

Perkins: Fascinating history behind Peterborough's most famous company

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THE story of Perkins and Peterborough begins not in the city itself, or even in the surrounding area, but miles away, in a village near Rugby, and the birth in 1821 of one Thomas Perkins.

When he grew up, he became an agricultural engineer, and established a business in Hitchin, in Hertfordshire, making agricultural equipment.

Through this business, he went to many agricultural shows, and at one such show he met a man named William Barford, who was to bring Thomas to Peterborough, and set in motion a hugely important chain of events for thousands of the city's future residents.

William Barford was well established in Peterborough as one half of an agricultural equipment firm, Amies and Barford.

After he and Thomas met, it was decided that Thomas should join the business, and the Amies partnership was dissolved in 1872.

The business became Barford and Perkins and Thomas came to Peterborough, starting an important chapter in the city's history.

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He had a son, John Edward Sharman Perkins, and John in turn also had a son, Frank.

It was Frank who was to go on to found the company that was to provide employment for many thousands across the city.

How he came to do it, and the way Perkins Engines became such an international success, is the subject of a talk by local historian Stephen Perry later this month.

Stephen's talks, which he runs in conjunction with the Central Library's Local Studies and Archives section, are a big hit with history enthusiasts across the city.

His last talk, on the history of the workhouse in the city, attracted around 120 people.

This talk has a personal interest for Stephen, as he spent 30 years working as an accountant at Perkins Engines.

He said: "I'd worked for the company for a long time and I thought 'is there a story to tell about Perkins?'.

"I started to look at it and I found it to be one of the most fascinating stories there is."

Stephen's talk will take his audience from the birth of Thomas Perkins to the heights of the success of Perkins Engines.

It will highlight the importance the company came to have on the international stage, from humble

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Frank Perkins had been thinking about the idea of a high-speed [diesel](#) engine for some time, and had started to develop it with an engine designer, Charles Chapman.

But it was from 1932 that the idea took off, as the pair joined forces with two other men, G D Perks, and Frank's brother-in-law AJM Richardson, to establish the company.

Perkins engines went on to play a key role in the Second World War, as its now-famous P6 engine was used in rescue boats and other marine craft.

By the early 1950s, Perkins engines were being used by many key car manufacturers, including Austin, Chrysler, Ford, Dodge and Vauxhall, and in the 1960s and 1970s, Perkins was the biggest employer in Peterborough.

Stephen will also reveal something of the man behind all of this, the inspirational figure of Frank Perkins.

He was the one who saw the potential that a high speed diesel engine possessed and set up the company which brought success to both him and the city.

As well as having the determination to found his own company, Frank also had an eye for publicity and was ahead of his time in getting word about his product out and about.

He needed to be, as the public needed some convincing that [diesel engines](#) were a good idea.

"People were concerned about where they would get a diesel engine serviced. They knew how to do that for petrol engines, but not for diesel," Stephen said.

Fortunately, Frank was a master at marketing and publicity stunts.

"What he tried to do was tell the country - and the world to some extent -that diesel engines were here and were a viable proposition," Stephen said.

In order to do this, he aimed to get the public's attention. He drove a diesel engine car to Moscow, and in October 1935, he put a diesel engine car on Brooklands racing track. The car lapped the circuit at 92mph, and at times reached 100mph – eye-catchingly fast speeds in the 30s.

Stephen has a lot of respect for Frank and the work he did.

"I think he had great vision. He had a great interesting in driving the company forward," he said.

"I've always described setting up the company as a pioneering venture.

"In the early days he had the vision to see that the world needed high speed [diesel engines](#).

"Even today across the world if you talk about high speed diesel engines, it's the name Perkins that's mentioned."

Stephen's talk on the Perkins Story will take place on Wednesday, January 20 at 2.30pm at the John Clare Theatre, Broadway.

Entry is 1 on the door, no booking is required.

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