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an uplifting business

Pat Ashworth visits a Nottingham company celebrating 50 years of manufacturing business, who say most of us carry round with us — if we hope we'll rarely have to use it.

MAYBE in this country we're just not given to shouting out about our successes. You could be inclined to think, reading an ever-growing list of imports, that Britain had ceased to make anything in the engineering field at all, and that quality and reliability were assets peculiar to the Japanese.

It's encouraging therefore to visit somewhere like Metallifacure at Redhill, and to discover that every single new car made in Britain is equipped with a car jack made in Nottingham. Metallifacure has 100% of the UK market for original equipment



John Clifford, managing director of Metallifacure.

and a growing share of the European market. Being best on price, quality and service has led to rapid growth over the last few years, as the automotive trade remains buoyant and car sales rise to a peak.

It's a double effect in fact: the productivity of UK car manufacturing plants has also increased so that the UK is getting an increased market share. Metallifacure has reaped the benefits. When managing director, John Clifford, joined the company in 1985, sales were £5.5 million. This year they will be £10.5 million.

The Granger brothers, who diversified from the family drapery business to found the company, started in a fairly modest way making general engineering components on Canal Street, Nottingham. Known as Canal Street Engineering, they discovered a series of businesses: one making precise grooves for the machine and latterly for the aerospace industry; one making coarser screws which were sold as agricultural jacks and car jacks. It was an innovative business and it flourished.

But at no time has it been more productive than now. Metallifacure builds the staggering number of 10,000 jacks a day and supplies all the UK manufacturers — Ford, Austin Rover, Nissan, Peugeot Talbot, Vauxhall, Jaguar and Rolls Royce, Lotus, Aston Martin and Panther. Ford Transit vans built in Belgium carry their jacks; as do all Ford Granadas and Fiestas built in Germany. The numbers produced weekly for each reflect the market: 14,000 jacks a week for the Fiesta and the Escort, for example; 4,500 each for the Metro and Montego, 58 a week for Rolls Royce.

There are four basic designs, named according to shape and function. Volume cars are split between the scissor jack and the



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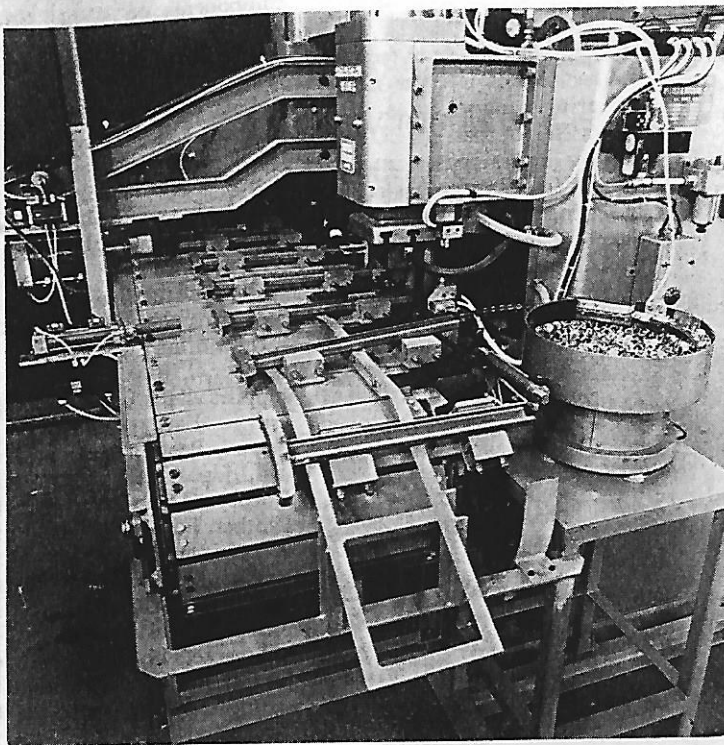
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'boomerang' or half-scissor jack; there's a pillar jack peculiar to the Ford Sierra, and there's the sturdy bottle jack used mainly for commercial vehicles. Metallifac-ture's Birmingham factory makes some of the metal components and the rest are manufactured from the raw steel at Arnold, where the company employs 220 men — an integrated, multiracial workforce that reflects Notting-ham's multiracial mix.

They work in a safety-critical business. When a driver jacks up a vehicle, his life is at stake, and consequently, quality assurance at the factory is as stringent as it could possibly be.

"I guess that's the biggest change that has occurred in the automotive components supply industry over the last few years", says John Clifford. "Quality, quality, quality. I think the Japanese have been responsible for that. The quality you got in a Japanese vehicle five years ago was so much better than the UK models that the British manufacturer was forced to bring his quality up. When Nissan stated that they guaranteed their vehicle for a certain number of years, it was a statement of their confidence in their quality. European

manufacturers had to match that in every single thing that went into the vehicle.

