minutes of the meeting had to be approved before the meeting was held. Then we got that straightened out it worked better. They still had much to learn.”

At the end of 1947 the works council demanded more far-reaching co-determination rights. Hirst turned to headquarters in Hanover for help. He was sent a trade unionist who came straight from London.

“So I thought crikey, a trade union man, a real 'Gewerkschaftsmann'. This man arrived with a cloth cap on, looking like a working man, you see. So the meeting was set up [...] and he turned to Schmücker who was interpreting and he listened to what they wanted, a seat on the management and he said to Schmücker, do you understand English? Schmücker said, I think so, sir. He said, well, tell them they're bloody daft, – The trade union man said, if you have a seat on the management who are you going to fight with? The old 'them and us' school and that was the end of Mitbestimmungsrecht in Wolfsburg for about two or three years”.¹³⁹



Office



Karl Schmücker
and Ivan Hirst

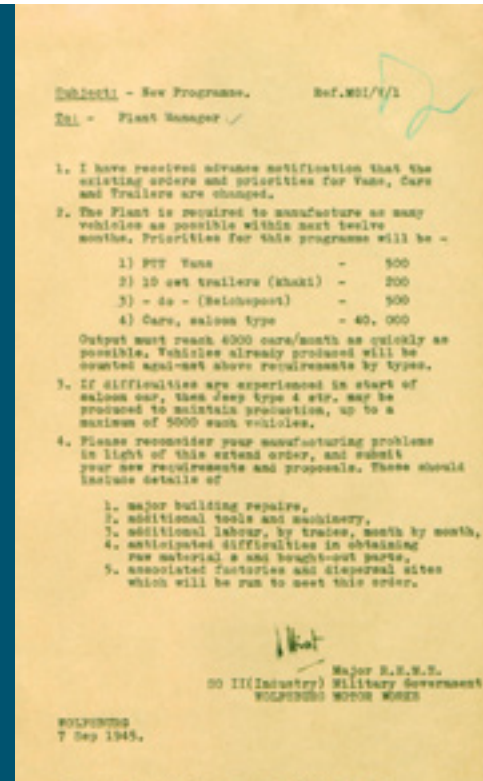
me because he followed English football and I didn't. And every Monday morning he wanted to know how the English football teams had done on the Saturday." Schmücker was a civil employee of the Control Commission and had his own small office where he worked as Hirst's assistant. He acted as a bilingual middleman between the British officers and German factory management.¹⁴⁰

Hirst also played a part in rejuvenating the cultural life in the town. Only two months after arriving he informed Hanover that there were plans to set up a cinema in the factory canteen because no cinema or indeed theatre existed in the whole of Wolfsburg.¹⁴¹ The Hanoverian theatre company 'Die Blitzrakete' was able to stage a guest presentation on factory grounds. As was underlined in the report: "We must always remember that we have lost this war, and that is why we must be especially grateful that the Command-

ing Officer of the Wolfsburg Motor Works, Major Hirst, granted us this performance and further, permitted our families to attend."¹⁴² Hirst was even aware of the need for background music in the canteens and personally ordered 30 records from Deutsche Grammophon GmbH to be bought in Hanover for the purpose.¹⁴³

3.4 The Start of Production under British Control

The British military and government authorities soon realised that much had changed in Wolfsburg. And given that the Military Government desperately needed cars, it wasn't long before someone had the bright idea of simply doubling the order for 20,000 Volkswagens. In early September 1945, only two weeks after the first order had been placed, Hirst informed the plant manager about a "new programme" involving 40,000 Volkswagen saloon

New production programme, 7th September 1945

cars: “It is expected that in the next twelve months as many cars as possible will be produced.” Hirst demanded that the production volume of 4,000 cars per month must be reached “as quickly as possible”.¹⁴⁴

Nevertheless, despite the attractiveness of such plans and orders, the problems involved in getting the production line going were immense. There was no regular workforce.¹⁴⁵ The majority of workers had not yet returned. Many were still held as prisoners of war and there was no end in sight. The grievances of former forced labourers provided a constant source of unrest. Supplies were either short or totally lacking. Some machinery was still located at 30 different sites and potential takers were already waiting. In the midst of all this, Hirst also had to prevent over-eager officers set on dismantling the factory: “The disarmament people were going

around very trigger-happy ready to blow up anywhere and anything. In fact the British officer in charge of that operation was known as Blasted Nuisance.”¹⁴⁶ The few remaining workers left suffered from bad accommodation and a lack of food; they were fighting to survive. It is hardly surprising that whatever could be smuggled through the factory gates was indeed stolen. Even the plant management itself dabbled in the black market.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore the denazification question had still to be clarified. In such a situation how was it going to be possible to produce one car, let alone 40,000? An experienced manager would have made a few calculations and have then disappeared or at least have straightaway made clear that the order was ridiculously high – and thus have put the survival of the Volkswagen Works at risk. But not Ivan Hirst. With the optimism of youth he continued to believe in the project in the

An English Lord thinks the Major is a “bloody fool”

In 1945 Hirst and his staff soon had a visitor from England: Sir William Rootes, head of the mighty ‘Rootes Group’ and leader of the British auto industry. Hirst showed Rootes around the damaged factory and the experienced businessman famously told the young Major: “If you think you’ll ever get cars built here you are a bloody fool, young man.” Rootes was after one particular German press made by the company Keller to take back to his own firm. As an English businessman he was entitled to confiscate the machine. But Hirst had to inform him that all the Keller machines previously located on the site had been destroyed during air raids. As Hirst recalls: “Lord Rootes he then was, he was a great entrepreneur but he didn’t know a machine from his left foot”. As he walked around the factory Rootes discovered a very old machine that had just been repainted: “Rootes eyed it up and said, there you are you see, you’re all liars, you’re all liars, there’s what I want.” Hirst managed to prevent him from taking the machine to England. However, when he reported the incident to Radcliffe, his superior in Minden, the latter broke out into laughter: “You are a bloody fool Ivan, you should have had it packed and sent, I would have loved to have seen the faces of the Rootes engineers when they saw what their boss had brought home as his great prize from Germany, this 1920’s machine.”¹⁴⁸

very face of these problems. He loved cars and was convinced his job – his army – was a good thing. At the time this sufficed: “In the war time and just after the war, we were all young people doing it but we had to learn. We did learn damn quickly, the hard way.”¹⁴⁹

Ivan Hirst first gave orders to tidy up the site.¹⁵⁰ He got builders and plumbers in to repair the toilets.¹⁵¹ Then he sent in a British engineer unit which used bulldozers to fill up the huge gaping bomb craters, and he ordered winter cereals to be sown: “mainly to

show that the war was over”.¹⁵² The process of clearing up proved to be lengthy.¹⁵³ Before production could start, tools and supplies had to be secured. While REME staff had already begun with the return of machinery stored off-site, Hirst made this a priority.¹⁵⁴

During this period it became more and more clear that co-ordination on a higher level was necessary. More and more departments were showing interest in the Volkswagen Works and an increasing number of institutions had been involved because of the



Clearing the rubble

difficult production conditions. By now the occupation authorities regarded the Volkswagen factory as a company of some importance and business operations had developed a complexity which made control at a higher level within British administration necessary. Co-ordination with the supplies industry alone demanded powers relating to the whole British zone – and beyond. Together with Leslie E.D. Barber from the Property Control Branch in Berlin, Hirst came to the agreement of setting up a kind of supervisory board.¹⁵⁵

This supervisory body was to include officers from all Military Government departments which were involved in affairs concerning the Volkswagen factory.¹⁵⁶

On January 21st 1946 this new body, known as the Board of Control, held its first meeting.¹⁵⁷ Colonel Charles R. Radclyffe from the Mechanical Engineering Branch (Industry Division) was responsible for technical affairs; Barber from the Property Control Branch (Finance Division) covered financial questions. Officers



Agriculture in an industrial company

from the Regional Government in Hanover were also represented and of course Major Ivan Hirst as Senior Resident Officer at Works as the officer in charge on-site. The Board of Control existed until the factory was transferred to German ownership in the Autumn of 1949. It met 41 times and involved 80 individuals from 30 different departments within the occupation authorities. The significance of this body for the Volkswagen Works can hardly be over-estimated. These meetings allowed all departments involved to work

together – face-to-face and without any red tape. Given the organisational difficulties of the day, it was of great benefit that Hirst and his staff were able to establish personal contact to these various offices. Moreover, the Board of Control was a clear reflection of Volkswagen's high standing in relation to the hierarchy of the British authorities. From such a position Hirst could work more efficiently with external contacts.



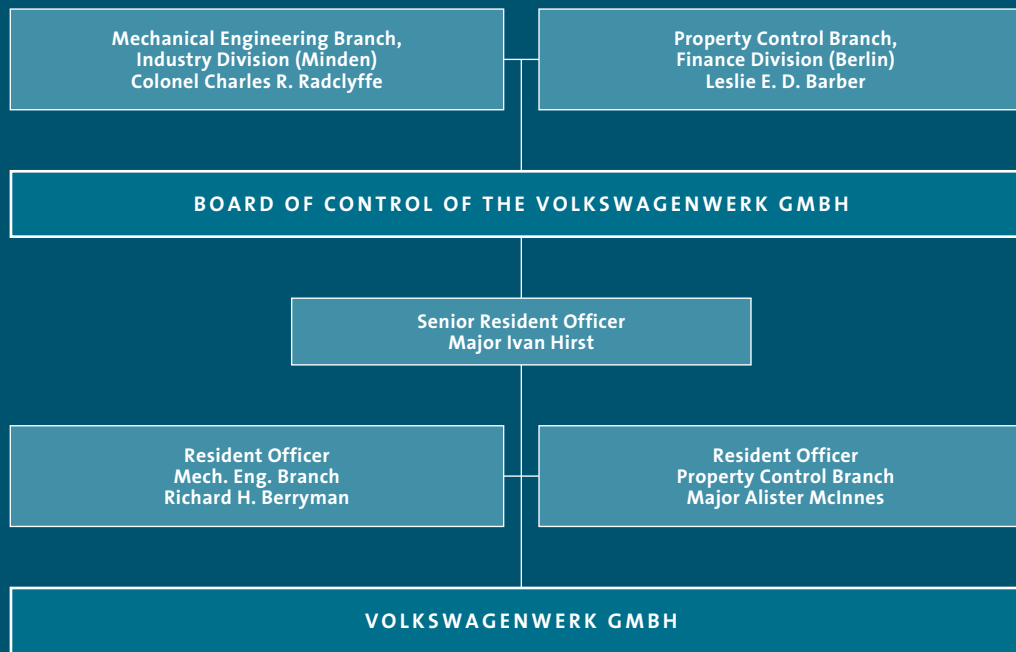
Colonel Radclyffe



Leslie E. D. Barber

Almost at the same time another great obstacle was removed: Hirst no longer had to report to the regional government in Hanover but was now assigned to the Trade and Industry Division at headquarters in Minden. The factory was now directly under the control of Colonel Radclyffe, the head of the Mechanical Engineering Branch. This was also an important development: Hirst and the Colonel had a good understanding of one another. Hirst was impressed by his superior's strength of character. Later Hirst

was to include Radclyffe, alongside individuals such as his father or McEvoy, in the list of people he most admired. Radclyffe was a sophisticated, worldly man. He was a veteran of the First World War and had got to know his Russian wife during a military assignment in Russia. While he had had an impressive army career, he had also worked on an international level in industry as an automobile expert: his career had brought him to India, England, France, Germany and to the USA.¹⁵⁸



British control structures, 1946

The advantages of being under British control were immeasurable. After the Volkswagen Works were placed under the direct control of headquarters in Minden, these advantages became even more pronounced. And Major Hirst knew how to exploit these to the full.¹⁵⁹ While other factories often did not even have the opportunity to acquire production permits or secure supplies,¹⁶⁰ Hirst expanded on Volkswagen's powers and often used unconventional means to get hold of the necessary materials. Being involved in producing for the Allies, the Volkswagen factory benefited from having priority in materials allocation. In postwar Germany raw materials were in short supply and mostly subject to rationing. The steel so vital

for car production could only be supplied in exchange for 'Eisenscheine' [ration coupons on iron]: during this early period it was practically impossible to get hold of this piece of paper.

Undaunted by this however, Major Hirst travelled directly to headquarters: "I went up regularly once a month to collect the Eisenschein merely as a gesture really to come back to Wolfsburg holding a piece of paper, to say we've got another month's production."¹⁶¹ In fact whenever an insurmountable problem cropped up Hirst travelled to Minden to see Radclyffe: "In actual day-to-day working Minden were very helpful because they applied pressure where necessary in other areas".¹⁶² This assistance from a supra-



Plattenwagen

regional level was especially valuable. It was not only the zone boundaries which often presented an insurmountable obstacle to trade but often enough municipal or district boundaries.¹⁶³ During the war Hirst had established good relations to various regiments of the British army with whom he had worked. In the postwar situation these were especially valuable.

In order to combat shortages, Hirst always had new tricks up his sleeve. Sometimes he managed to arrange a near impossible exchange in order to get hold of vital supplies. He once, for example, exchanged Volkswagen cars for steel with the French military government in Baden-Baden.¹⁶⁴ And he organised meetings

every four weeks with the sole purpose of organising spare parts, to which representatives of all British departments involved had to appear.¹⁶⁵ The supply industries needed spare parts and rationed goods themselves. So together with a German colleague Hirst put together lists of supplies which specified which departments needed glass, sheet metal, nuts and bolts etc. These lists were also brought by Hirst directly to headquarters and to the desk of his boss Radclyffe. The latter then handed on these papers – after stamping them ‘top priority’ – to the various relevant bodies in Cologne, Dortmund and Essen. He tried to put firms under as much pressure as he could in order to get all the necessary supplies immediately.¹⁶⁶

Plattenwagen

Hirst on the everyday difficulties in the factory:

“The difficulties, one of the difficulties was for internal transport in the factory. There were very few electro-cars, battery cars for taking material around the factory. So I borrowed from the British Army some forklift trucks, some petrol engine forklift trucks. Suddenly, the army said, we want those back and again Brörmann exploded and said that’s the end of production. I said, don’t be stupid, we’re a car factory, surely we can do something. So I said, we’ll take a Kübelwagen or a Käfer chassis, put a flat board at one end, put a driver’s seat over the engine, Put a steering wheel there and that became the Plattenwagen, that was used in the factory until quite recently. Just enough were built for the factory. But Pon, who was going to be the importer for Holland, he wanted these Plattenwagen for Dutch companies. Out of that, he talked to Nordhoff and out of that came the Transporter.”¹⁶⁷

