Guglielmo Marconi: 1874–1937

MARCONI INSTRUMENTS LIMITED

~~~ a brief HISTORY

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Guglielmo Marconi was born in 1874 near Bologna, Italy. His father was Italian and his mother was British. In 1896, at the age of 22, he developed the world's first workable telegraphy apparatus which transmitted and received signals using radio frequency waves instead of wires—the "wire-less". He realized immediately that his invention had very far reaching possibilities and he tried to get the support of the Italian government to develop his idea but without success. A little disillusioned he turned to his mother's country—where people had shown a much more encouraging interest—and conducted demonstrations. He took out a British patent later that same year.

A company, Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company Limited, was formed the following year, 1897, and its first factory was established in Chelmsford, Essex. Marconi worked untiringly to improve wireless telegraphy apparatus and the distances over which wireless messages could be sent and received greatly increased. The Company soon expanded as people began to appreciate the potential of reliable wireless apparatus for communications and navigation on land, sea and in the air. Marconi himself received a Nobel prize in 1909 for discoveries in physics.

Alongside the development of more sophisticated radio equipment, however, came the need for electronic measuring equipment for testing at various stages in the manufacture of receivers and for checking and trimming the transmitters. In the early 1900's such test gear as was used was either made by the engineers who needed it, or it was imported. It was known, however, that a company in Southend—E. K. Cole Limited—was producing suitable test gear for its own use. In the early 1930's Coles agreed to sell test gear to other manufacturers. Business between E. K. Cole and Marconi was brisk until, in 1936, the two companies jointly formed a new concern—Marconi Ekco Instruments Limited—with premises at both Southend and Chelmsford.

In 1939 Europe entered into war and in 1940 the British government decided that the Southend factory was in too vulnerable a position to continue to house such a vital link in the country's telecommunications industry. At twenty-four hours notice the Company moved to High Wycombe and later also took factory space in St. Albans. Owing to legal complications of dual ownership in wartime the shares in Marconi Ekco Instruments held by E. K. Cole were acquired by Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company in 1941, thus making the instrument company a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Marconi parent company. It was around this period that the name was changed to Marconi Instruments Limited.

It was in 1946 that Marconi Instruments moved to their present site in Longacres, St. Albans, and by the following year all of the Company was housed on the one location.

A further development in the Company's history also happened in 1946. Britain had gone to the polls late in 1945 to return the first post-war government—a government which decided to nationalize all wireless transmission services to other countries. Wireless communications in this country up to that time had figured largely in the activities of Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company. In fact, Britain's earliest transmitting stations, both licensed in 1922, were 2MT and 2LO and both were Marconi stations. They were later to provide the foundation on which the British Broadcasting Company (later Corporation) was built.

The government decision had the effect of separating the transmission of cables and telegrams from the manufacture and sale of apparatus. A new company, Cable and Wireless, was formed but the government did not wish to own a manufacturing concern and so the English Electric Company Limited purchased the manufacturing activities of Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company.

Marconi Instruments Limited, now an English Electric Company, grew steadily. The Longacres site, 12½ acres in all, now consists of two main production buildings, a two-storey office and laboratory block, many other smaller buildings and a well-appointed canteen recently altered to provide comprehensive facilities for a thriving social and sports club. In 1967 further premises were acquired in St. Albans, Fleetville Works, adding a floor space of 150,000 square feet now used for manufacture, development and stores. As part of the policy of expansion the Company acquired, in 1965, the business of W. H. Sanders (Electronics) Limited, a company with two factories at Stevenage, Hertfordshire engaged in the expanding microwave business. Marconi Instruments Limited also has premises at

~~~ a brief HISTORY

Luton Airport, where the servicing and spares function is housed.

In 1968 the English Electric Company Limited merged with the General Electric Company Limited to form an immense new concern which continues to trade under the name of GEC with sales of more than £1,000 million per annum. Subsidiaries were formed which organized all the differing individual companies into groups according to the nature of their products. One such holding company is GEC-Marconi Electronics Limited and Marconi Instruments Limited is now part of that group.

In order to keep abreast of progress in the rapidly changing world of electronics, Marconi Instruments Limited invests substantial sums of money into developing new products and improving existing equipments. The manufacturing system employed is one of the most highly developed of its type anywhere and involves the use of computer controlled production, numerically-controlled machine tools, an environmental test laboratory, a thin-film laboratory and three measurement standards laboratories which have the Seal of Approval of the British Calibration Service.

The products manufactured currently include some of the world's finest examples of signal generators, attenuators, amplifiers, oscillators, waveform generators voltage and power meters, analysers, test sets, television measuring instruments, multi-channel test instruments, impedance measuring equipment, electronic counters, power supplies, programmable automatic test systems and microwave devices. Every product is ably supported by a first class spares and repairs service. Over half the production is exported, which is significantly more than the average for this type of industry, and the instruments are to be found in every country in the world. A hand-picked network of Distributors and representatives of the highest repute handle sales of Marconi Instruments in 66 countries.

It was in recognition of Marconi Instruments' valuable contribution to Britain's export efforts which led, in 1966, to a Queen's Award to Industry for Export Achievement. In 1971 the Company was again honoured by the award of another Queen's Award, this time for Technological Advancement following pioneering work done on developing new methods for solving measurement problems.

MARCONI INSTRUMENTS LIMITED

A GEC-Marconi Electronics Company

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