

Parkfield Foundries, Stockton on Tees

Posted by Paul Delplanque on June 20, 2008 8:29 AM | [Permalink](#)



Parkfield Foundries plant in Stockton in 1990, note the optional shopping trolley

In our occasional series focusing on one particular Teesside firm, we have chosen to feature completely at random Parkfield Foundries, which was once in Stockton on Tees.

Parkfield Foundries was a relatively new firm in the heavy industrial field being established in 1961 at a time when Teesside industry was expected to be poised on the brink of a boom time. The Evening Gazette reported on the 2nd February 1961 that, "A new lease of life for the Parkfield Foundry, Stockton has become assured following the formation of a new company which will take over the plant from Ashmore, Benson, Pease and Co. Ltd., who had originally planned to shut it down. ♦? The Gazette explained that the foundry business was to be sold as a going concern to a new company, Parkfield Foundries (Tees-side) Ltd.

Within a few months the Gazette was able to report that the new company had secured substantial contracts for machine tool castings destined for India, also that the output from the foundry had increased especially in high ductile irons. However, the new company was not without its problems, within a month of taking over, the Gazette reported a walkout by 200 men of the TGWU. The dispute was over the dismissal of some workers; fortunately the dispute was quickly settled with the men back at work the following day.



Molten metal being poured by Brian Hunter in 1984

By 1964 the foundry business was gaining in strength with the plant specialising in the field of 'spheroidal graphite irons' which were replacing traditional steel castings, this meant that the company was in a position to expand further and create another 60 jobs.

By 1973 it was reported that an upsurge in new factory building and equipping throughout the country was creating more work for Parkfield Foundries who were able to re-employ 40 workers they had laid-off the year before plus a few more. The workforce was now 300 and the assistant managing director K.B.Turner said that, "prospects were very good.♦?"



Apprentice Geoffrey Williams of Parkfield Foundries (fourth left), received three of the top five awards at a presentation of prizes to the best foundry apprentices in the Teesside district in May 1973. Other apprentices pictured with Hubert Keeble (left), managing director of Blakett Hutton, Guisborough, are Kenneth Warn of Wilson Foundries, Bishop Auckland, and Keith Peggs of Blakett Hutton.

The early 1970s were the good times for the company but by 1977 the firm seemed to be be-devilled by strikes and walkouts followed by redundancies in what was described as "the worst ever recession in trading.♦?" Ecology was another concern as the 1970s drew to a close, Stockton Council had been in talks with management about pollution levels from the plant. In 1979 a £40,000 anti-pollution plant was announced by the company in response to complaints from local residents on the Parkfield estate.

The Gazette had reported in March 1979 that for several years residents had been complaining of thick dust-bearing smoke belching from the chimneys settling on windowsills and cars and even finding its way into living rooms and kitchens. Company secretary Gordon Trembath said that the firm was aware of the problem and that the new £40,000 plant would cut emissions by 80 per cent.

There were more problems in October 1981 when more than 100 jobs were axed with the 'light' foundry being forced to close because the men would not agree to short-time working said the directors. Managing director Brian Turner said, "We are short of work and we have not been able to reach an agreement with the union so we have no alternative but to close the 'light' foundry.♦?"

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Remember When is a nostalgic blog by the Evening Gazette's very own resident historian, Paul Delplanque. It looks back on Teesside history and memories using the Evening Gazette's excellent archive of news stories and photos, which recorded local history as it happened.

We want to hear about your local memories even if they are sometimes unashamedly viewed through rose tinted glasses, because nostalgia as we all know, is not what it used to be.

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Mr. Brian Turner, managing director of Parkfield Foundries, Stockton (left) with three directors all over the age of 70 who were re-elected to the board at the annual meeting in 1982 - deputy Chairman Mr. Geoffrey Taylor, 71, Chairman, Mr. George Cantlay, 75 and Mr Tom Potts 75.

Parkfield was not alone however, redundancies involving a total of 300 men were hitting several other big employers on Teesside at the time, notably British Chrome and Bowater Hills. Stockton MP Bill Rodgers who had recently left the Labour Party in favour of the newly founded SDP came in for criticism from Gordon McClean of the TGWU for his "total lack of involvement". Bill Rodgers angrily rejected the accusation saying that he had been in constant touch with the firms involved.