3.5 The Workforce: Deprivation and Denazification

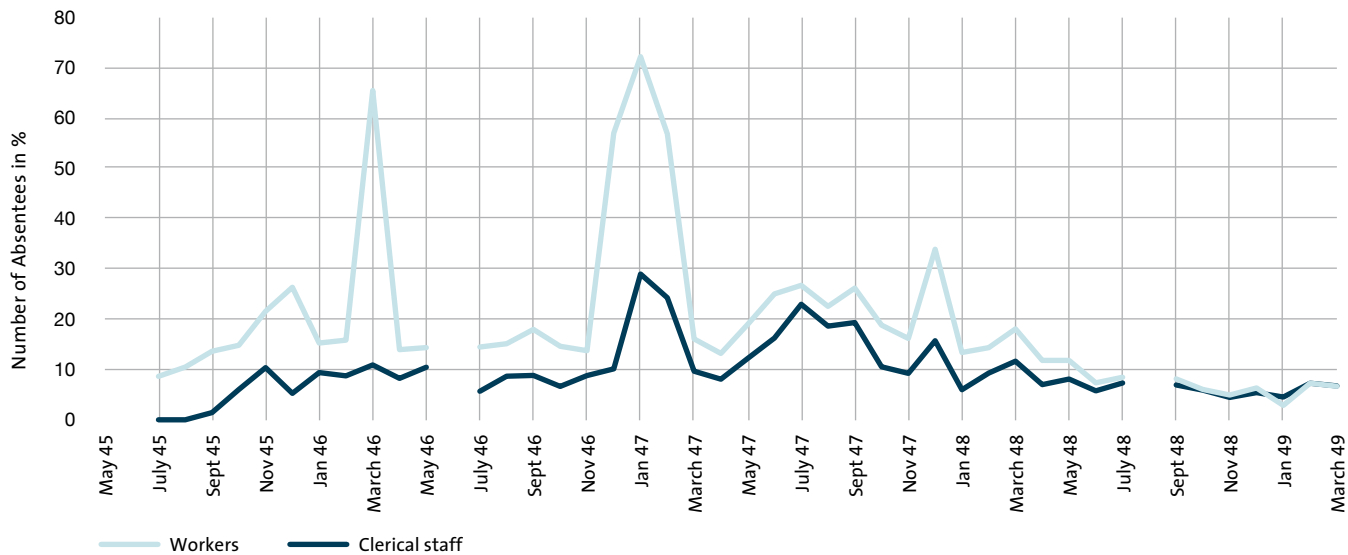
On Ivan Hirst's arrival in Wolfsburg, he was faced with a factory without any regular workforce. But he'd just got hold of an order for 40,000 cars. Hirst described the unusual situation on his arrival: "It was strange of course because in 1945 the ordinary worker in the factory went home, he was a Zwangsarbeiter [forced labourer]. So when we came to start up car production properly we had a lot of ... we had all the foreman, the Abteilungsleiter and Meister and so on but no operatives."¹⁶⁸ Hirst first approached the Manpower Division of the Military Government. It was responsible for the distribution of workers. Within the British Zone, hundreds of thousands of German prisoners of war had been released so that they could help with harvesting. A second measure led to the release of further Germans allocated to the transport system and the mines.¹⁶⁹ Hirst managed to get roughly 1,000 men of this contingent to Wolfsburg.¹⁷⁰

Soon the factory was filled with a truly mixed bunch of workers and their only real aim was to survive. Indeed, doing a hard day's work was not the issue at a time when wages didn't mean much.¹⁷¹ So lacking in motivation to work, many of the incoming workers couldn't even find somewhere to live. As elsewhere in Germany, the lack of housing was severe. As the Winter came, the exhausted population began to suffer under the low temperatures. Not surprisingly, morale was at an all-time low, as Hirst recalls, adding as he was want to do the explanation, "amid the ruins".¹⁷² The situation was truly catastrophic. The last thing the workers were worried about was the factory. In the midst of such chaos, nobody felt obliged to maintain work discipline; if there was a 'hamstering'

trip going or anything else worthwhile, workers simply stayed away from work without any explanation. During the Autumn months many workers barely started to work at all because they were busy bringing in the harvest.¹⁷³ Even those who didn't own any land were involved given that the chances of getting something to eat in the fields were higher than in the factory. In 1947 it was still the case that during some months every fourth employee stayed away from work.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, nobody stayed in this town for longer than necessary, especially those who didn't come from the area. Workforce turnover was extremely high.¹⁷⁵ The lack of workers, especially qualified ones, was immense and a problem which concerned the entire region.¹⁷⁶ In November 1945 Hirst applied for a further 2,550 workers from the labour office in Wolfsburg in order to be able to keep the production programme going.¹⁷⁷

Hirst tried to keep the workforce in Wolfsburg by tackling two of the main problems: the appalling housing situation and the lack of food.¹⁷⁸ Although the Volkswagen factory had two agricultural units of its own which were supposed to serve the workforce, Hirst had to turn further afield in order to get additional foodstuffs. In November 1945 for example, he managed to provide the workforce with some fish from Cuxhaven.¹⁷⁹

The housing shortage was particularly severe and for many years to come workers lived in huts, some even with their families. On the Board of Control Hirst insisted again and again that proper housing must be provided. In March 1946 for example Major Hirst emphasised "that it was of paramount importance that permanent houses be provided for the workers and their families, and that the

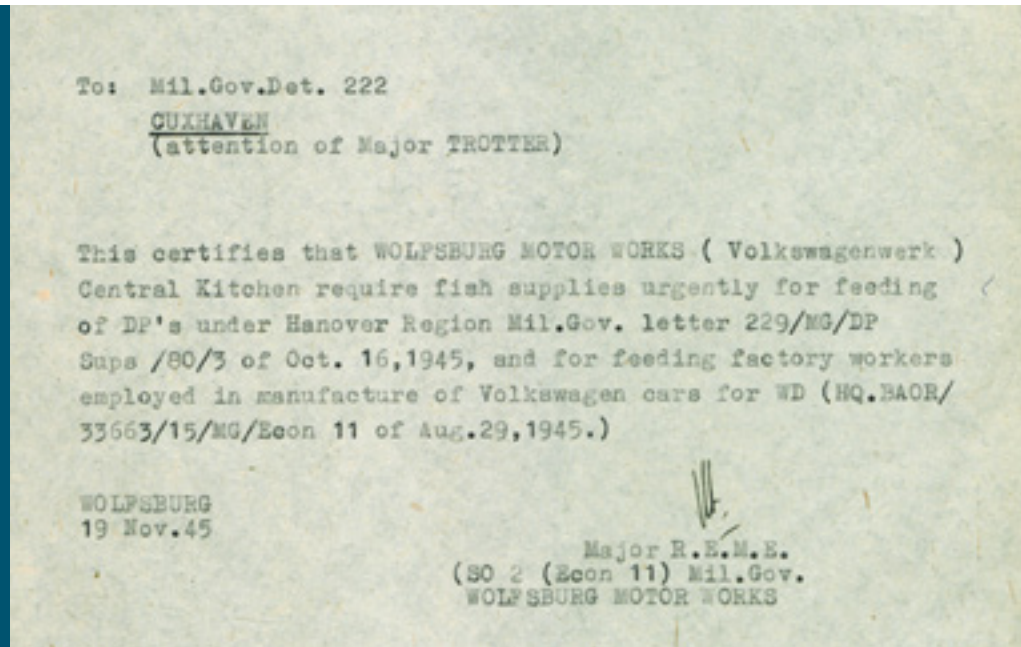


Monthly trend in absentee rate of workers and clerical staff in the Volkswagen Works, from 1945 to 1949

allocation of D.P. camp must be considered only as a stop gap”.¹⁸⁰ The board discussed all manner of ways to remedy the shortage of buildings materials.¹⁸¹ In the end however, Hirst was repeatedly told by other authorities that no supplies were available. Once it was even suggested “that badly damaged huts which could not be repaired should be used as repair materials for the less damaged ones”.¹⁸² After a long interlude more huts were built instead of proper housing.¹⁸³ Accommodation for some workers was found in neighbouring villages once Hirst had organised transport for them to get to work. Such a service was not something taken for granted in a situation where transport was scarce and an hour on foot to get to work was not unusual. With REME support Hirst managed to organise military lorries for the purpose.¹⁸⁴

In the Autumn of 1945 the British Military Government decided to implement denazification measures. In Hirst’s eyes this

decision was counter-productive and disruptive. At Volkswagen all employees now had to provide the management with an account of their actions under National Socialism. Hirst was worried that he would lose qualified workers in the process. Indeed, production suffered as a result. The atmosphere was extremely tense: within management many were uncertain if they would be able to continue their work. Hirst recalls: “At the factory I took the view, keep independent of this, the right authority must handle this, but it must be handled very quickly to get it out of the way.”¹⁸⁵ Once it was announced that denazification was to take place, Hirst personally travelled to Lüneburg in order to pick up the questionnaires to be filled out by Germans and in which details had to be made about their relations to the NS regime. Afterwards he returned the completed questionnaires back to headquarters in Lüneburg, cutting out the local district office.¹⁸⁶ Once in Lüneburg he pressed for a



Purchasing of fish from Cuxhaven, 19th November 1945

quick handling of the denazification of Volkswagen employees: “I’d say, now come on, let me have them in two days time so I can get on with the thing.”¹⁸⁷

No doubt Hirst’s demands for a quick completion of the process and his dislike of the whole affair played a role in the fact that some employees got through this first denazification wave – although Hirst always emphasised that he didn’t directly have any effect on procedures. In January 1946 Hirst could announce that denazification had been largely completed.¹⁸⁸ And in February he informed the Board of Control that denazification had taken a satisfactory course.¹⁸⁹ Hirst even nominated Brörmann for the denazification committee at district level.¹⁹⁰

Considering the significant role Brörmann had played within the factory during the Second World War, this decision was rather politically inept. It is also indicative of Hirst’s apolitical approach

to the issue. He was more concerned about the plight of individual workers. For example, he never forgot how one day he had to give one worker his notice: it bothered him and in the evening he drowned his sorrows with drink. As Hirst said with typical understatement, denazification “was a very disagreeable job”.¹⁹¹

3.6 The Eternal Optimist

Ivan Hirst’s commitment to Volkswagen went far beyond the call of duty. His identification with the factory was extremely strong. Even after decades he could still give an accurate description of the state of the factory in 1945 and list all substantial damage.¹⁹² He never forgot the problems of the postwar years and the endless technical problems he had to contend with. It is also remarkable how even in old-age Hirst remembered individual members of staff. At the time an order of the military government forbade any “fraternisation”

with the German population.¹⁹³ Yet Hirst could not only remember their names and their approach to work but also personal details about their lives before and after his years at Volkswagen. He maintained contact to some Germans for the rest of his life.¹⁹⁴ In his recollections he was never tired of emphasising that reconstruction at Volkswagen had been the work of a team and not of an individual: “Inside the factory we worked alongside the German executives. It was their hard work, and the outstanding performance of the men and women at all levels – in very difficult circumstances – which brought VW into production as a car manufacturer.”¹⁹⁵ The good relations between German staff and the British Major are all the more remarkable considering how tense relations between the occupation forces and the defeated population were during these early years. Hirst always had a good understanding of the German side and played a crucial role in smoothing over differences.¹⁹⁶

The workers appreciated Hirst’s commitment and his open approach to work won him support throughout the factory. The young major was well-liked: he wasn’t arrogant but determined. Ivan Hirst also learnt to appreciate his German staff. On March 1st 1946, after only six months in Wolfsburg, Hirst turned thirty. His German staff presented him with a ‘certificate’: “For our energetic British officer Major Hirst – the re-builder of the Volkswagen factory – on his birthday with very best wishes!”¹⁹⁷

Brigadier Galpin from headquarters in Minden also sent his regards: “I have just been told of your very fine achievements in reaching the figure 1,000 Volkswagen produced for the month of March. I would like to congratulate you and your British and German staff in this record production for the plant in what I know are exceptionally difficult conditions. I hope that you will be able to continue this level of production in the coming months, but in view of our dependency on factors outside the direct control of this Branch I fear you may not be able to. Anyway, I know that you and your staff will make every effort to achieve the ‘impossible’.”¹⁹⁸

This letter is remarkable because it documents an entirely new way of looking at the situation. No more talk of 40,000 cars, of 4,000 vehicles a month. Obviously Hirst’s superiors now realised what a brilliant feat of organisation it was to get 1,000 vehicles produced in a month. In practice the target of 1,000 cars per month represented the absolute maximum for a long time and it was a target which was often not reached. The letter also reflects the pes-

simism which clouded the future. The prognosis for Germany was still extremely bad. The transport system was still in ruins and steel production was running low.¹⁹⁹ An effective economic policy was in practice blocked by the economic and administrative division of the country, a situation exacerbated by the fact that each occupation force followed a different political and economic concept.²⁰⁰ On March 26th 1946 the Allies presented the ‘Level of Industry Plan’ which limited German industrial capacities and production to little more than half of the 1938 level.²⁰¹ While the plan was later dropped, it seemed to add insult to injury in the spring of 1946.

Nevertheless Hirst was determined not to lose faith. In the same spring he presented the saloon from Lower Saxony at an exhibition organised by the Control Commission for Germany in England. Unlike his colleagues on the Board of Control who felt the costs involved were too high, Hirst believed that publicity was vital.²⁰² He wanted to signal optimism, that there was a future and that work was worthwhile.

Indeed, faith was a commodity in desperate demand. The situation in Germany remained dramatic. The country was still in ruins and many were still suffering from starvation. The food situation in the British Zone was especially bad. Here the concentration of industry was the highest and, as a result, the population density was too, while agriculture was an insignificant factor.²⁰³ In this situation the British were forced to reduce the already minimal food rations by another 500 to 1,050 calories per day in March 1946. Originally 3,000 calories per day had been calculated for the average worker.²⁰⁴ A cry of disbelief echoed throughout the British Zone.²⁰⁵

Dr. Hermann Münch, the chief trustee appointed by Property Control wrote a desperate letter to the regional rationing offices in which he described the situation of workers: 70 per cent of employees had been allocated only standard rations although they often had to do heavy manual work. The workers suffered from famine oedemas and diarrhoea; tuberculosis was rife; many suffered from loss of balance and nervous exhaustion; the general lack of Vitamin C caused fatigue and tooth loss. Workers were repeatedly seen to collapse at their machines, exhausted and hungry. “At the same time”, as Münch continued bitterly, “the Military Government has ordered that production should be expanded to a profitable level which would secure the factory’s future. But it remains that work-



Workers in uniform

Hirst and the workers in uniform

As a military official Hirst wore uniform: German workers did too, not having anything other than their soldier's uniform to wear. Hirst felt a strong sense of comradeship. "Going around the factory I felt a comradeship, that most of these fellows were prepared to smile and take orders from the British officer, rather than some German who stayed back in Wolfsburg and had not been in Russia. We had this Kameradschaft, unspoken, unwritten of course but it was there to be felt."²⁰⁶

ing conditions are extremely unfavourable." These Münch listed as: destroyed workplaces which could hardly be repaired given the shortage in raw materials; work carried out in cellars with only artificial light, while rainfall left some workers standing up to their ankles in water. With derelict buildings not fit for use, the individual workshops were now too far away from each other; 2,400 employees and their families were still living in barracks which housed up to 14 men.²⁰⁷

Dislike of the British grew. They were held responsible for the general crisis²⁰⁸ while it was forgotten that the British were suffering from postwar deprivations too. The food shortage was part of an international crisis against which Britain, highly in debt, was more

or less helpless.²⁰⁹ The British government was forced to introduce bread rationing at home in 1946 – something which had not even been necessary during the war years.²¹⁰ Suffering from a food shortage itself, Great Britain exported a million tons of food into the British Zone between June 1945 and April 1946. Nevertheless there were rumours in the British Zone that at night ships full of German cereals were secretly disembarking and heading for England.²¹¹

The second wave of denazification further worsened relations within the British Zone.²¹² The process began in May 1946 and was the cause of much disturbance within the Volkswagen Works.²¹³ The rather superficial approach to denazification in the British Zone had become a bone of contention. In Wolfsburg former vic-



Birthday certificate, 1st March 1946

tims of the National Socialist regime protested against such lax procedures. The trade unions, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the German Communist Party (KPD) spearheaded the new British regulations under the second denazification process – much to the irritation of Hirst who believed the whole affair to be unnecessary: “The first British wave of denazification was perhaps not very cleverly done because the British Police were typical British ‘Polizeimänner’. [...] But with the German authorities, local politics would come into it and the rumblings of ‘Gesellschaft’ and so on.”²¹⁴

Again Hirst had little sympathy for the denazification programme. He disliked the German thoroughness with which the factory was now scrutinised. In addition he felt the process was now tainted by acts of personal revenge.²¹⁵ Similar reactions were voiced in the public discussion. The conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party and the Catholic church attacked the so-called denazification committees. The most prominent case was that of Rudolf Brörmann. He believed himself to be the victim of a trade union intrigue. His dictatorial management style and his suspicions of almost everyone meant that no-one felt obliged to weigh the accusations against his great achievements for VW in years before.²¹⁶ Brörmann never got over the loss of his position.²¹⁷ His



Exhausted worker

successor was the lawyer Dr. Hermann Münch, the chief trustee appointed by Property Control Branch. On August 1st 1946 he began in his double function as main trustee and general director.