"European-built vehicles were generally more unreliable. Parts failed — you only had to look at the side of the motorways to see which models were the least reliable. So the quality standards that most car manufacturers now insist upon have revolutionised our own quality standards, to the level that what was once a bit of basic technology is now a piece of fairly sophisticated technology when it gets to the vehicle. Our controls are sophisticated, systematic, and make sure that a darned good product goes out of the door".



Metallifac-ture, Arnold, Nottingham.

The company has undertaken massive investment to bring machinery and processes up to date. The design department, where until last year, all drawing used to be done on boards, is transformed with CAD — computer aided design — and they're now in the process of introducing software which links computer aided design and computer-aided manufacture, punching directly into the machine which produces the part. Such processes are now almost standard in large companies, and in adopting them, Metallifac-ture are consciously moving into a new league.

Inside the factory itself, raw material from British Steel and

manufactured parts from Bir-mingham enter the production areas from opposite ends of the vast interior, and join the process in the middle. It's an incredibly noisy environment, but to a visitor it's an exciting, even exhilarating one. Steel bar comes into the factory direct from the mill, with all its scale still attached, and so the steel is first put through drawing machines to remove the scale and then reduced in diameter.

Great hissing, sloshing machines these are which pump the steel bar through into the next battalion of machinery, each set up to do a different part and all feeding into the main production. Automatic machines drill a hole through the middle of each bar and put a thread in ready to build into the jack. In one process, six machines are worked by two men: in another, five machines are worked by one. Everyone's busy.

The next set of machines makes the jack handles, a two-stage operation that draws from black bar and bends ready to fit on to the jack. These processes are all automatic: a commercial jack handle, which has no less than four bends in it, can still be produced in a single operation using computer control. But watching the men at work on the

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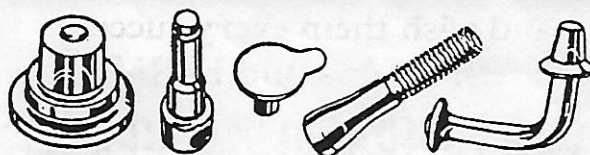
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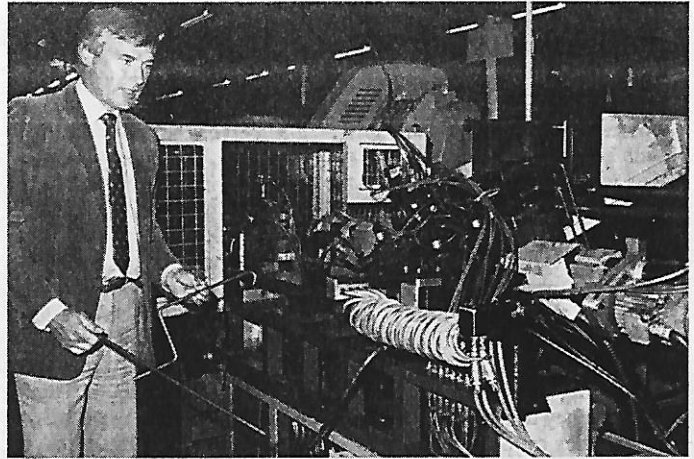
parts coming off the machines as they feed into hoppers, you also sense a natural rhythm there too and a certain pride in being able to produce a good product every time.

At every stage, quality control procedures come into force. Any process which affects the criticality of the jack has to be checked hourly on a standard check list and the results meticulously recorded on an inspection sheet. Anywhere where a machine is setting controls has to be checked. We watch a lift arm for a Jaguar XJ 40 jack under construction — a combined design between Jaguar and Metallifactory. If you can afford a Jaguar, you want something special.

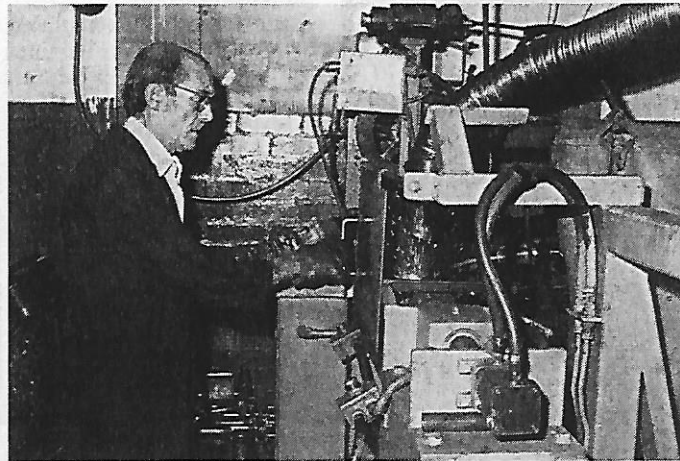
Each factory line is dedicated to a different manufacturer's model. One line is already building volume for the much-heralded new car from Austin Rover. The Vauxhall Cavalier line produces 5,000 jacks per week for the two UK plants and a further 1,500 for the General Motors plant in Antwerp — business gained over the last twelve months. Another section produces Metallifactory's own make of jack for the retail trade,

and a consignment of these is stacked ready to go out.

