

BIRCHINGTON ENGINEERING Co Ltd.

Lt Col Harold John Taplin (affectionately known as 'Taps') started his business of wire-drawing in the Primitive Chapel in Albion Road, Birchington in **1946**, when he was already 55 years old. Wire-drawing involves pulling **cold wires** through moulds of very precise shapes. These extrusions are then sliced across into items like cogs, hinges and other tiny machinery parts. In the 1970s a local resident was on holiday in Scotland when she met a Scotsman who commented on the accuracy of the work done in Birchington Engineering – "The most accurate in Britain" – quite an accolade.¹

The old Chapel had been built in 1875 and had been used by the Primitive Methodists until about 1889, but had been used for a number of purposes over the 70 years of its history.² Within a few years of starting production, Taps' realised that he **needed to expand** and so in **1950** the Birchington Operative Builders constructed a purpose-built factory on the plot next door to the Chapel. It was 'dressed-over-all' in honour of the Queen's Coronation in 1953, with a huge Union Jack painted across the whole of the front of the building. In the new building they had doubled the floor space by building a **second storey**, with the upper floor accommodating the drawing office, tool-making rooms and administration offices. The **boilers** to heat and seal the wire shapes were built at the rear of the site.

As the business progressed, the firm obtained a name country-wide for the most accurate extrusions available – to within a **tolerance of + / - 2,000th** of an inch. The wires were sold in six, eight and ten feet lengths.

by 1958 'Tap's' interest in radio-controlled model boats and planes had led him into designing a new type of engine for them. They went on sale to the public in January 1959 and were initially produced upstairs in the Birchington works. The engines were called the **TAPLIN TWIN**, because of their twin carburettors.

The main work of the factory was the production of the extrusions. These were used in the making of **cogs and other small parts** for use in cigarette lighters, clocks, radio transistors, spectacle frame hinges, toys, etc. Firms like the large electrical giant of Plessey, Ronson's and Dunhill's cigarette firms, the local toy factory and Line's, a large London-based toy manufacturer, were just some of the main customers.

¹ One of the firm's customers was the Royal Naval Base at Gairloch on the west coast of Scotland. This could well have been where the man worked who gave Birchington Engineering such high praise.

² See the story of The Primitive Methodist Chapel in the Museum

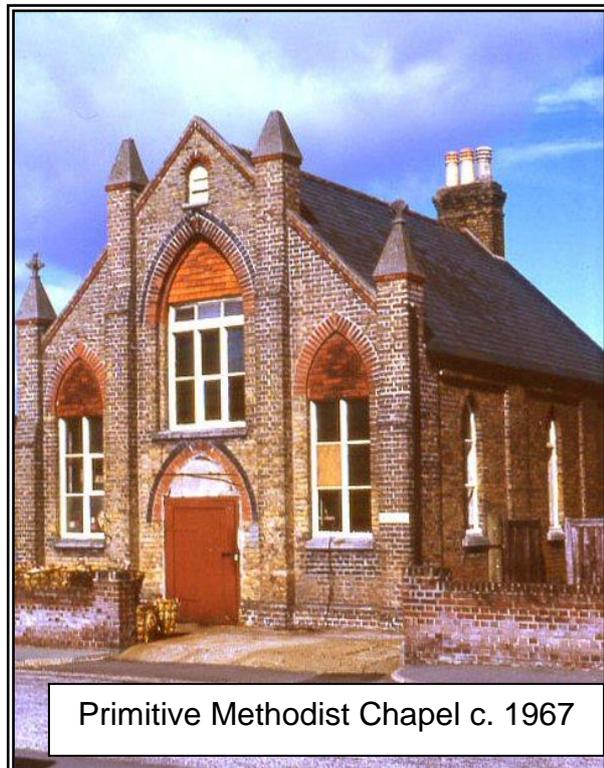
In order to **lubricate** the extrusions through which the dies were pulled, **powdered soap** was used. This gradually formed a film over everything around, especially the floor. This meant that each time the factory closed for a holiday, work finished the day before closure. Then the men cleared all the moveable objects up off the ground floor and flooded it with water into which caustic soda was added. This was left overnight to do its work. The men returned the next day, clad in Wellingtons and armed with bass brooms, and proceeded to sweep out the soapy solution. The floor was then left to dry out during the holiday and when the men returned after their break, they were greeted by a spotless floor!

The factory was sometimes asked to make some **unusual items**, like the huge plastic cogs required on the film set of '**Father Christmas**', starring Richard Attenborough. At another time there was an order from Wriggley's Chewing Gum, asking for some unusual extrusions. After the order was delivered, payment was made not only with the cheque for the correct amount, but also with a **huge box of chewing gum** for the workforce!

Apart from the usual metal work they handled, the staff sometimes had orders for projects with precious metals, including several orders for **silver serviette rings**.

From very early on, 'Taps' used to organise and fund **Works' Outings**. The first one was to the Festival of Britain in 1951. Other Outing venues were the Zoo, the London Palladium and to a 3-D Cinema. They usually took food and drink with them and would stop by the roadside to refresh themselves.

By 1963, with the additional work involved by the manufacture of the Taplin-Twin carburettors, 'Taps' had decided to open a second factory under the name of **Dinton Engineering**, based at 51 Marlborough road, Margate. He moved production of the Taplin-Twin engines over there and among other new lines, he added the making of **patch-boards for transistors**, used in radio transmitters for radio-controlled boats and planes.



Primitive Methodist Chapel c. 1967

When '**Taps**' died in **1969**, his younger son **Michael** took over the running of this enterprise. He enjoyed this side of the work, whereas John, his elder brother preferred the hands-on aspects of the work. Under Michael's guidance, the firm went from strength to strength. Sadly though, he developed leukaemia and **died in 1976**. **John then took over** the management of both factories – no easy job, with an ever-increasingly competitive market to battle with. He carried on the task for ten years. Eventually, in **1986**, **he sold both businesses** to 'Cupform' of Lewes in Sussex, who moved to works to Pysons Road, Ramsgate. The new owners were soon hit by the 1989-95 recession and the firm was finally sold off and closed down on 30th September **1990**. **John died not long afterwards** from a heart attack, **aged only 58**.

There are still a few of the original employees living in the area and two of them, Ken Watson and Reg Stokes, have been a great help in putting this short history about the firm together.

The factory buildings in Albion Road were left empty for some time, but were finally demolished in 1989. The land lay derelict until **McCarthy & Stone acquired it** and began building a block of flats on it in 1999. The management asked the local residents to suggest a name for the Court. The most popular one was '**TAPLIN COURT**', which was felt to be very appropriate and a worthy name.