So again Hirst had to send employees away. During three days alone, from July 17th–19th 1946, 179 employees received their notice, and a total of 227 employees had to leave.²¹⁸ Even though some of these did return to the factory in the end, the fear of denunciation and the psychological consequences of this general sense of insecurity were far-reaching. The procedure dragged on for many months, with new announcements and alterations. As so often Hirst had great understanding for the situation of his German staff: “On the German side, however, the position was by no means a happy one. [...] This process reached a peak when the responsibility for deciding individual cases was delegated to panels of local Germans. Feelings ran high in a one-factory town like Wolfsburg.”²¹⁹

Yet despite all these tensions, it was Hirst’s achievement that the most acrimonious disputes and most fatal shortages could be

avoided at Volkswagen: his skill in co-operation and ability to establish the necessary consensus and his immense commitment to the factory were decisive. The works council worked together with plant management very closely. They met to discuss production and the works council was involved in the distribution of food and social benefits. As a result the workforce in Volkswagen had more to eat than other inhabitants within the British Zone. At the same time, given the involvement of their own representatives within the factory, the workforce must have been aware of the fact that the British really did not have any more supplies to distribute.²²⁰ A British Field Security Reserve Detachment Report described the mood of the population in Wolfsburg as follows: “The attitude of the local population in Wolfsburg towards the occupation force is satisfactory. Generally it is recognised that the occupation forces behave correctly and that they provide the inhabitants with as much assistance as possible when necessary.”²²¹

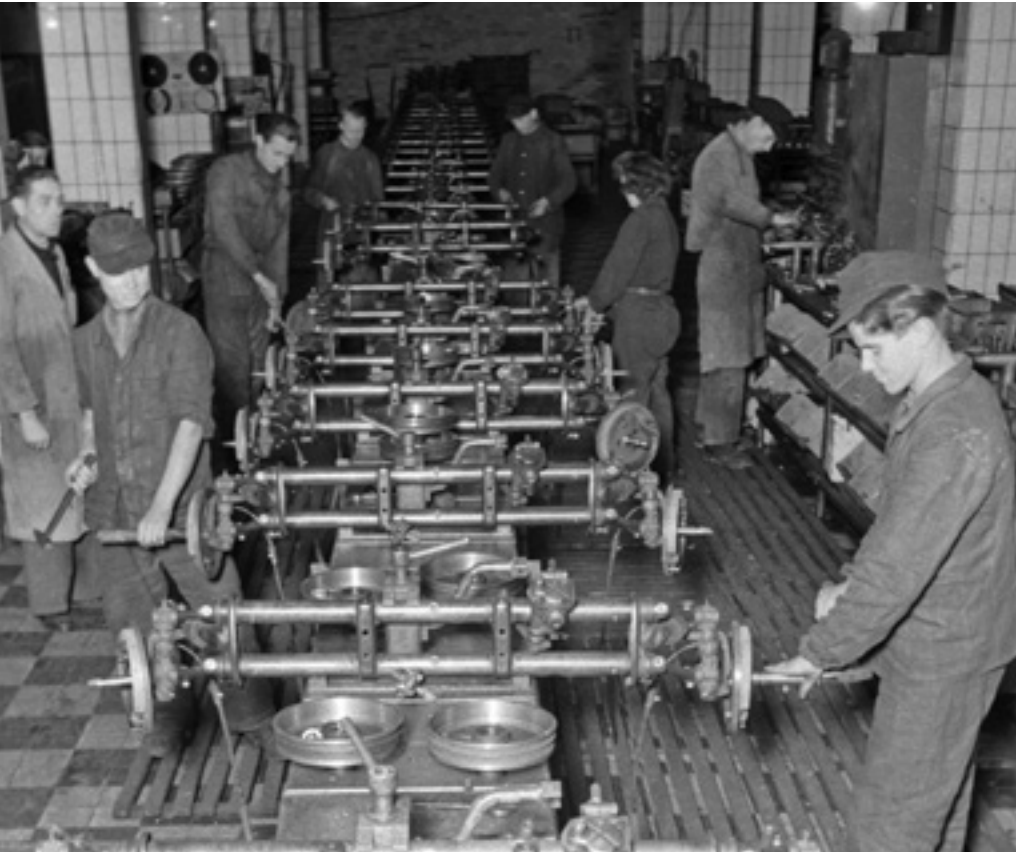


Exhausted worker

The sheer immensity of the problems could have created a sense of paralysis but Major Hirst worked on a step-by-step improvement of the situation. The clearing of rubble and tidying-up of the site continued.²²² In June 1946 he informed his plant manager that he was shocked that the work wasn't finished yet: "1) Clearance of main plant areas has cost much – and results are still disappointing [...] 2) Instruct responsible Depts to finish off the work in a proper manner. 3) I will inspect the whole area in seven days time."²²³ During the summer Hirst used the week-long factory closure to move machinery which was still on the basement floor to the production halls above. It was only now that sufficient work had been done on renovating the premises.²²⁴ The situation had been worsened by the lack of parts. Substitutes had to be made in-house, making it necessary to set up new production lines.²²⁵ Not surprisingly 1,000 vehicles a month remained the target.²²⁶

With an eye to reducing costs, the officers on the Board of Control responsible for the Volkswagen Works suggested that finance experts should be invited in to carry out an independent audit of production.²²⁷ This was a decisive step towards achieving clarity in financial affairs. In October 1946 further machinery was brought into the production halls: the presses for small parts were put into the freshly renovated rooms which best fitted in to the infrastructure of the factory, thus shortening transport distances.²²⁸

Hirst then had his first opportunity to look at quality control: "Quality was clearly an objective as the 'Inspektionsabteilung' was very weak."²²⁹ Hirst was on the look-out for a capable individual able to manage the department. But qualified employees were in short supply. Once again the dominance of the British proved to be of great advantage to Volkswagen: the REME presence within the factory meant that practically the best qualified people were right at hand. So Hirst simply put quality control under REME supervision even though they were really working independently within



Axle assembly in washrooms

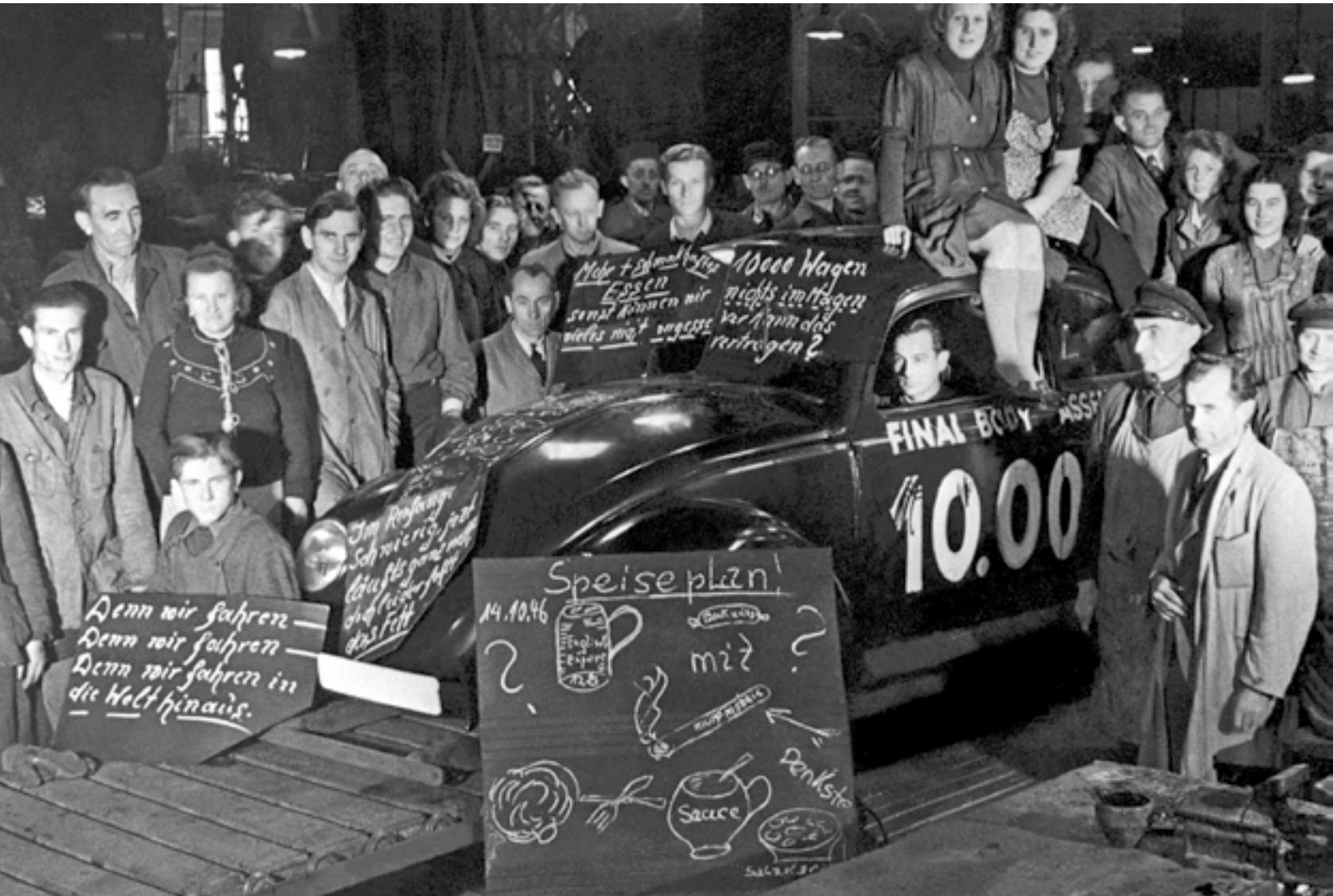
their own repair workshop. The appointment of the future German chief inspector was then in turn to be approved by the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. Moreover, as Hirst's organisation plan of 1946 illustrated, the chief inspector was to report directly to REME while all departments were to be included in his field of work. In addition, Hirst insisted that the inspectors on the production line work more closely together with the chief inspector, informing him of errors as they arose.²³⁰ It was a lengthy process before a well-functioning quality management had been set up.

However, the right man for the job was nowhere to be found. So Hirst inquired at the British army if a team of sergeants could be sent to Wolfsburg. Hirst got the team he wanted and they proved

to be very good. Although they were really only responsible for the final inspection of vehicles, they were involved in all the inspection departments. The leading officer was a metallurgist by profession and had many good ideas to contribute to quality improvement. Together with Hirst he developed an error-reporting system. Whenever there was a problem with a car – whether within the factory or off-site – the workshop involved had to send a report to the inspection department; an inquiry then followed within the factory: whether in customer service, the inspection department or the production departments.²³¹ Finally Hirst was able to find a suitable German chief inspector: Helmut Orlich. Orlich had worked for Opel in Rüsselsheim.²³²



Production milestone: 10,000th Volkswagen, October 1946



Workforce comments on the 10.000th Volkswagen, October 1946

Hirst was untiring in his efforts. In mid-1946 his attention was caught by the question of noise levels. In June the Major informed the plant manager that he was unhappy with the level of gearbox noise.²³³ And only a month later customer service issued a letter informing the buyer of a Volkswagen car which measures had been introduced to damp engine noise: in detail it was described how wool, felt and jute had been used to reduce noise levels.²³⁴ Gradually vehicle and road safety regulations took on more significance. Together with his plant manager, Hirst checked whether the horn, indicators, windscreen-wipers and ignition lock met with the stipulated requirements.²³⁵

In October 1946 the 10,000th Volkswagen rolled off the assembly line. Photos show a proud workforce – and Major Ivan Hirst in

their midst. Even though nowhere near as many cars had been produced as initially planned, the production of 10,000 vehicles was still a remarkable achievement. Yet an entirely different photo also documents the occasion: again, the same celebrated 10,000th car, but with a board leaning against it. Workers had listed their real wishes on the board: a proper meal, beer – a life free of worry. And on another board an attack on the unbearable situation: “10,000 cars, but nothing to eat. Can we bear it?”

And yet in November 1946 a step of symbolic significance already followed: apprentices were taken on for the first time. Training young people was a clear vote for the future and a fundamental step towards creating a permanent workforce.²³⁶



4. Reshaping the Company 1947–1949





4.1 The Daily Work of a Military Manager

Setting up a car factory to operate effectively was a difficult task. Hirst's day began in the early hours with breakfast in the officers' mess which was located in the former guesthouse of the factory. He was out on the factory floor early, making his rounds, improvising solutions together with the staff to cope with the general shortage of materials. There was office work to deal with, and he had to follow up queries from other officers and the German management. At least once a week a meeting was held with German representatives to sort out the materials purchasing situation.²³⁷ A great deal of time was also taken up by Hirst's frequent trips to headquarters in Minden with which he hoped to accelerate affairs.

At lunchtime Hirst often accompanied guests to the officers' mess. The factory was well-known, even famous, as an Allied success story and attracted a steady flow of visitors. Despite all the problems at Volkswagen, operations were running comparatively smoothly compared to the general stagnation pervading elsewhere. Soldiers and officers from the French Air Force, the US Army and the Red Army travelled to visit the factory. Some visitors were simply curious and were in Hirst's eyes only an irritating waste of time. Yet others had a real interest in the factory. Major Hirst recollected that he was able to learn a lot from some visitors and some had pro-

vided expert technical advice. And when influential visitors arrived Hirst used the opportunity to get special conditions or extra deliveries. In this respect the time taken up by guided tours, test drives and the like was a good investment.²³⁸

On an average day Ivan Hirst finished work at 6pm in order to have dinner in the officers' mess. Until 1947 his wife remained in London, where she worked as an optician: "So I was a bachelor, I was alone for two years".²³⁹ With barely a private life to speak of, Hirst's identification with his work was total: the Volkswagen factory was his life. His only relaxation was provided by the officers' mess. While the furnishings could not be described as lavish, the rooms had a certain elegance. After dinner he often retired to the salon, smoked his pipe and talked to colleagues. Often enough the topic of conversation was the factory.²⁴⁰

Although the Allies had more to eat than the Germans, provisions were modest and supplies were always a concern. Rations were small and younger officers tried to improve the situation and get some more life into the mess. They decided to invite other officers. Gradually Polish or French officers appeared, medical officers or officers from secret services.

