



## The Singer Car Centenary Celebration

### Read John's After Dinner Speech

#### My Memories of the Singer Car Company - by John Spencer

I started work in **CANTERBURY STREET** in 1933. The main offices of the Singer Car Company were in Canterbury Street. The main entrance was past the **Time Office** where workers clocked in. If you were 4 minutes late you lost a quarter hour. The wages were paid out in small tins with your works number on it - mine was 108. The top of the tin was half covered with a fixed tin top and your paper money was tucked in and covered with your silver and coppers down to a farthing.

My starting rate at 14 was tuppence farthing an hour, rising to one shilling per hour when you were 21 years of age. For a 47 hour week you received £2 and 7s.

The **Works General Manager was Mr Bulloch**. Most people seemed afraid of him. Once I got caught in his office as I was taking him his telex letters.

Just as I approached his desk the sirens went off for the Nov 11th 1933 Armistice, and we stood facing one another across his desk for two whole minutes. It was terrible - I didn't know if I should have turned and run out, or if that would have been the correct thing to do - and I still wonder!

In 1938, the **Manager, Mr Chalmondley**, pronounced Chumley, came to the tool room, stopped the machinery and said that there would be no more short time and that we would be on overtime for the next 10 years. Shortly after, we started getting coded drawings and found we were making parts for Spitfires.

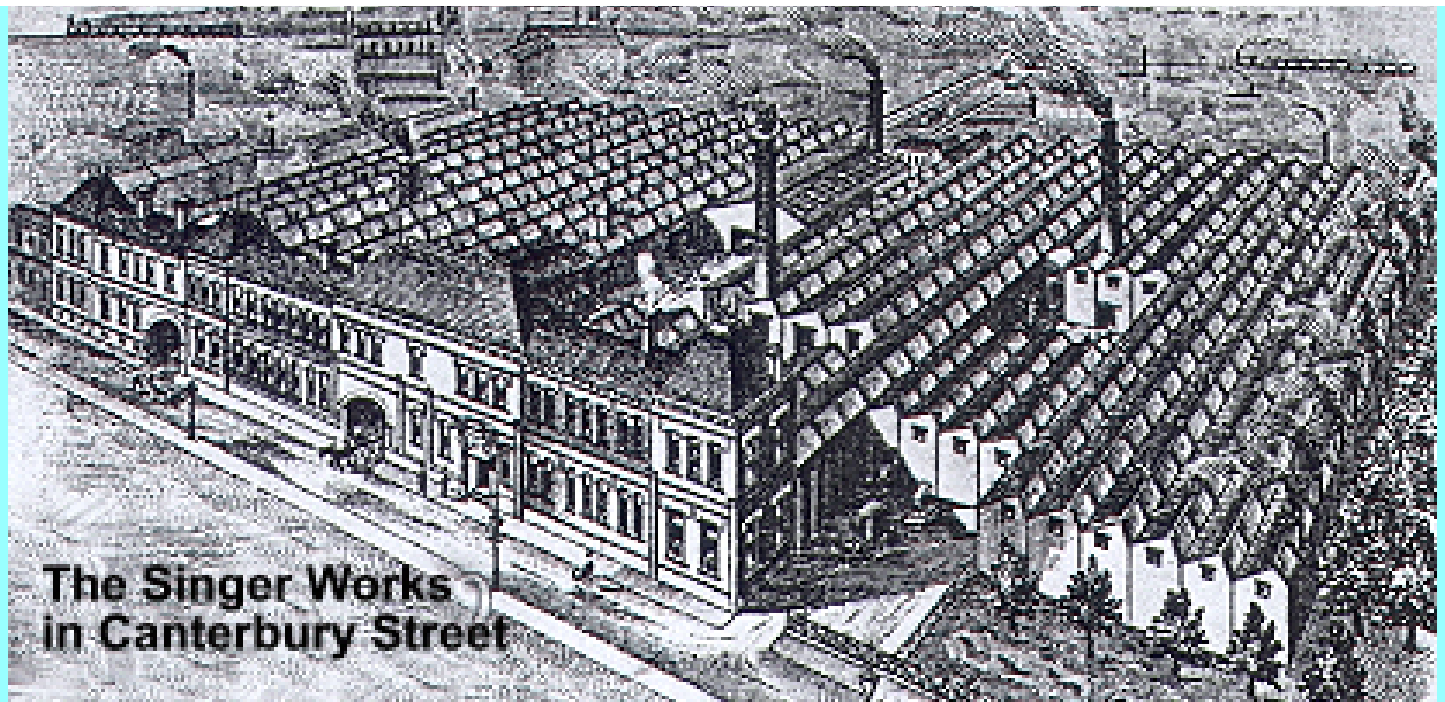
The **Labour Manager was Mr Jarvis**, a nice man. He was also in charge of the Fire Brigade. My boss in the **Printing Office was Mr Edgar**. My first job was printing on the genevoise machine, handling the Telex machine and guillotine, and checking letters with the typing pool.

Vacancies were offered after six months, and Mr Jarvis had me in the office, said I had done well and offered me the choice from vacancies in the Tin Smiths, Tool Room or Drawing Office. I chose the Tool Room.

We had small, 40w lamps over the parts being machined. It was a very dark place when the sun went down. We moved around the tool room roughly every 6 months.

Sometime around 1938, two German Junker Officers with sabre scars on their faces, came to the works and ordered propellers and other items. They were looking round and weighing up our potential. There were about 25 men in the Jig and Tool Room, and about 20 in the Press Tool Room, which was full with big machines, big castings and huge press tools for the front wings.





## The Singer Works in Canterbury Street

The **Foreman, Mr Carter**, was always leaving his glasses back home, and I would have to fetch them on my bicycle. This was near to my home, so I would pop in for a cup of tea!