"We don't hold any finished stock", says John Clifford. "We'll be building this morning, painting this afternoon, dispatching tomorrow. When you're building 10,000 jacks a day, imagine trying to hold them! We try to hold components only". And so in the massive shipping area of the factory, today's shipment was being assembled, ready for dispatch on the 40-foot trailer which would arrive at 1pm to be filled with jacks for Ford at Halewood, Southampton, Dagenham, Germany and Belgium. It's a daily timetable with



Computerised handle forming machine.



One of the welding processes.

all the manufacturers, and by 2pm the whole shipping area will be empty. Some of the jacks painted this morning will already have been packed for tomorrow.

"This is the Nissan load for today", John Clifford points out, "painted at 4pm yesterday and packed off the line. They're fitted on-line at Nissan, who have vetted our quality control procedures and know that the jack will be okay to fit. We go through a lot of audits — Nissan come and double-check our procedures — and if we created a problem, we'd have to handle it right back to the customer". We watch a man doing the final assembly of

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a jack after it's been through the painting, baking and cooling process. What he's doing now will be on a vehicle tomorrow, and within three days will be in the boot of a car.

Nissan were impressed when Metallifactory suggested an improved product — they were not used to a UK supplier who went back and said, 'look, you're buying our product — here's something that's an improvement'. They became interested in what other capabilities the company had, and that has led to a new product for Metallifactory: the manufacture of the seat hinges for the rear folding seats.

It's part of a whole expansion plan for Metallifactory, who are well aware that a single product can make them vulnerable. The components for the hinges will come in to a new bay, and within 48 hours from receipt of parts the completed hinges will be shipped out. "Once we're happy with the processes", John Clifford says, "we can then go out and sell similar products."

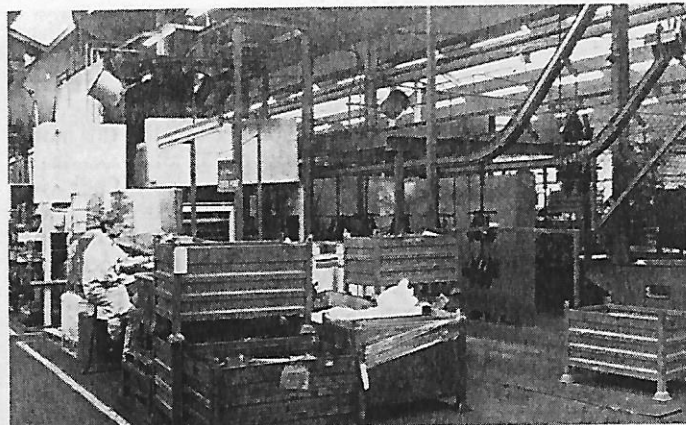
"We've identified products where we're going to expand over the next four or five years, and we're putting £1.8 million expansion capital into the company,

which should almost double our sales again. We have to be the best or equal the best in whatever we take on, and my job is to make sure the investment goes right and gives us the future we deserve". To that end John is off to Japan in November, to get the technology transfer that will ensure Metallifactory has the best in the world.

It's a dynamic situation. And it's not until you take a look at the quality assurance lab that you see the extent and the rigour of the testing processes through which the company puts its jacks. One machine simulates what happens once you take the weight



Quality testing by computer rig.



Quality checkpoint inspection.

of a vehicle's suspension when it's cleared the floor and the jack has to take the full weight. They've got a Nissan jack on it at present — it will have to do 100 lifts up and down and still be in an operable state by the 101st.

"It's insurance", John Clifford points out. "Our product is always used under distressed circumstances — a flat tyre, usually when it's dark and raining and usually on the side of a motorway. Maybe when you pull the jack out, you're already cross: the slightest thing wrong with the jack and you've got a major complaint".

There's complete freedom at Metallifactory for any of the quality assurance team to take

a jack off the line at random and test it. They've never had to halt the process for a faulty one, but it's a good safeguard. In here there's equipment to analyse the solids content of the paint; sophisticated equipment to analyse the carbon and sulphur, sulphur content of the steel to double-check that it conforms with British Standard; destruction testing equipment; devices to test the structural formation of a weld; and many more. They even simulate a car rolling off a jack, in order to cater for human disregard of safety precautions.

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