The officers' mess

The young British officers tried to get a bit more life into the mess and to secure better rations by inviting other military men. As Hirst remembered, these included three Polish officers from DP camps:

“It was a most uncomfortable decision, because one was a London Pole, another one was a Warsaw Pole, I discovered of peasant origin, and the other one was a Warsaw Pole, but had previously been a landowner, and neither one spoke to another. These three chaps, they're all Poles, dressed alike but they wouldn't sit down at table together.”²⁴¹



Officers' mess

Despite such efforts, the situation remained miserable enough. “The bar closed at 10:00, except when I ran into trouble with the president of the mess committee by keeping it open later,” as Hirst recollected. As even more visitors came to Wolfsburg, and these included a growing number of civilians, Hirst recommended the mess be transformed into a transit mess which civilians could also visit without being members. In this manner Major Hirst succeeded in being able to provide food and lodging for his visitors without any official problems.²⁴² All in all, however, life in Wolfsburg was not very colourful. Apart from the mess, there was nowhere in town to go for these young Englishmen.

Saturday was a workday, so the weekends were short. Whenever Hirst wanted to get out of Wolfsburg, he drove to the neighbouring town of Braunschweig (Brunswick), to the hairdressers or to eat. In Gifhorn there was even a British Officers' Club which Hirst occasionally visited. Taking a weekend drive to the Harz and visiting Goslar or Bad Harzburg was a real holiday by comparison. Hirst spent his evenings and weekends with visitors.²⁴³ The chal-

lenge of work compensated for the limited leisure activities. Hirst was the boss – but in his eyes this meant being a dogsbody.

Although the shortages were severe the young officer enjoyed the challenge of improvisation. He often did jobs which weren't really his responsibility but were not being dealt with by anyone else either. He tackled problems of which others were unaware. He even got involved in press relations in cases of particular urgency: in his eyes German managers lacked the necessary skills.²⁴⁴

It seems that Major Hirst's superiors were not really aware of the fact that he was the centre of operations at Volkswagen. Once production was operating relatively smoothly at the end of 1946, it was considered that the Industry Division had done its work and that Major Hirst could be posted elsewhere. The British occupation costs were exceptionally high and Great Britain, burdened by the weight of its American wartime debts, was itself close to economic ruin.²⁴⁵ The British had strong grounds for wanting the Volkswagen Works to serve their own interests. The aim was to establish a strong management – which was of course primarily to serve the



Cabriolet, built on request of British officers

Allies – and to promote the commercial development of the company.²⁴⁶

The plans for the Bizone at the end of 1946 were a further indication of the fact that the British intended to leave the factory in German hands – sooner or later. On January 1st 1947 the American and British zones were to merge. Accordingly the British would reduce their administrative apparatus and create market economy conditions for economic development in Germany. The British hoped for an economic upswing in order to reduce the costs of occupation. The creation of the Bizone reflected the joint economic policy of the two allies. It expressly aimed at the reconstruction of Germany and thus overruled the Level of Industry Plan. The administrative office for the economy in the Bizone was now transferred to Minden. This was a real stroke of luck for Volkswagen: now staff had all the most important authorities at one location.²⁴⁷

On September 30th 1946 Hirst had been granted the rank of War Substantive Major and at the CCG he performed duties equivalent to the military rank of Lieutenant Colonel.²⁴⁸ The Board of Control planned to transfer Hirst’s responsibilities from the Mechanical Engineering Branch to the Property Control Branch. This meant that F.T. Neal, the civilian member of staff representing Property Control at Volkswagen,²⁴⁹ was supposed to take on Hirst’s job as well.²⁵⁰ It was the intention of the Board that Hirst and Radclyffe should make only occasional appearances in order to make sure things were running well. However Property Control was opposed to this decision, fearing that Allied interests would not be upheld if production was not supervised – and they were to be proved right.²⁵¹ Hirst’s departure in December 1946 coincided with a terrible Winter which paralysed the German economy and threatened to undo much reconstruction work. For the first time Major Hirst was able to take leave: he left for England to see his wife.²⁵²

4.2 The Major Proves Indispensable

The winter of 1946/47 was harder than any other known throughout the century. In many European states, including Great Britain, it remained bitterly cold until well into March.²⁵³ In Germany the transport system had still been in a bad state anyway and now it fell into total collapse. Fuel and coal were scarce and railway points

were frozen solid. The last remaining option for the transport of heavy goods was also lost once the Mittelland canal was covered by a thick sheet of ice. At Volkswagen the press shop still had no roof and under such low temperatures the presses could no longer be used. The worst case imaginable set in: production had to be stopped for more than two months. Between January 7th and March 10th 1947 not a single car was produced.²⁵⁴

As the severe winter dragged on, the British increasingly got the impression that factory management was more concerned about organising supplies for the workforce on the black market than keeping production going. Soon it became obvious that the German management had only a limited scope for action.²⁵⁵ Hirst tried to save what he could and, despite his official departure, remained in his old job in Wolfsburg. After a few weeks it became generally recognised that Hirst was indispensable: “So I then moved back to Wolfsburg. I hadn’t moved away but officially I went back again.”

After his leave, Major Hirst now re-emerged as a civilian member of staff within the German Section of the British Foreign Ministry.²⁵⁶ Hirst chose to take on this temporary position at the CCG because salary levels were higher within the civilian administration. His rank continued to be that of Lieutenant Colonel, his official title in the factory was now Senior Control Officer (SCO).²⁵⁷

Given the irregularities of the day, Ivan Hirst made sure he retook control of affairs. It seemed that the German management had drawn the wrong conclusion from the partial departure of the British from the factory. In particular German managers had hoped to be able to freely allocate vehicles. On his return, Hirst made it very clear that “in the next few years the distribution of vehicles from the Volkswagen Works would not be comparable with the situation in other automobile firms, but that deliveries would primarily serve the English and American armies.”²⁵⁸

He informed his staff about the decision of the Control Board on March 18th 1947 that “for six months from 1.4.1947 production at the Volkswagen Works should reach 1,000 vehicles a month.”²⁵⁹ After the long hard Winter and the total collapse of production the British had returned to their older more modest target. Nevertheless production got underway and by the Summer the target of

Hunger in Wolfsburg

Hirst on the lack of food in postwar Germany:

“As late as 1947 when my wife first came to Wolfsburg until we got the house at Steimkerberg she shared a little room with me and we heard a noise outside during the night. The next morning we found one man killed another man outside, just a murder. There were gardens at the back at that time and one man had been growing potatoes, Kartoffeln, and he found somebody else lifting the potatoes so he went for him with his potato cultivator and killed him.”²⁶⁰

Hirst on the black market boom

The following story was not unusual for these years: “The head of the Kripo came to my office one day, correction, it was a Saturday afternoon, he came to the officers’ mess. He said could I recognise some dies, some Stempel, beautiful hand made ones for printing ration tickets for Fett and Fleisch. Could I recognise the hand work, the Handarbeit. I said no, but it was nice work. So I said should I ask the tool-room foreman, or somebody, if he could recognise them? He said no, no, no, we have a tip, we’re going to raid tonight. I said yes. He said yes, and we believe that they’re working in Fallersleben printing these black market things. I said let me know how you get on. On Monday morning he came to the office in the factory, looking not very happy. I said how did you get on? He said, we got three printing presses, ten people. I said you must be pleased. He said, well, yes and no. While we were carrying out the raid, somebody stole our police car, can we borrow a Käfer?”²⁶¹



Press shop

1,000 vehicles per month had been achieved. All in all there were reasons for optimism. At the Board of Control meeting on July 21st 1947, Hirst stated that there had been much discussion of production capabilities, but that once the factory had been supplied with a very limited amount of additional machinery available from within Germany, it would be possible “to raise production to two thousand cars per month by January 1948”.²⁶² Even the production maximum of 2,500 vehicles per month could be reached within a year.

Of course, numerous problems and obstacles still remained. The labour shortage remained acute in 1947 and a regular workforce still did not exist. Once the gaps could no longer be filled with released German POWs, the British were glad to be sent Displaced Persons (DPs) of other nationalities. In October 1946 the British military government had even introduced an official work requirement for DPs.²⁶³ In Hirst’s eyes they were welcome “stopgaps”.²⁶⁴ The British were prepared to integrate DPs in order to increase production. Hundreds of Yugoslavians were to be accommodated in the so-called “Lettenlager” once the camp had been vacated by the Latvians.²⁶⁵ Living conditions left great scope for improvement and the British knew that the DPs were “living in the D.P. camp under very bad conditions”.²⁶⁶

The Volkswagen Works were now slowly approaching the transition to real market growth in production and sales. However, as this turning-point drew closer, Hirst became more and more aware

of a serious problem relating to the leading heads within the German factory management. While Dr. Hermann Münch worked hard as chief trustee, he did little for company development in his function as general director. An expert in legal affairs, he was not suited to dealing with the demands of a growing car production. He was a very intelligent and hardworking man who had maintained opposition to the National Socialists, for example by maintaining contacts with the Czech resistance.²⁶⁷ A man of democratic convictions, he pressed for a new democratic works constitution at Volkswagen after the war. However Münch had little knowledge of technical matters – which was the all-important issue, not only in Hirst’s eyes. Hirst described him as a “good, kindly person – a good custodian in the legal and accountancy sense – but neither he nor one or two people who came with him had the know-how or technical expertise to run a major manufacturing company.”²⁶⁸

As a result Ivan Hirst could not expect any help in solving technical difficulties. In Hirst’s opinion Münch also lacked an awareness for practical difficulties in production.²⁶⁹ Hirst repeatedly found himself fighting against disorder and messiness and often enough had to personally follow up repair work.²⁷⁰ Here Münch was barely a help either, although Münch’s responsibilities included work safety. In December 1947 for example Hirst found unacceptable working conditions: welders working without protective goggles, women working near machinery without their hair tied back,



Body shop

paint shop workers without masks. Many band saws and presses lacked basic protective equipment. With noticeable irritation he passed on his instructions to the general director: “Please see to the immediate revision of existing work safety regulations and make sure that these are in practice followed in every respect.”²⁷¹

His private life brought some recompense. In 1947 his wife joined him in Germany which was, as he himself always emphasised, a great relief. Naturally Marjorie Hirst shared in the same problem so many other wives faced after being reunited with their husbands after so many years of war: their husbands were not the same. The war had changed Ivan a lot, as she later explained, he had become somewhat uncouth.²⁷² At first the couple had to live in Hirst’s small apartment but soon they were able to move to the Steimkerberg. Here they had their own, albeit small, semi-detached house. As Hirst recollected: “Nice house, not very big but nicely built, with a nice little garden.”²⁷³

4.3 Obstacles on the Way to the World Market

In Hirst’s recollections the year of 1947 represents a turning-point in the history of the Volkswagen Works. He regarded the period prior to 1947 as one of reconstruction; a period of crises and improvisation during which the Volkswagen saloon could only be produced in limited numbers, but during which the basic foundations were laid for what then was swiftly transformed into a flourishing factory.²⁷⁴ In the summer of 1947 Hirst believed there to

be every reason for more optimism – despite remaining problems: “We on the CCG Board for VW now believed that VWV would have a future.”²⁷⁵

Indeed, the general picture suggested economic recovery was near. In June 1947 the US Foreign Minister George C. Marshall outlined a comprehensive programme of economic assistance for Europe in a speech held before students at Harvard University. The European Recovery Program (ERP) was to accelerate the reconstruction process in Europe.²⁷⁶ In addition an Anglo-American agency for international trade was set up in the Bizone. The Joint Export-Import Agency (JEIA) in Frankfurt/Main was to promote German exports and use returns to secure vital imports for the Bizone.²⁷⁷ Both the Americans and the British wanted to make their occupation force more efficient and to transfer more responsibilities to the Germans. In this situation the threat of dismantlement disappeared into the background as far as the Volkswagen factory was concerned. It was agreed that the factory should continue to exist in order to play a significant part in the German export trade.

Given this new situation the reaction of the British military government in the person of Major Hirst was to hold a meeting in Minden in order to co-ordinate all those institutions relevant to affairs at Volkswagen.²⁷⁸ In July 1947 Hirst explained to the German factory management that “it could be regarded as almost certain that the factory would not be dismantled. Issues of ownership could however only be sorted out once all zones had agreed to one proce-

ture. Given that such an agreement seemed improbable in the near future, the factory would continue to remain under control – probably for many years to come.²⁷⁹

In August 1947 the British decided to set up a German administration with its own far-reaching responsibilities which was to work independently within the Bizone with newly established German authorities, such as an office for economic affairs (Verwaltungsamt für Wirtschaft).²⁸⁰ It was also “envisaged that at some future date the activities of the Board of Control will devolve upon a purely German body”. Of course such plans for the future were based on the premise that “such an Aufsichtsrat can be so trained that it would operate in accordance with Allied policy and principles ...”.²⁸¹

In the Western zones the mood was optimistic. In the Volkswagen factory great plans for the future were also being made. On March 22nd 1947 Hirst informed the German factory management of the exciting news that “the possibility of exporting Volkswagens was being considered”.²⁸² Yet the world of international trade was still a long way away. Exports would only be possible if production levels both covered Allied demand and the quality of production was sufficient. While Hirst was a master of improvisation, his aim was not to complete the job in a shoddy fashion but to achieve the best result with what little means were available. Hirst comments: “Quality, of course, is an essential part of a motor vehicle. In those days with the various second class material, sheet steel of poor quality, not properly annealed temper, and of very poor textiles, [...]

it was a matter of making do with what we could get. So the early cars were of very poor quality but the fact that they were so defective meant that it was even more important to achieve the best quality we could, so quality was important even in those days to get cars that would run and keep running.”²⁸³

Although the worst problems had been identified by the quality control set up in 1946 under REME supervision, there was still a lot to do. Doors and bonnets didn’t close properly. Gearbox damage was common. The glass used for headlights and inside lighting often shattered. In many cases carburettors were already blocked before the vehicle left the site and the bodywork had severe faults and rust problems. These problems were partly due to the fact that there was no suitable space to store the new vehicles where they were protected from the weather.²⁸⁴ The consequences were catastrophic: nearly every new vehicle had to be touched up if not totally repainted before leaving the site.²⁸⁵ Complaints increased.²⁸⁶

With a view to the option of exporting, Ivan Hirst took the issue of complaints very seriously.²⁸⁷ Even while the factory was shutdown due to extreme frost he made plans in the spring of 1947 for an inspection committee which was supposed to supervise the spare parts store. After returning from England he had become aware of how badly stores were organised.²⁸⁸ Frequently customer service was not supplied with the spare parts required. F.T. Neal emphasised the importance of this issue on the Board of Control: “Mr. Neal said that the matter of non delivery of spares to workshops should be taken up at a high level as the car was getting a still fur-

ther bad name through the country.”²⁸⁹ Hirst called for a working committee to identify and solve the root problem. Hirst discussed the situation with all the members of staff involved and assigned Helmut Orlich the task of keeping order. And plans were made to restructure quality control mechanisms.²⁹⁰

In the midst of shortage and extreme difficulties some thought that quality control and inspection were superfluous – a luxury. The conviction was widespread that since materials were in short supply, quality was not really the issue. So any policy on quality faced innumerable hurdles. Instead of tackling the problems, the situation was allowed to drift and responsibility was passed on. As a result tensions increased between the British and the Germans. Some German members of staff believed the British to be indirectly responsible for the low quality. After all, it was the British who were constantly pushing for a productivity drive. Given the labour shortage and the scarcity of work materials, improved quality seemed out of the question.²⁹¹ While Hirst refused to tolerate this approach to the problem, his hands were bound: on the one hand it was vital that the Volkswagen Works achieved production targets; on the other hand it was clear that Volkswagen needed to build up a good reputation to safeguard its existence in the future. The constant stream of complaints contradicted the vision of a top quality car producer.