The machines were worn out in the first world war, and if a big cut was needed on your lathe we used to add a bit more cardboard under the main bearing on the head stock and spanner down tight.

The **Chargehand** was **Dickie Penn**. He was very religious, so you couldn't swear and couldn't smoke. He used to bring chrysanthemums every Monday morning in the growing season. He carried a 6" steel rule that he used to give us a tap on the knuckles, but he did give us sweets occasionally.

Most of the men in the tool room had been there for years, and would help you with anything you wanted to know - they were like uncles.

The **Big Machine Shop** was known as the Top Shop. All parts of the engine were machined here.

The **Big Steel Stores** and **Suds Supply Area** were on the street side of the building. The suds were in a huge tank and the smell was very strong.

The **Big Capstan Section** - this is where they did the gear cutting. Mr Shannon was the Foreman.

The **Milling Section** was huge. My Uncle Arthur worked here, where they did the milling on engine blocks.

The **Lathe Section** was the largest, and the **Drilling Section** was mainly women and girls. There was bullying in the toilets.

The **Hardening Shop** was high-roofed, hot, smelly and dirty. This is where the apprentices went for a drink of cold water - some would have a cigarette. There were two ex-stokers from the Royal Navy on the big ovens, stripped to the waist for the very hot work. Another ex-serviceman, who had lost a leg in the war, was on the cyanide pot, dipping engine rockers in for hardening on the two ends, and there was a big, round water tank for cooling car parts from the big ovens so that they could be handled.

The **Tool Stores** had everything from micrometers and verniers down to drills. Two friends of mine, Johnny Kinghorne and Pete Goldie, who was a wonderful trumpeter and piano player, worked in the tool stores.

In the **Purchase Office** was **Ron Birch**, who was a Band Leader and the first man I ever knew who played golf.

The **Tracing Office** was all girls - used to meet some of them at different dances.

The **Small Blacksmith's Shop** had a big, belt driven automatic hammer - very noisy.

The **Engine Assembly** and **Test Shops** were separate areas. The smell of burnt petrol and rhythm of dozens of engines being tested was quite exciting.

The **Press Shop** housed the 80 Ton press known as Big Bertha. Big Bertha blanked out and pressed the left and right hand chassis members into their "U" shape. This was heavy work and the blow from the press could be felt by people walking on the pavement outside. Two big men, naked to the waist, worked in a pit in front of the press. One had a big, pointed moustache and very strong arms. The other had a



bald head and looked foreign. They also did chassis work for other car makers in the Midlands, and there were many smaller presses knocking out other components.

During the war, German fuel cans were captured - these were much stronger than ours, which were weak and liable to leak. The so-called "Jerry Cans" were copied and pressed out in their thousands, and it is claimed that these helped to win the battle of El Alamein. If you see a Jerry Can with "SM" stamped on the sides, these are now collector's items.

The **Tin Smiths** were in the **Big Shop**. The smiths were all dressed in big white aprons with big front pockets. It was a very well lit place with a high roof, which was needed to help take away the noise from the hammers and mallets beating all shapes in a frenzied cacophony without any rhythm.

Between the Big Shop and Engine Assembly was an open space with no roof, where the **incinerator** was for burning all the rubbish. There was also the **Sand-Blasting Shop**, where through the thick glass you could see a man in protective clothing with a heavy, Ned Kelly looking helmet, picking up all sorts of components and blasting them, making a very loud, searing, hissing noise.

The Big Shop led out past the Labour Office on the right, with the Canteen on the left, where the workers billy cans were filled with hot water, poured onto the mashing the lads had brought in. This was mostly condensed milk with loose tea mixed, wrapped in newspaper which, when stirred, floated to the top of the brew and was taken off with a spoon. The billy cans were all hung on a long pole, which was picked up in the middle and taken back to the workplace. This happened all over the factory, and each pole could carry 24 cans. To go with your tea, if you were lucky, you could get a thick slice of new bread with beef dripping and the jelly on for a penny.

There were other Singer Works:

**PAYNES LANE** housed a small **Metallurgy Department** and **The Foundry**. This was very high roofed, dirty, dark and smoky, with fiery white-hot molten iron shooting cascades of sparkling white stars.

Around the building were huge heaps of castings, weathering and settling down before being machined, and a large pile of silver sand.

**GOSFORD STREET**, which was previously the Caldicote car works. A nice looking building that is still standing - the last of the five factories. Huge, long and narrow, it seemed mainly to be the storage place for all the inside materials for the cars, plus paint, tyres, headlights, cleaning and polishing goods. Singer made almost everything for a car except the tyres and electrical items.

**READ STREET**. This was the chassis and engine shop, where a driving seat was fixed on the chassis with wood and bolts, and the driver sat exposed to all weathers, summer and winter, driving through the streets checking the steering, brakes and carburetter. When they were selling well the streets would be alive with them. The cars would then go to the Body Shop, where the body would be fixed on. I was born in Read Street in front of the old Premier cycle works that became the Singer Body Shop. My next door neighbour was **Bodger Lea**, who played for the Singer Motors football team that eventually became the Coventry City Football Team.

**RAGLAN STREET**, where the seats and interior finish were added. **The Paint Shop** was also in Raglan Street, and **Jock and his gang** on the wash would wash down and polish up the cars. When I delivered Jock his telex letters I also had to take him his Littlewoods football pools coupons.

Along the top of the roof was a large electrically lit sign, with huge letters, I should think about 7ft high, that spelled out, one by one, the word **S I N G E R**. It would stay lit for a short while, then start all over again. At night it used to light up my bedroom.

Good night, folks.

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