Over the next two years more workers were made redundant as the firm recorded more losses but in August 1983 it was announced that a sales 'tycoon' had been recruited to lift the firm out of the red. This was Roger Felber from London who took a 25 per cent stake in the company and was appointed as deputy chairman. After some months of more redundancies, December 1984 saw the new deputy chairman announcing that Parkfield Foundries was back in the black for the first time in some years.



Roger Felber pictured outside Parkfield Foundry in 1983

Felber had led the company to diversify into the nuclear industry which brought Parkfield Foundries enormous benefits, and it looked as if the company's fortunes were changing for the better. The next few years saw surging profits which enabled the company to take over several smaller firms which had been its suppliers, and by 1986 Parkfield was securing contracts from as far a field as American locomotive manufacturers.



Foundry man Ray Moore manufacturing a litter bin for Chelmsford in 1988

By 1987 the company announced that it was the first firm in the North to win a major construction contract for the building of the channel tunnel supplying 5,600 iron segments for the two 'pathfinder' tunnels. This new work created another 60 jobs between Parkfield and Tees Components of North Skelton with the new projects valued at £700,000.

More channel tunnel work followed with orders for £2m arriving in November and a Christmas bonus of an £8m order announced in December. In October 1988 Roger Felber said that Parkfield Foundries was part of a group of companies recently acquired which would be known as the Parkfield Group which had an annual turnover of £35m and now employed nearly 1,000 people. These were the best years for Parkfield.

However the issues over pollution had still not disappeared, furious Stockton residents said they faced washday blues every day because of thick black soot from Parkfield. "You daren't hang white clothes out because of it, ♦?" said Elaine Noble of School Walk on the Parkfield Estate. Residents complained that they could not even open their windows because of the soot. In December 1988 Parkfield pledged to clean up its act rather than face prosecution from council health chiefs after they had slapped notices under the 1936 and 1939 Public Health Acts on the company.



Parkfield often added their own special ingredient to the weekly wash and Elaine Noble (right) and her neighbour Joy from the nearby estate were none too pleased about it.

As the 1990s dawned woes for Parkfield increased with one story after another in the Gazette reporting redundancies, debts, lack of orders and even fines over safety issues that were issued against the company. Administrators had taken over and whiz-kid Roger Felber had left the company, shares fell so sharply on the Stock Exchange that dealing was suspended, it was now a story of slow decline.

Amid optimistic stories of revival, the job losses increased as a desperate search was made for a buyer, eventually C V Buchan a member of the AMEC group stepped in and bought the company in January 1992. However the problems continued with the original company the Parkfield Group being investigated by the Serious Fraud Office and more redundancies. There was one bright moment in 1993 when Parkfield won a contract to build tunnel segments for the new Jubilee Tube line in London. But eventually the plant closed in October 1996 leaving the workforce bitter and disappointed.

That was the end of the road for Parkfield Foundries, which had battled its way through the turbulent 1980s to become one of Teesside's major heavy industrial companies employing over 1000 people. A company whose fortunes rose and fell like a yo-yo eventually to disappear from Stockton forever, but not our memories.

Did you work at Parkfield Foundries? What are your memories? Share them by posting a comment here.

Next week we have 2 exclusive 'never seen before' video clips to show you of Thorpe Thewles viaduct being blown to bits in 1979. Great stuff.

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Kevin McGowan wrote...

I worked at Parkfield Foundries from 1973 to 1982 and witnessed the slow decline in the companies fortunes during that period. The strikes were no worse than anywhere else at the time, and were usually confined to a few days around the annual wage negotiations. However there were a number of walkouts during the famous heatwave of 1976. This was largely due to the overhead crane drivers experiencing intolerably high temperatures in their cabs, over 90f on some days. Our neighbours weren't the only ones to suffer from the effects of the foundries pollution. The workers cars parked below the chimneys suffered paint damage caused by iron particles etching into the surface.

I went back to work there as a student in the summer of 1985. We were sprucing up the place in readiness for a visit from Margaret Thatcher, who was coming to see our new electric induction furnaces as part of a visit to Teesside. These devices finally solved the pollution problem.

One of my jobs at this time was repainting various signs around the site , and an example of my handiwork can be seen on the wall in the first photo. It reads " Parkfield Group PLC. Private Car Park"

Posted by: Kevin McGowan | August 31, 2008 7:13 PM

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