Hirst tackled the problem directly within production. It was in line with his direct approach to management that he sometimes personally carried out quality controls by examining cars as they

came off the production line.²⁹² Wherever he could he removed the obstacles himself. For example, as complaints about broken steering arms increased and no solution could be found, Hirst managed to organise a detector from the British Army. The detector could test the steering arms for fractures prior to installation.²⁹³ Hirst also ordered that all defective parts should be sent back for testing.²⁹⁴ Hirst had an eye for detail: during a period dominated by shortage he issued the order that all black vehicles must also be equipped with black steering wheels.²⁹⁵ Hirst also played a significant role in establishing customer services. In this field Dr. Karl Feuereissen, a capable man and car enthusiast, provided valuable support.²⁹⁶ Progress was made and the numbers of complaints dropped dramatically. In June 1947 staff reported on developments: “During the first half of 1947 numerous experiments and tests were carried out in order to improve the quality of Volkswagen production. While the pace of progress is naturally slow with regard to bodywork, chassis construction already has remarkable results. First of all the fittings and gearbox were overhauled in order to make sure the individual components could be assembled without difficulty.”²⁹⁷

In order to promote export plans, Hirst made a detailed plan of how to raise production standards at Volkswagen together with the German factory management in July 1947. The monitoring of materials and production standards was to be intensified and machinery improved. The second step of the plan consisted of design modifications without fundamental alterations, either to the model itself or to the manufacturing process. The long-term aim of

“... re-designing the Volkswagen, will not be undertaken at present, until the Works are properly established and in full production”.²⁹⁸ In August 1947 Hirst set the short-term target of increasing production to 2,500 vehicles per month by the end of the year.²⁹⁹ Hirst was particularly concerned about the quality of cars for the foreign market. He recognised that the international reputation of the Volkswagen Works would be based on the quality of these vehicles. These were thus subject to tighter controls. With ‘de luxe’ class furnishings, better paintwork and more comfortable upholstery, these cars were available in a broader range of colours; the bumpers and wheel caps were in chrome.³⁰⁰ Throughout the summer of 1947 the British and their German staff worked extremely hard at turning the Volkswagen into a car fit for export. The industrial exhibition in Hanover in August 1947 aimed in particular to promote the export trade within the Bizone. Here the Volkswagen Works officially presented its products for the first time.³⁰¹ And with regard to two demonstration models set to promote the Volkswagen in Switzerland Hirst issued clear stipulations: “The cars must already be driven in before delivery. Each car must have clocked up 1,000 km and then be decarbonised etc. The bodywork must be of a high standard – not too glossy but in the same way as the better cars on site. Chrome headlights, bumpers and wheel caps are required. Seat covers should be of a higher quality, made out of the same material used for the new chauffeur uniforms.”³⁰²

The Paris motor show in October 1947 represented the next real test. The first international motoring exhibition would show whether the Volkswagen could be sold internationally. Accompanied by Charles Radclyffe from headquarters, Ivan Hirst was nervous as he travelled to Paris. Hirst’s fears about reactions to the Volkswagen proved unfounded. The Volkswagen caught the postwar mood with its robust and simple style. The exhibition underlined that the Volkswagen was very cost-effective compared to other models. From Hirst’s and Radclyffe’s point of view it was the Škoda which represented the most direct point of comparison.³⁰³

In October 1947 the first five Volkswagen cars were exported to the Netherlands. An export agreement had already been made on August 8th 1947 between the Volkswagen Works and the Dutch Pon Brothers. However Hirst had pulled back the first delivery once he had realised that the customer service workshops still lacked the necessary tools. Hirst waited until all repair services could be guaranteed before allowing the Volkswagen saloons to be exported.³⁰⁴ Despite the great efforts being made and despite all the stipulations issued by the military government, production remained at the already achieved level of 1,000 vehicles per month. Both the British and the Germans had to admit that production levels were determined by an economy in which everything was in short supply. Neither the decisions made by the Military Government nor those made by the German factory management seemed to have any real immediate effect.³⁰⁵

Export model



4.3 A German Boss

As the commercial significance of the Volkswagen Works became clearer, all those involved recognised that the German factory management had to become more efficient and be allowed to take on more responsibilities.³⁰⁶ The rather tense relations between the British Military Government and the chief trustee and first general director of the Volkswagenwerk GmbH, Dr. Hermann Münch, had worsened in September 1947 after the latter had made business contacts in Switzerland without securing the prior agreement of the British. The Board of Control was up in arms over the move: “There is a great danger in permitting Germans to have control over foreign currencies.”³⁰⁷ Münch was informed that he had obviously misjudged the situation and was reprimanded by Hirst.³⁰⁸ Primarily, however, it was Münch’s lack of technical expertise which became more and more of a problem. The commercial side of management had the reputation of having absolutely no understanding of technical matters and as a result was thought incapable of working productively with the engineering department. Again and again Hirst detected faults in the production process which fell under the responsibilities of Dr. Münch.³⁰⁹ Hirst and Radclyffe finally came to the conclusion that the only way forward was to find a techni-

cal expert to assist Münch in his work.³¹⁰ In September 1947 Major Hirst informed Dr. Hermann Münch: “We have often discussed the weaknesses in the running of technical affairs in the Works. We urgently need a capable head engineer.” Hirst concluded: “In the meantime you carry the responsibility for making sure all technical staff join in an effective work effort.”³¹¹ Indeed, the underlying animosity of relations became more and more obvious. In November Hirst sent the following memo to Münch: “When I was in factory about 10:00 hrs on 5 Nov 1947 – the whole place was ‘lazy’ and idle men were to be seen everywhere. If there was no drop in production on 5 Nov [19]47 – with the Works ‘lazy’ – then you must have too many workers.”³¹²

Hirst was on the look out for a new man. While he was involved in the expansion of the customer service network he heard of a certain Heinrich Nordhoff. Nordhoff had gained a great deal of experience within the German car industry and during the Second World War had managed the Opel plant in Brandenburg following his appointment as ‘Wehrwirtschaftsführer’. Given his role in the war industry he was effectively blocked from taking on any leading role in the American zone where the denazification programme was



Heinrich Nordhoff

more stringent.³¹³ Nordhoff found work as a customer service manager in Hamburg.³¹⁴

So Nordhoff was not in a very favourable position when Hirst first approached him. The Major invited the engineer to come to Wolfsburg. Nordhoff accepted the invitation and Ivan Hirst realised that Nordhoff was an exceptionally capable man: “He had the depth of knowledge and he was clearly a man of broad horizons.”³¹⁵ Hirst took a liking to Nordhoff and sent him on to headquarters in Minden as Radclyffe had to agree to his appointment.³¹⁶ Nordhoff made such a good impression – he was polite, eloquent and English-speaking – that the British more or less on the spot decided to not only appoint Nordhoff as technical director but also to offer him Münch’s post as general director. Significantly Nordhoff had never

been a member of the NSDAP so from the British point of view there was no obstacle to his appointment.³¹⁷

On November 7th 1947 the Board of Control appointed Nordhoff as general director. It was decided that Münch would be allowed to continue as chief trustee.³¹⁸ The British informed Hermann Münch that he was to be replaced by Nordhoff in a rather cold letter three weeks after the decision to appoint Nordhoff as general director had been made.³¹⁹ Münch was caught entirely unawares by this decision.³²⁰ Münch regarded himself as hard-working and he had expertise to offer. In his eyes Heinrich Nordhoff’s appointment represented his effective demotion and was as such unjustified. After a brief period Münch handed in his notice. It was accepted by the Board of Control in March 1948.³²¹

Nordhoff under the scrutiny of Mrs. Hirst

Hirst on Nordhoff's first appearance in Wolfsburg:

“He came to Wolfsburg for two days and he spent a lot of time with me. He even joined us one evening at the Steimkerberg. My wife said: ‘He looked clean and tidy.’ Which helped a bit. Nordhoff was clearly a man who understood what happened in a factory and he knew where we required assistance. He did not like the Beetle. He had a grasp of the financial side and certainly the commercial side and so when I saw him on the second afternoon I said: ‘I’m afraid I cannot recommend you for the job I’ve been interviewing you for.’ So he picked up his Aktentasche. I said: ‘Hold on a minute.’ I said: ‘What I’m going to suggest is that our present general director should retire at the end of the year and that you should take the top job. But I cannot say so, I must depend on our board and in particular Charles Radclyffe the chairman, my chief.’ So he went on to Minden and Radclyffe agreed with me and that’s how Nordhoff came in.”³²²

On January 1st 1948 Heinrich Nordhoff began his work as general director of the Volkswagen Works GmbH. Nordhoff was to take responsibility not only for car production but also for the repair of British military vehicles. As general director he was in charge of all departments, including the ‘Vorwerk’ supplying works in Braunschweig, and he was responsible for exports. While Dr. Münch had already had similarly broad responsibilities he had never been able to make effective use of them. There was however one important change: Nordhoff was to negotiate with the German authorities and local government in his own right.³²³ Nordhoff soon got to know the ropes. He proved to be an effective manager and possessed both technical prowess and business acumen. With the assistance of his PR head Frank Novotny, Nordhoff made sure he made a good impression. He moved into the top storey of the office building on the factory site. The message was plain: the new boss’s identification with the factory is so strong he’s prepared to share in all the hardships endured by the workforce. Hirst commented later: “He looked too good to be true. He was a very good showman.”³²⁴

A new era – Nordhoff’s – had begun while Hirst did not yet realise that Nordhoff’s appointment marked the end of his time. Although business flourished, the new general director represented a bitter personal defeat for Hirst. Rivalry must have begun

soon after Nordhoff’s appearance in the factory.³²⁵ Their differences could not be bridged. Hirst described their relationship as “close, but cold”. He had felt “a warmth of contact” in his relations to Brörmann despite the latter’s faults: “He was a human being but Nordhoff was a distant figure to everybody, in my experience, at that time.”³²⁶ Despite Hirst’s misgivings, he had in fact together with Radclyffe chosen exactly the right man for the job. Nordhoff’s appointment was a decisive move with far-reaching consequences.

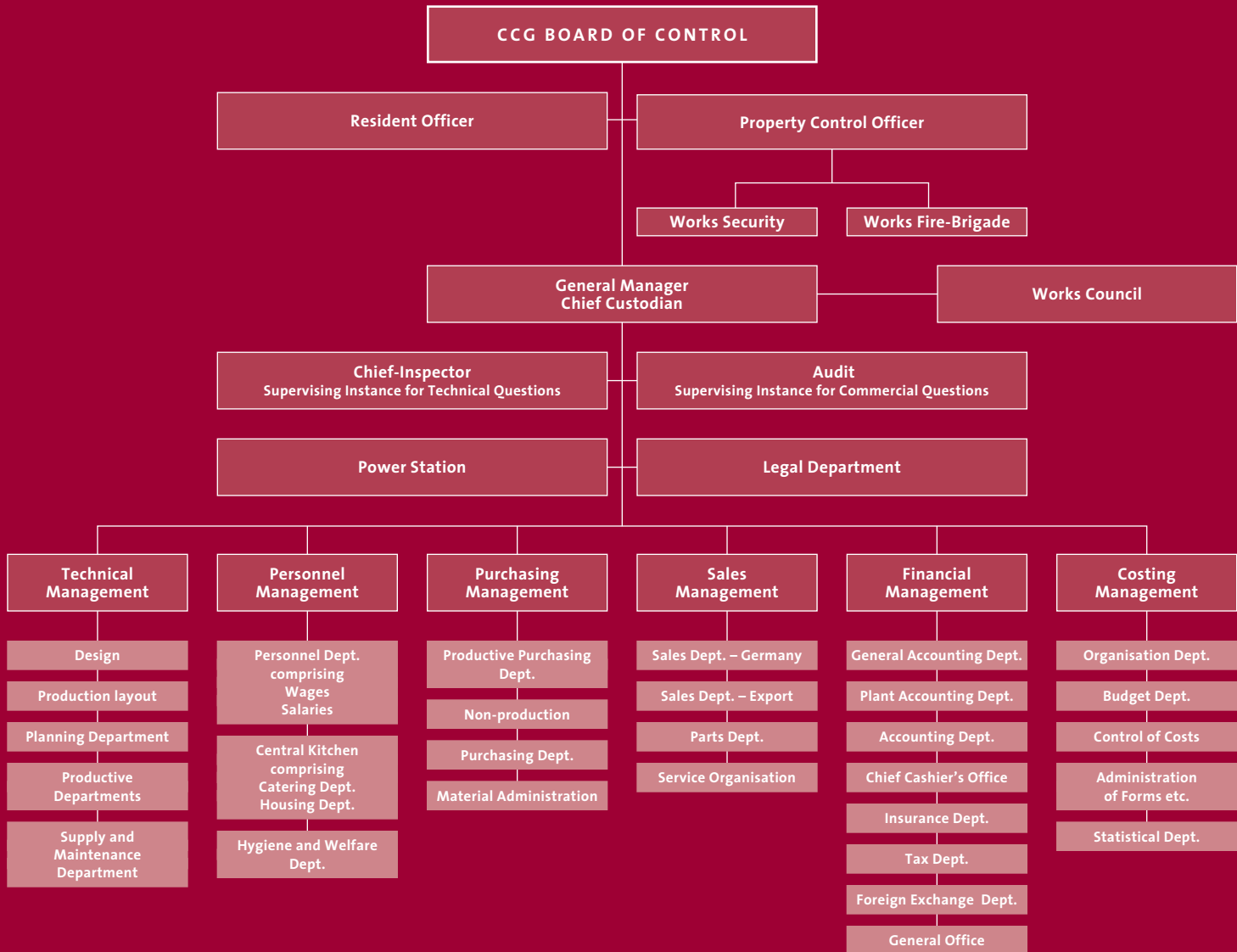
4.4 A Farewell at Volkswagen

On his appointment, Radclyffe had instructed Nordhoff to work together with Hirst “in the closest co-operation” and to involve Hirst the moment any problems arose.³²⁷ However the new general director was not only hard-working and adept but very experienced. He didn’t for one moment consider deferring any authority to an Englishman who was seventeen years his junior. Instead he made sure he was the centre of company affairs. Instead of reporting to Ivan Hirst, Heinrich Nordhoff arranged meetings as if Hirst had to report to him.³²⁸ He effectively reversed relations.

