

Petters of Hamble

15th November 2012 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

The Society has had talks about most of the main large companies that have operated in Hamble, but had not covered Petters. As there was no written history of 'Petters of Hamble' it requested pictures and information through local magazines.

The result of this was that the Society's Chairman, Ian Underdown, led the meeting through a comprehensive illustrated history of the company at Hamble from the information received.

From the 1960s to the 1990s Petters provided valued convenient employment for Hamble residents and the surrounding area. Many of Hamble's school leavers gained their first job at this company.

Petters took over the AST Aircraft Division factory and many of its workers in 1959, producing marine engines, generators and vehicle refrigeration units. It also provided backup services for these products such as spare parts.

In the mid 1960s Petters produced a new breed of aluminium diesel engines. The first was the AA1 and for many years it was the smallest and lightest diesel engine, for which it received the Queen's Award for Industry. It tested its marine engines in local river businesses' boats such as Moodys, Blue Star Boats and the Hamble/Warsash ferry.

Many friendships were made at the factory and the Sports & Social Club was the envy of many other companies, with its activities ranging from sailing, golf and horticultural competitions, to just using the Clubhouse bar. It run charity events such as a 50 mile night walk from Guildford to Hamble and a sponsored row from Warsash to Curbridge. Petters also organised Blood Donor sessions for its employees.

In August 1972 Petters suffered a devastating fire which destroyed a quarter of the factory; however no one was laid off and work continued in temporary accommodation. The fire caused £2.5 million damage but the rebuilt premises provided much improved modern facilities. In the mid 1970s Petters had 1,100 employees and exported to 144 countries.

Similar to other factories of that time, there were some interesting stories of what the company would call as shrinkage but some employees saw as a perk of the job.

By the end of the 1970s sales of small engines were down worldwide because of over production. Petters was part of the Hawker-Siddeley group which eventually merged its Petter and Lister companies, as a result the Petters deisel factory closed at Hamble at the end of 1985.

Petter Refrigeration continued to operate part of the site, with the rest being sold to Hamble Development Ltd in 1987, which subsequently built 'Ensign

Business Park'. In 1988 Petter Refrigeration was sold to the American company Thermo King with its 200 employees. Soon after taking over it closed the Social Club and its premises was entirely used as offices.

After reviewing its factory sites around the world, Thermo King decided to close Petter Refrigeration at the end of 1996 and its 100 employees were made redundant.

The audience included many former employees who shared their memories during and after the meeting, particularly reminiscing about their ex-work colleagues and friendships. At the end of the meeting the former employees were reluctant to leave as it was like a works reunion for them.