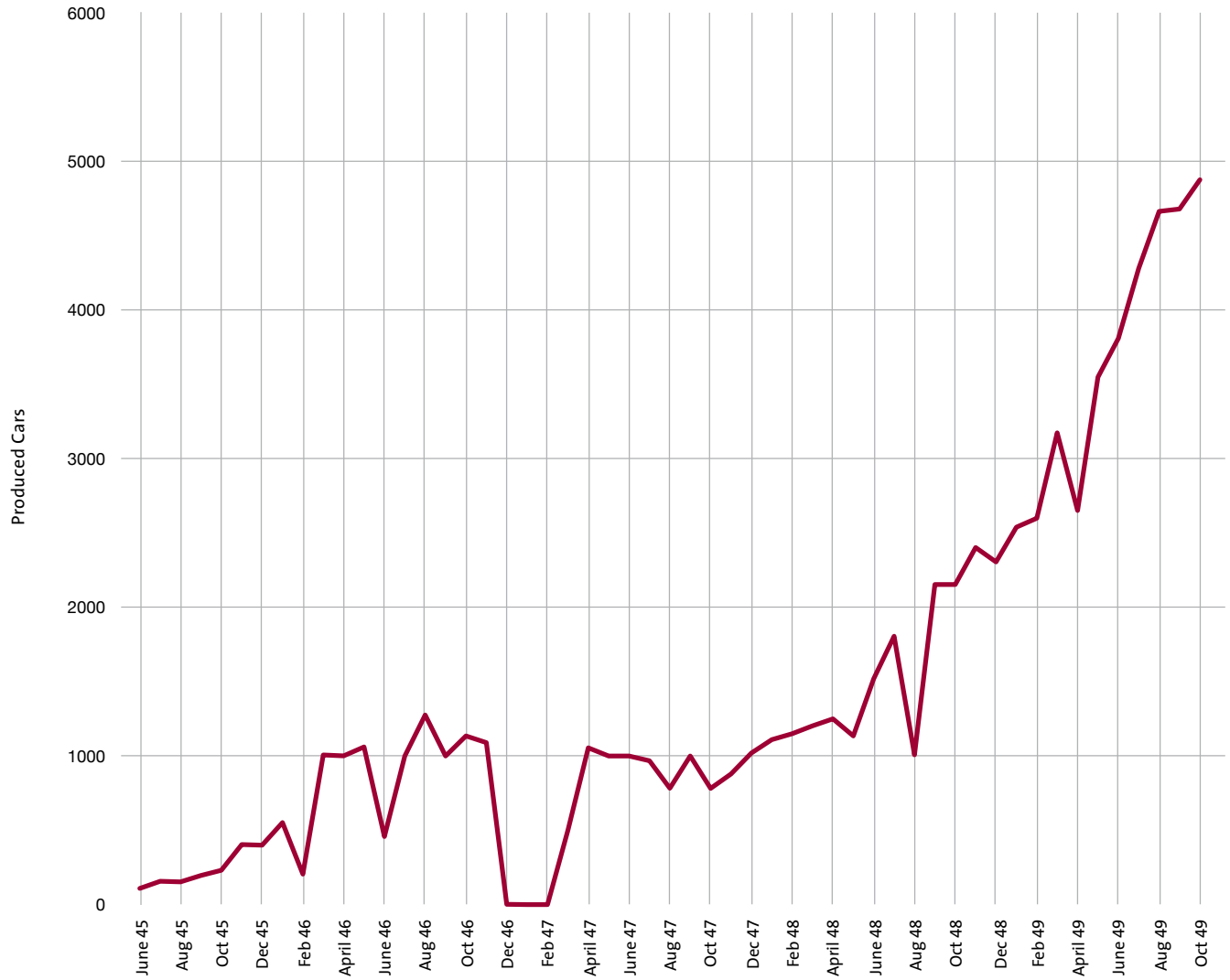
Yet Hirst had always neglected to think in strategic terms and now he seemed to have been caught off-guard. His position alongside the general director was extremely dissatisfying: “I stayed on at

The invention of public relations in Germany

Hirst on Frank Novotny who was responsible for PR at Volkswagen: “When I was first introduced to Novotny and I do not remember how he came to Wolfsburg, ... He was introduced to me as the new head of the press department and I saw a few days later on his door was Frank Novotny, I think, Presseabteilung. Now, I remember saying to him I don’t think that’s right, Presseabteilung, you ought to be doing something wider, what in English we call public relations. And he said, what’s public relations? I said, well press but wider, external relations generally, so he adopted public relations. I think he brought it into the German language.”³²⁹



Management Organisation Chart, May 1948



Monthly car production at the Volkswagen Works, June 1945 to October 1949

Wolfsburg for another year and three-quarters, year and a half perhaps, with the rather difficult task, not difficult but just not enviable, [...] the awkward task, of monitoring Nordhoff's performance seeing that he was as good as we thought."³³⁰

Indeed, the new general director's achievements were not only good but beyond expectations. Nordhoff also benefitted from the general economic development. In Hirst's eyes it was as if all the many problems he and the workforce had struggled to overcome during the years after 1945 had suddenly disappeared. By May 1948 and under Ivan Hirst's authority, the structure of German management had been modified. Volkswagen now had a full management board as typical for an industrial company.³³¹ The economy in the Western zone was transformed by the currency reform of June 20th 1948 which represented the economic division of Germany. As if by magic almost every article was again available. This development also guaranteed Volkswagen's future. Moreover Ludwig Erhard's economic policy promoted economic growth: "Everything was much more straightforward. The management team was in place, everybody doing their job, doing it well, produc-

tion was running with no emergencies. From 1945, '46, '47 there seemed to be an emergency every week. By 1948 all those things were gone. It was like we'd sailed from a violent storm into calm waters."³³²

Within the Western zones industrial production expanded by 20 per cent compared to the previous quarter and economic growth continued to be pronounced.³³³ The work ethic of the VW workforce steadily improved while the rate of absenteeism rapidly dropped. The new currency meant that going to work finally seemed to be worthwhile again.³³⁴

From November 1948 Nordhoff was even allowed to take part in the meetings of the Board of Control, where he reported on production results – a task which had previously been Hirst's. This represented a fundamental change significant not only for the Volkswagen Works but also for Nordhoff and Hirst.³³⁵ The British had appointed Nordhoff in order to strengthen the German side of management and to reduce their own workload. They didn't interfere and withdrew from the operative side of business entirely.³³⁶ Yet it was strange for Hirst to have free time – something previously



Leaving present for Major Hirst: VW model car, 1949

unthinkable. Hirst still wanted to make himself useful so he got involved in those two areas which had always been his special interest: quality control and customer service. Together with another officer he developed an efficient system for feedback on problems with vehicles already sold. He also worked on establishing a network for customer services and improved the supply of spare parts. In addition, he maintained close contact with both the British and American market in order to secure potential car buyers.³³⁷ It was also in line with Hirst's character that he sorted out personnel costs before his departure. He made a point of making sure that German staff who had previously been employed by the CCG within the factory continued to be employed.³³⁸ Indeed, Hirst's frustration about Nordhoff's behaviour did not mean he lost interest in either Volkswagen or his employees. It is not without significance that the last existing memo Hirst made before leaving the factory in June 1949 included the offer to help whenever necessary: "The undersigned will remain for a short period in Wolfsburg and until his actual departure all departments within the works can approach him with whatever problem which will be dealt confidentially (...). This will guarantee smooth operations."³³⁹

Hirst was not the only Englishman who found it hard to leave the factory. One of Hirst's colleagues, F.T. Neal, from the Property Control Branch wanted to stay at Volkswagen and applied for a job.

The workforce had no objection to working with their former British bosses.³⁴⁰ They were hard-working, familiar with operations and as such valuable to the company. However Heinrich Nordhoff was of an entirely different opinion. He wanted to finish with the past. The company was to be launched into a new era in which the British no longer had a role to play. Hirst was probably right in his belief that Nordhoff prevented his colleague's appointment. British officers not only found it hard to leave the Volkswagen Works and to return to civilian life. At headquarters in Minden Radclyffe – "poor man" as Hirst recollected – also had a hard time: once Radclyffe's post in Minden had been Germanised and the Volkswagen Works had been formally handed over to Erhard as West German Minister for Trade and Commerce in October 1949, he failed to find a comparable task. He died a few weeks after returning to England.³⁴¹

It was now very clear to Hirst that his time at Volkswagen had come to an end. In Kiel the Control Commission for Germany offered him a demanding position as Industrial Director for the mechanical industry in Schleswig-Holstein. He officially departed from the Volkswagen Works in April 1949. At a meeting of the Board of Control Radclyffe thanked him for his exceptional work in the factory in the years after 1945.³⁴² The workforce wanted to present their "Major", as they called him, with a special farewell gift: a brand new Volkswagen. However Hirst rejected the idea. Instead

it was agreed that he and Radclyffe should receive a special Volkswagen model car as a memento. Yet the accompanying letter of thanks was written by Nordhoff and reflected an entirely different spirit. Written in extremely formal German, it remained very cool and distant: “Dear Major Hirst! On this evening marking your departure today please allow me to present you a small token of appreciation on behalf of all my staff, for your personal use and as an expression of our close bond. I would also like to take the opportunity to wish you the very best for your new position and the best of good health in the hope that contact will be maintained. Respectfully yours H. Nordhoff.”³⁴³

Nordhoff recognised Hirst’s great achievement and knew that Hirst was an exceptionally capable man. He must have been relieved to finally bid his rival farewell. Hirst had after all monitored Nordhoff’s work for over one and a half years. By comparison Nordhoff’s letter to Charles Radclyffe was written in English and reflected a true sense of thankfulness: “Dear Colonel: The little model of the Volkswagen which we are presenting to you at the same time shall be regarded as a visible expression of the connection between you and this factory. During the last 3 years you have spent most of your time in sharing our problems and difficulties. When in the future this little replica of the Volkswagen comes into range of your sight, we hope it will create a feeling of pleasure as far as its good craftsmanship is concerned, and a feeling of happi-

ness and pride for having laid down the basis for a now powerful and happy organisation. We certainly will never forget what you did for this factory and for the recreation of hope and confidence for 10,000 men. I am, dear Colonel, Sincerely yours H. Nordhoff.”³⁴⁴

It would have been fitting if Hirst had also received such a letter of thanks. He had truly spent the last few years living only for Volkswagen and had managed to give the workforce some hope. Ivan Hirst must have found his departure from Volkswagen and his farewell very difficult.

In July 1949 Hirst was supposed to take up his post as Industrial Director in Kiel. Hirst’s predecessor obviously had his own problems in leaving Germany and returning to life in England and delayed his departure. While waiting to move Hirst had time on his hands. He spent two weeks with his wife in Bad Harzburg. Again this was characteristic: he returned to the Harz which had been his only holiday destination during past years. Hirst also took part in a retraining course for British soldiers.³⁴⁵ These courses were provided by the British government as a measure to ease reintegration into civilian life. Ivan Hirst’s delayed departure from Volkswagen in August 1949 was a quiet affair. There was a small farewell in the office building; warm words were spoken, and his staff presented him with a bunch of flowers. The Hirst era at Volkswagen had come to an end.³⁴⁶



5. Life After Volkswagen





5.1 Service in Germany: Kiel, Solingen and Hamburg

Political or strategic considerations had never been at the forefront of Ivan Hirst's considerations. In terms of his own personal career Ivan Hirst also neglected to make long-term plans. While his career had taken him from the British Army to military government and finally to the German department within the Foreign Office, his career was not something he had consciously worked at. It would have been out of character for him to fight for a particular position. As it was he simply remained loyal to his respective former employer.

While still in Wolfsburg Ivan Hirst had received a very interesting job offer from Ford in England. Rumours of Hirst's abilities and enthusiasm had reached the car industry. The invitation came from the Ford European headquarters in Dagenham. Hirst recollected: "I think they were looking for somebody who had seen a bit of the continent and who had different ideas of the automotive scene."³⁴⁷ At the time Hirst still enjoyed his work in Wolfsburg. After meeting the man with whom he would have worked with at Ford – and taking an immediate dislike to him – he rejected the otherwise attractive job offer. He gave personal relations priority so the job was out of the question. Later Ivan Hirst came to bitterly regret this decision: it had been "foolish" to decline the offer. Hirst realised later that "the man who took the job that was offered to me went on to be a director of the Confederation of British Industry", i.e. he went on to take on a very influential position.³⁴⁸

At the time Ivan Hirst had clearly refused to see what was obvious: the British occupation authorities had begun to make drastic cuts to their huge administrative apparatus. West Germany was

now supposed to act itself as an ally and as a bulwark against the "iron curtain", a term first coined by Churchill. The Berlin blockade and the Berlin Air Lift which had successfully averted the onset of starvation in the Western sectors of Berlin since May 1948 had strengthened the feeling of solidarity between the Western Allies and West Germany. In April 1949 the French occupation zone was absorbed into the American and British Bizone, now known as the Trizone. In the very same month the foreign ministers of all Western Allies agreed upon the establishment of an Allied High Commission as the highest authority in the Western zones. The steady development of a West German state progressed in May 1949 with the introduction of a new constitution and the formal creation of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The number of soldiers able to leave for home rapidly increased. In the last edition of the British Zone Review, the monthly journal of the CCG in the British zone, it was stated: "We can be satisfied if the goodwill and the intention to improve relations between the English and the Germans have perhaps led to an improvement in international cooperation and understanding."³⁴⁹ In September 1949 the Allied High Commission replaced the military government which was now dissolved. In contrast to the CCG the High Commission was to have "the character of diplomatic representations abroad." This would entail massive job cuts given that two years before the occupation authorities had employed 20,000 British staff. It was planned that by the end of 1949 the number of employees within the Control Commission should be reduced to 6,700 and by April 1st 1950 to 6,100 at least. By the end of 1951

personnel was to have been halved.³⁵⁰ Those employees who still had career ambitions did not fail to recognise that the occupation authorities no longer represented a long-term option.

However, Hirst remained on the Continent. His father's modest optician business didn't attract him back home. He had after all now gained a wealth of experience in a leading management position within a big company. The alternative of starting up a new existence in England was also unattractive. Hirst had never been one to fight for his career. In this situation he decided to go to Kiel in August 1949. Indeed, the status which Ivan and Marjorie enjoyed in Germany was pleasant and a reason for staying with the British authorities. The salary was very generous and they belonged to the emerging British high society within Germany: British Officers and leading staff enjoyed the most luxurious settings. The Hirsts always had a lovely house to live in at all the locations which were to follow: in Kiel, Solingen and Hamburg. In Kiel they were allocated a housekeeper who was directly employed by the Control Commission. Even such a modest individual as Hirst could grow to appreciate such a lifestyle. In Kiel Hirst also found his job interesting – demanding but with plenty of variety.³⁵¹ In addition Hirst and his wife had no children to consider in their plans.

In Kiel Hirst became the Regional Director for the iron-making and mechanical industries in Schleswig-Holstein as Senior Control Officer (SCO). The organisation which he now worked for had far-reaching powers with regard to the German economy. A Regional Commissioner headed three departments: agriculture, trade and, the biggest department, industry.³⁵² The department for industry which Hirst belonged to controlled all activities within German industry in Schleswig-Holstein. Its tasks included monitoring imports and enforcing a multitude of regulations. This involved the SCOs making “frequent visits of factories to check the accuracy of information reported through German channels”.³⁵³ So Hirst monitored operations within the metalworking and mechanical industries, especially focusing on the issue of security. Within his area the steel construction industry, engineering in general and machine-tool construction were very important. His field of responsibility included car construction and spare parts distribution, the light metal sector and the construction and repair of railway wagons.³⁵⁴

The political integration with the West was moving fast. In October 1949 the Federal Republic became a member of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC). The Western

Hirst's parents



Allies also agreed to a widespread halt to dismantlement.³⁵⁵ In this new situation the elaborate network of regional commissioners within industry became superfluous. As Hirst recollected: “My job in Wolfsburg was done then so I went to Kiel as regional industry director just in time really to wind up that office and then hand over to my German colleague up there.”³⁵⁶ This of course raises the question why the British authorities bothered to appoint Hirst at all. Perhaps they had heard of Hirst’s skill in cooperating with German colleagues. And in Wolfsburg he had already once proved his ability to hand over operations to the Germans smoothly.

However, this time the situation was different. Industry suffered from the lack of economic development in Germany. The years 1949/50 were marked by economic stagnation while unemployment soared up to the two million mark.³⁵⁷ In particular the scarcity of capital hampered economic development.³⁵⁸ Despite these difficulties Hirst was glad to have a real job to do after experiencing an indefinite role prior to his departure from Wolfsburg.

And as was to be expected, Ivan Hirst did his job well. As the economic situation picked up, the Allies felt confirmed in their withdrawal strategy.³⁵⁹ Hirst and his wife probably enjoyed living in a larger town. Although Kiel had suffered from heavy bombing and about two-thirds of the town had been destroyed, it still had a lot more to offer than Wolfsburg.³⁶⁰ Ivan and Marjorie Hirst had a warm relationship to the German housekeeper allocated to them in Kiel. He had never been a very authoritarian manager in the factory and at home Hirst was just as pleasant an employer.³⁶¹

Early in 1950 the Hirsts left Kiel together with their housekeeper. They had to move, as Hirst’s next job took him to the town of Solingen in North Rhine-Westphalia. Here he was again responsible for the mechanical industry. In Solingen the Hirsts moved into a stately house. In addition to their housekeeper they gradually acquired more domestic staff, including a boilerman and a cleaner, and later a gardener.

While in Solingen Hirst was visited in Germany by his parents for the first time.³⁶² No doubt he was very proud to be able to show his parents how much he had achieved in a foreign country. The Hirsts also frequently received visitors from Wolfsburg. These included customer service head Dr. Karl Feuereissen and his wife. Feuereissen had not forgotten Hirst's great contribution to VW customer service.³⁶³ Ivan Hirst maintained life-long contact with some VW staff. During Hirst's stay in Solingen, the world was threatened by a renewed outbreak of war. On June 25th 1950 the North Korean Army crossed the border to South Korea and thus threatened the sensitive agreement reached between both countries and the two superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union.

The Hirsts didn't stay in North Rhine-Westphalia for long either, because Hirst was called to Hamburg: "I remember my wife and I had three different houses in different towns in one period of 12 months [...]."³⁶⁴ Once in Hamburg, their life became a little quieter. In October 1950 Hirst took up his new post, retaining his former rank. He belonged to the same authority, the Regional Commissioner's Office, which had now been drastically restructured and reduced. As in Schleswig-Holstein, Hirst's responsibili-

ties included the mechanical industry, but with more far-reaching powers. His tasks included security controls within the mechanical industries; these included mechanical engineering, car construction along with light metal and steel construction. Hirst was required to report on the situation in Hamburg regularly. The British were still interested in benefiting from any new German inventions,³⁶⁵ in preventing any possible rearmament and in maintaining control over the economy. Ivan Hirst reported in the required detail, for example on the increase in the employment rate within his field, the development of trade and finance, the consequences of the new tax system, about the export and import of goods, the overall situation within the mechanical industry in Hamburg as about the situation of individual firms.

Hirst's work now included working with the Military Security Board (MSB) on a regional level.³⁶⁶ The MSB had been set up by the military governors of the three Western zones in December 1948 in order to mainly supervise demilitarisation.³⁶⁷ The German public was however primarily informed about its role as the guarantor of reconstruction in Germany. The main aim of the MSB was thus inspecting German organisations of every type on the one hand,

Hirst's house
in Hamburg



while providing military governors with advice on demilitarisation on the other. All MSB staff, including Hirst, had to keep this work secret. The secrecy clause remained valid after termination of the contract.³⁶⁸

The issue of licensing – or the refusal to do so – was one important weapon used by the Allies to control the German economy. Hirst had a huge number of license applications to deal with.³⁶⁹ Hirst's responsibilities included machine tool construction. This was an area subject to particular scrutiny: it was regarded as a sector ideally suited to concealing arms production and licensing procedures were followed extremely thoroughly.³⁷⁰ Hirst decided which products were problematic and which should be entirely prohibited. He dealt with the ownership of machinery and engines, their transport, storage and export.³⁷¹ One particular problem was posed by numerous surviving submarine engines in Northern Ger-

many. While they fell under demilitarisation policy and were thus prohibited, many factories used these large engines to generate electric power or, given the materials scarcity, they were modified and used for other industrial purposes.³⁷² Major Hirst submitted his suggestions to the MSB and gave his own expert opinion on the issue of licensing. Hirst's reports to the MSB were lengthy and extremely detailed.³⁷³ Ivan Hirst also carried out inspections on behalf of the MSB. He visited firms within the mechanical industry in order to monitor whether licence terms were being complied with. It seems he enjoyed the opportunity to visit factories and to have direct contact with workers.³⁷⁴

The German economy recovered. In 1950 the Bundestag had reformed the laws on taxation. A subsidy programme was launched. The Korean War initially provided further economic momentum. Demand increased worldwide and West Germany was the only

industrial country with surplus production capacities. Exports within the mechanical engineering sector, for example, tripled by 1952.³⁷⁵ This boom is reflected in Hirst's reports: unemployment dropped, demand increased, payment practice was good, competition and exports grew and, as Hirst noted "many firms are displaying enthusiasm over foreign sales."³⁷⁶ Adenauer wanted to exploit the foreign trade situation by persuading the High Commission to withdraw existing limitations.³⁷⁷ Industry in Germany was soon also affected by the lack of raw materials on the international market and the price explosion. Yet while these consequences of the Korean War threatened to develop into a global recession,³⁷⁸ the overall development in West Germany remained positive.

In West Germany the Korean War increased fears of the Soviet Union. The threat was perceived to be immense and the question was raised whether West Germany itself could be regarded as safe. Adenauer exploited the situation and worked towards a redefinition of occupation policy. Accordingly the Allied troops were now

stationed in order to protect the young republic against the foreign threat: the state of war should be brought to a close and the occupation statutes should be replaced by agreements.³⁷⁹ Adenauer pledged military support to the Western powers without even consulting his cabinet.³⁸⁰ The mere suggestion of rearming Germany was enough to send shockwaves throughout the country. On 14th July 1950 the 'Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung' reported that the very idea of German rearmament was like an oil stain.³⁸¹ Although actual military sovereignty was first established in the Federal Republic in 1954, the integration of West Germany made substantial progress under Adenauer.

Although the British were no longer just an occupying power but more of a partner, tensions emerged on official levels. Some Germans felt that many British officers were too arrogant. Particularly those who had previously enjoyed a colonial lifestyle in India were apt to behave in a discriminatory manner towards the native German population, that is to say, not only the officers them-

The Hirsts' housekeeper in Hamburg could well remember the British:

“The British were sometimes a little arrogant and flaunted their status as occupiers. Many of them had previously been in India. And once in Germany they maintained the same lifestyle. One officer and his wife had a press button – to be pressed by foot – with which they summoned their German domestics. Hirst was invited to a big reception at the house. Lots of officers with their wives in evening dress. It must have been very posh and unbelievably formal. Ivan Hirst found the whole performance extremely irritating. At one point it was so quiet nobody dared to utter a word. Ivan Hirst then pressed the button. At once a maid appeared. Hirst asked her, politely and pokerfaced, and much to the surprise of the other British, whether she could sort out his braces. It must have been very funny and Hirst just had to burst out into laughter. He had a wonderful dry sense of humour.”

selves but their wives were extremely unpopular too – at least in the memory of the Hirsts' former housekeeper. While she objected to any criticism of her own former boss in any sense, she was familiar with grievances voiced by German domestic staff. Many British officers enjoyed an extravagant lifestyle. They were able to move into the most beautiful houses throughout the country. As Hirst's housekeeper recollected: “The house the Hirsts lived in was rather small. The one in Solingen was much bigger! In Hamburg Hirst was also offered a big house. But he preferred the smaller one. He was a modest man. And the Hirsts immensely disliked the performance made by some of the English, being rude to their German domestic staff.³⁸² Hirst often used humour or particular friendliness in order to take the tension out of the situation. Hirst was friendly and polite to domestic staff as a matter of course.

For these British officers cocktail parties and receptions were the order of the day. Although the British Empire was already in decline, here it was possible to uphold the illusion of the glamour of bygone days. The Hirsts also took part in these festivities and clearly enjoyed their lifestyle. And although Hirst was a modest and very thrifty man, the Hirsts also hosted many guests at their large house. These came mostly from Wolfsburg but some American colleagues from Heidelberg also found their way to Hamburg. Colonel Michael McEvoy was a particularly frequent visitor. He had, years before, persuaded the then still young Major to set up mass production at Volkswagen. McEvoy, the eternal car enthusiast, always arrived in his Rolls Royce. As he commented, “It's very practical. I don't have to bother locking up. It's the only Rolls Royce in the whole of Hamburg. Nobody would steal it.”³⁸³ Unlike many of his British col-



Garden party

leagues Hirst had a weakness for German humour and ‘Gemütlichkeit’. One photo shows him together with a folk music band at St. Pauli: the musicians in their leather trousers and traditional hats with the Englishman in a pinstriped suit and the obligatory pipe.

On February 6th 1952 Hirst and his British colleagues fell into collective mourning. As every morning, he had gone to his office, but he soon returned home, deeply shocked. He darkened all the windows, ordered all mirrors to be removed and retired to the sofa.

King George VI had died. Hirst was truly moved by the death of the King who had guided Britain through the Second World War and had skilfully accompanied the transition from Empire to the Commonwealth. As a young man Hirst had once had the honour of being present at an audience of the King.³⁸⁴

The future looked bleak in career terms too. The role of the MSB was increasingly questioned. The Korean War and discussion about the possible rearmament of West Germany were both fac-



Reeperbahn

tors which made it clear that the aims of the MSB no longer correlated to political realities.³⁸⁵ Although British administrative structures continued to be cut back, Hirst remained. While this was no doubt a reflection of how well he had done his job, it again illustrates that Hirst neglected to think about his own career. As others left, his field of responsibility initially increased and in the Autumn of 1951 he became responsible, in addition to Hamburg, for the whole of Schleswig-Holstein.³⁸⁶ After 1953 the MSB was

Hirst's sole employer. Here he belonged to the Industry Branch,³⁸⁷ which existed alongside two other branches for the military and for research.³⁸⁸ The Industry Branch was responsible for the inspection of industrial units and for making competent proposals for the monitoring of industry. This called for a man like Ivan Hirst with experience of industry.³⁸⁹

By May 1952, however, the MSB had already become an anachronism. The three Western occupying powers had signed new

agreements, known as the Deutschlandverträge, redefining relations to the Federal Republic. MSB staff were cut back further. In 1953 the Industry Branch only had 31 members of staff.³⁹⁰ The British alone continued to make sure regulations were implemented and continued with their inspection of company sites.³⁹¹ As the British High Commission complained in a confidential memo: “The Americans co-operate in formulating the policy decisions of the Board and in licensing controlled activities but they make hardly any effort to investigate the activities of German firms in their Zone or to detect or suppress illegal activities.” And further: “They (the Americans) would like to eliminate all controls except those concerning atomic energy.”³⁹²

The integration of the Federal Republic of Germany into the West was assured. The continued promotion of economic development was a central part of Allied policy on Germany, including the expected costs of rearmament. In 1953 the London Agreement on German foreign debts set the scene for reintegration into trade and finance on an international level. Finally in 1954 the Western powers recognised the sovereignty of the Republic of Germany and approved its NATO membership.

Now the MSB had become obsolete. In 1954 a final restructuring took place: with only 23 members of staff left, the departments for Industry, Military and Research were now dissolved. Hirst now had the overall responsibility for Schleswig-Holstein and Hamburg, reporting directly to the head of the MSB, Brigadier Harvey.³⁹³

Hirst’s stay in Germany was coming to a definite end. Perhaps this was the reason why in May 1952 he tried to re-establish closer

contact to Volkswagen. He asked Nordhoff whether they could meet and do a tour of the factory together. Nordhoff politely declined, claiming to be busy, and another member of staff came to meet Hirst. Afterwards Hirst nevertheless composed an extremely positive letter of thanks in which he praised Nordhoff’s achievements beyond all measure.³⁹⁴

The British authorities offered Hirst, as an experienced manager and administrator, a post in the Central African Federation, today Zimbabwe, which Great Britain had created out of Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. However Hirst lacked the required rank of Colonel, even though he had worked on the same level and had received the corresponding salary.³⁹⁵ While the war had made promotion a near, by the same token, the cut-backs demanded in the postwar situation made promotion an near impossibility.

5.2 Falling into a Void

On May 5th 1955 the Federal Republic proclaimed full sovereignty. The Allied High Commission was dissolved and with it the organisation Hirst was working for. Suddenly the Englishman had no career to speak of. In effect he lost his status as a civil servant, had no right to permanent employment and no pension rights.³⁹⁶ Hirst was 39 years old, far too young to want a quiet little job somewhere for the rest of his working-life and already too old to start from square one. His life had been very comfortable, he had had a good job – but now he had to find his place in civilian life. He could not find a suitable job, not even in business. Perhaps because he had never actually

given much thought to career planning, Ivan Hirst became unemployed.³⁹⁷

In May 1955 he approached Wolfsburg again in an attempt to find some work. Not wanting to appear entirely empty-handed, Hirst declared his interest was to set up contact between a press shop in Coventry and the Volkswagen Works. Nordhoff's reply was polite. Hirst "and his friends" were naturally always very welcome – the Major was clearly not seen as a business partner. Although Hirst travelled to Wolfsburg in June 1955 with a group of English businessmen, the visit was without consequence and thereafter correspondence between Hirst and Nordhoff was again limited to cursory greetings at Christmas.³⁹⁸

Heinrich Nordhoff remained reserved in his relations to the Englishman. Following his appointment as general director Nordhoff's rise had been unbelievable. Nordhoff was acclaimed as the prime example of German business while the Volkswagen Works were held to be the very embodiment of the German economic miracle. His reputation as an exceptional manager and businessman had become international. The New York-based 'Time' magazine ran a lead story on him, with his face resplendent on the cover.³⁹⁹ The hard-working general director had long written his own history of Volkswagen: he saw himself as the new founder of the company.

Moreover, Nordhoff had created a new sense of identity at Volkswagen which denied any British roots: "We in Germany have been re-accepted in the world, we're now accepted everywhere just as dollars are, because we have potential" as Nordhoff claimed. A

different version was the rather more aggressive refrain: "Whatever comes in from outside either doesn't want what's best for us or wants to live off us without actually doing anything."⁴⁰⁰ If Hirst had been appointed within the company, he would have posed a potential threat, to Nordhoff's own version of the Volkswagen story and to his almost monarchical position in Wolfsburg. The Englishman found the cold rejection hard to bear. During the sixties Hirst referred to this period with some bitterness when talking about Volkswagen. He described how he made repeated attempts to find work at Volkswagen but that he always came up against a brick wall. Hirst's irritation was noticeable to listeners and he made sure that it was clear that there was only one reason why he was not taken on: Heinrich Nordhoff.⁴⁰¹

He had to go – but where to? He was unable to find work in Germany. The only remaining point of refuge was his parents' house in Grasscroft near Manchester. At the end of April 1955 he didn't have any other option but to move there with Marjorie.⁴⁰² It is not difficult to imagine just how hard this step must have been.

Hirst had been at home in Germany for more than a decade. He was unfamiliar with the England he came back to in 1955. While Winston Churchill had returned to power in 1951, he resigned as Prime Minister in April 1955 due to old age. In May, the month of Hirst's return,⁴⁰³ the country was gripped by the first election to be fought on TV, with Anthony Eden leading the Conservatives as Churchill's successor.⁴⁰⁴ The face of Great Britain had changed and Hirst had lost his ground. The British economy recovered gradually from the huge burden of war, not least due to the Marshall Plan.

Later when Hirst was asked how Nordhoff had managed to turn Volkswagen into a motor of the German economic miracle he answered with the following words:

“Yes that is as it is seen by the world perhaps. I think you could have put anybody in there, even a monkey and it would have been a success. There was a huge factory, a labour force, a building, a good management already in place, a car that would sell, huge demand all over the world for light cars and it could not fail even if you put the biggest fool you could find in charge, it would have still worked.”[...] “I say anybody but I mean anybody with reasonable management skills and entrepreneurial sense.”⁴⁰⁵

Nordhoff for his part declared in a speech in 1954 in Zurich:

“On January 1st 1948, six months before the currency reform, I took on the management of the Volkswagen Works. I was faced with a desolate heap of rubble, a horde of desperate people, the torso of a deserted town – an amorphous mass which had never had any organising principle, no factory organisation in a real sense, without a programme or any rational work organisation. So something new had to be created because there was nothing there and had never been anything to build on at all.”⁴⁰⁶



Hirst with his dogs in France

Under its terms Britain was allocated the largest part of the European reconstruction programme. Despite continuing economic problems Great Britain experienced an economic recovery during the fifties. The unemployment rate was low.⁴⁰⁷

Nevertheless Hirst was unable to find a suitable position. He didn't even have the option of working for his father as the business no longer existed.⁴⁰⁸ Naturally Hirst had his own standards, having once been responsible for a company with a workforce of over 8,000. But the months went by. Hirst became more and more desperate in his search for work. Finally he found something which seemed promising in the form of the business plans of a certain Harry Ferguson. Ferguson came from Northern Ireland and was an engineer, industrialist and, above all, the inventor of an efficient tractor. After some business success and lengthy negotiations with Ford in America, Ferguson had distributed his tractors together

with a Canadian firm, but he ended the cooperation in 1953, after only one year. Now he had plans to supply the British market with a luxurious car with four-wheel drive.⁴⁰⁹ Hirst got in touch with Ferguson's project manager and, as Hirst recollected, he was then offered a position in management.⁴¹⁰ The plans were appealing and Hirst greatly appreciated being offered a leading position. But it was all to no avail – the whole project never got beyond the planning phase and managers were never appointed.

5.3 New start in Paris

For almost half a year Hirst lived with his wife at his parents' house. He found being unemployed almost unbearable.⁴¹¹ In desperation he tried to reactivate his old contacts in the Foreign Office and in the car industry. He booked a flight to Paris in order to meet an old acquaintance from Renault.⁴¹² Yet some good news reached him

before he left for Paris: the Foreign Office offered him a post within the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC). So he used his trip to Paris to drop in for an interview. Given that his plans for working in the car industry had been thwarted, he accepted the post at the OEEC even though it was not very attractive. He was appointed as technical advisor, initially with a contract for only six months.⁴¹³

Hirst's job at the OEEC brought little authority. The salary was modest and the term of contract limited. Yet after all the failed attempts – Rhodesia, Volkswagen, Ferguson, Renault – he was glad to find work and to have his own home again. Indeed, the adventure of moving to a city such as Paris softened the blow of taking on an inferior position. In his home country this loss of prestige would probably have been hard to swallow. As it was he could disappear with his wife off to the exciting city of Paris and start a new life. In the Autumn of 1955 Marjorie and Ivan Hirst moved back to the Continent.⁴¹⁴ In Paris they could only afford a small flat.⁴¹⁵ Ivan Hirst's determination to bear the injury inherent to such a loss in social standing and to make a success of this new beginning is admirable. Once again Hirst proved his flexibility and his ability to make the best out of the situation.

When Hirst started work for the OEEC it had seventeen member countries, including the Federal Republic of Germany. The organisation had been set up in April 1948, primarily to implement the Marshall Plan. Once this task had been completed by 1952, the OEEC planned and co-ordinated the continuing programme for reconstruction in Europe. Overall the work of this organisation was of greater importance to the European economy than the Marshall Plan which had the symbolic significance.⁴¹⁶ Aside from the reconstruction programme, the targets of the OEEC included increasing production, securing stable currencies, the expansion of trade and the achievement of full employment.

Hirst's job as technical advisor was not very demanding. When he was offered a job as technical translator he immediately took the opportunity, although languages had never really been one of his interests.⁴¹⁷ His employers explained that while there were plenty of people around with the best of translating qualifications, none of them were familiar with technical terms, and none of them had the slightest understanding of the continental economy.

At first Hirst's wife was a great help for his work as translator because she had a better command of the French language.⁴¹⁸ Hirst managed to slowly work his way up within the OEEC. As the French economy developed rapidly in the fifties,⁴¹⁹ the Hirsts also improved their financial situation. Finally they were able to rent a bigger flat in Garches near Paris. The couple now took part in social events within diplomatic circles in the French capital.⁴²⁰

In December 1960 the OEEC was restructured and targets were redefined. These now went beyond economic cooperation and included the economic development of states. The change was reflected in the organisation's new name: the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Hirst characteristically cared more about his job and his colleagues in Paris than for high-level politics. As in former positions, Hirst worked very hard at his job in the translating office within the OEEC. His improvement suggestions were convincing and promotion followed.⁴²¹

The improvement suggestions Hirst passed on to the Volkswagen Works in the autumn of 1959 were less welcome. Clearly Hirst had not forgotten Volkswagen at all. As correspondence reflects, the Major still thought about possible improvements to be made in Wolfsburg. While staff at Volkswagen replied in a polite manner, they made clear that he was no longer up-to-date with technical developments.⁴²²



The Hirsts

In Paris Hirst finally became head of the translating department.⁴²³ Nevertheless in 1976 Hirst chose the option of early retirement at the age of sixty. After twenty years in Paris Hirst had had enough of the city and socialising in diplomatic circles.⁴²⁴

5.4 Belated Return Home and Final Recognition

Ivan Hirst had spent over thirty years living abroad. Now he returned home with his wife Marjorie to Marsden, a village near Manchester.⁴²⁵ He enjoyed his retirement. He still had a passion for cars and was a regular reader of car journals and magazines. Hirst became something of a Volkswagen expert and witness of Volkswagen history. Since taking early retirement, he had “done no work other than answering questions about Volkswagen.”⁴²⁶ With his obligatory pipe, the retired officer met camera teams, historians,

staff from Volkswagen and other interested parties and answered questions on the most important period in his life: his work in Wolfsburg.

In the sixties Ivan Hirst was invited by the British Army in Germany to come and talk about his time at Volkswagen and his experience as an occupation officer. Hirst was more than happy to come. And he had a lot to talk about: the seemingly insurmountable problems, his skill in improvising, the Germans – slow but obliging –, Radclyffe, who had long since died, about his achievements and his somewhat bitter farewell.⁴²⁷ Ivan Hirst became a storyteller. His years at Volkswagen represented – at least in career terms – the zenith of his lifetime.

It was only once Heinrich Nordhoff had died in April 1968 that Hirst again enjoyed some recognition at Volkswagen. Nordhoff’s



Hirst giving an interview in 1997

successor, Dr. Kurt Lotz, acknowledged what Nordhoff had denied and wrote to Hirst that “while looking into the early years of the Volkswagen Works I often stumbled across your name and upon decisions which you made prior to 1949.”⁴²⁸

The company then again invited the Englishman to some of the larger festivities and events in Wolfsburg. Hirst still had the urge to get involved, to give advice. On one occasion Ivan and Marjorie Hirst were being driven across the site when a van shed its load – directly in front of the visitors’ car, blocking its path. The startled driver jumped out of his vehicle and started picking up what he could whilst apologising a thousand times. Hirst got out of the car and started to help him. And the other visitors then followed his example: “Everybody came around to look to see the bosses getting their hands dirty” Hirst recounted mischievously, adding that

he had never liked the huge distance usual between managers and workers in Germany.⁴²⁹

Ivan Hirst enjoyed the peaceful life in the country. Here he had the time to read about history. He was especially interested in the Middle Ages, but it was the history of industry which interested him the most. In old age he returned to his own past; he researched the history of the family business Hirst Bros & Co and the Tame Side factory.⁴³⁰

The death of his wife Marjorie on February 21st 1992 was a hard blow.⁴³¹ Five years later he was asked what had been the most important factor in his life. He answered without hesitating: “A very happy marriage.” Ivan Hirst died on March 9th 2000. He was buried next to his wife in Saddleworth – the home of the Tame Side factory.



6. Summary

6. Summary

Ivan Hirst's life was dominated by two major crises. The first crisis, the war, brought the young Englishman to the top: In the army he achieved the rank of deputy battalion commander at the age of 24 and after the victory against Germany he was given the responsibility for a large company with thousands of employees at the age of 29. The second crisis, the demobilisation of the British forces, brought Hirst's fall in the early fifties. He became unemployed and finally was forced to start again as a simple clerk.

The war presented Hirst, as many of his contemporaries, with opportunities he would never have had in peacetime. Hirst and his British colleagues – McInnes, Neal, Berryman – seized the opportunity. As an Allied officer Hirst did more than fulfil the function of custodianship. His orders to go to Wolfsburg were very vague: he was supposed to supervise the factory in some shape or form. Hirst exploited the indifference reflected in policy and the degree of freedom it created and began to operate as a manager.⁴³² Together with Colonel McEvoy he made what can be regarded as the decisive move immediately after his arrival, securing the order for 20,000 cars which saved the Volkswagen Works from dismantlement. He had the lucidity to understand the structures established under occupation and, more importantly, knew how to manoeuvre the Volkswagen Works into a better position. Moreover, together with colleagues he established the target of achieving efficient production. Hirst's commitment to quality control and to the issue of exports went far beyond the immediate demand to produce cars. On his departure from Volkswagen the steps already made to estab-

lish exports represented an important foundation for the rapid development which was to follow. Finally, Hirst was concerned about his German staff and their future.

The case of Hirst illustrates how companies placed under custodianship were extremely dependent on the actual individual placed in control. This seems to have been just as important a factor as the structural and political decisions implemented under occupation policy. Of course, it was in itself an advantage that Volkswagen fell under British control. Nevertheless Ivan Hirst's character had a deeper significance. That Hirst was sent to Wolfsburg was an extremely fortunate choice for the future of the factory. He had spent his childhood in a family business and during the war he had had opportunity to practice the art of improvisation in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. In addition he was able to learn fast, to adapt to new situations quickly and to enthuse others with his ideas. In these exceptional times, individuals found themselves in exceptional circumstances. In the obituaries marking Hirst's death, the question was raised in the British and American press why this Englishman put such great effort into this German company. For Hirst and his British colleagues at Volkswagen the answer was simple: they had identified with the factory, they had developed business ambitions and had made use of the opportunities inherent to their positions. For the Volkswagen Works the British represented good fortune. From 'British' Wolfsburg, Volkswagen was to find its way into the world.⁴³³

7. Notes



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- 6 See Gerhard Hetzer: *Unternehmer und leitende Angestellte zwischen Rüstungseinsatz und politischer Säuberung*, in: Martin Broszat/Klaus-Dietmar Henke/Hans Woller (Ed.): *Von Stalin-grad zur Währungsreform. Zur Sozialgeschichte des Umbruchs in Deutschland*, München 1990, pp. 551–591, here p. 556. In Bavaria alone 26,000 properties were held under trusteeship in 1947. In 1949 there were still 11,000 and in 1952 3,300; see Hans Woller: *Gesellschaft und Politik in der amerikanischen Besatzungszone. Die Region Ansbach und Fürth*, München 1986, p. 253.
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- 9 For details on the history of Volkswagen from its beginnings up to the end of the Second World War see Hans Mommsen/Manfred Grieger: *Das Volkswagenwerk und seine Arbeiter im Dritten Reich*, Düsseldorf 1996.
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- 13 Watson, *The Tame Side Factory*, p. 271.
- 14 Zeitlin, *Between Flexibility and Mass Production*, p. 244.
- 15 Whitwam, *Book of Family Hirst*, Chap. "Fred and Florence Hirst".
- 16 Information provided by Dorothy Holdsworth, 21.7.2001.
- 17 Information provided by Irmgard Keller, 13.11.2001.
- 18 Whitwam, *Book of Family Hirst*, Chap. "Fred and Florence Hirst".
- 19 Watson, *The Tame Side Factory*, pp. 271–272.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 271.
- 22 Interview with Ivan Hirst, 21.–23.10.1997, p. 4 (UVW, Z 300, no. 33).
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*; Whitwam, *Book of Family Hirst*, Chap. "Ivan and Marjorie Hirst".
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Information provided by Irmgard Keller, 13.11.2001; See also interview with Ivan Hirst, 21.–23.10.1997, p. 4 (UVW, Z 300, no. 33).
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Quoted in Charles F. Sabel/Jonathan Zeitlin: *Historical Alternatives to Mass Production: Politics, Markets and Technology in Nineteenth-Century Industrialization*, in: *Past & Present* 8 (1985), no. 108, pp.133–176, here p. 153.
- 29 Interview with Ivan Hirst, 21.–23.10.1997, p. 3 (UVW, Z 300, no. 33).
- 30 Watson, *The Tame Side Factory*, p. 272; for more on the ultimately disappointing venture in machine tool construction see Vertraulicher Bericht über die Zweite Olympia-Werkzeugmaschinen-Ausstellung in London im September 1920 (Wirtschaftsarchiv Baden-Württemberg, B 17, Bü 112); Georg Schlesinger: *Zweite Olympia-Werkzeugmaschinen-Ausstellung in London im September 1920*, in: *Werkstattstechnik* 5 (1921), S. 105–131.
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- 33 Information provided by Irmgard Keller, 13.11.2001.
- 34 Interview with Ivan Hirst, 21.–23.10.1997, p. 3 (UVW, Z 300, no. 33).
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
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- 41 Ian S. Hallows: *Regiments and Corps of the British Army*, London 1991, p. 195.
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- 53 *Ibid.*; Interview with Ivan Hirst, 21.–23.10.1997, p. 5 (UVW, Z 300, no. 33).
- 54 Ministry of Defence, UK, Information provided by Mrs. M.J. Parke, 31.5.2002 (UVW, Z 495, no. 1); Interview with Ivan Hirst, 21.–23.10.1997, p. 6 (UVW, Z 300, no. 33).
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