

The History of Vincent Timber 1923-2023.

Words from Geoff Willets.

I have been asked if I could put pen to paper to share my time with the company and the history, which was started by John Vincent, who sadly, is not here to complete his notes. To continue where John left off, I will use his notes, but also, have asked for help and assistance from my colleague and good friend, David Burr. I make no excuses for including some of the highs and lows, during my time with the Company, which ended when I retired at the end of May 2010.

John Vincent's notes - February 1988

W.J. Vincent started in 1923 when my grandfather, W.J. Vincent Snr., known as "The Governor", bought at auction the premises of Fairbanks Timber Merchant at 473 Bristol Road, Selly Oak. Until then, he had been a director of Jones, Manley & Co. Limited. Before that, he had been its foreman, then manager when the hours of work were 6am until 6pm, 6 days per week. In addition to the timber yard, where most of the arrivals were by canal or railway, there was also an extensive stable of horses to look after and feed. It was not unusual for a man to lead, mainly on foot, a drawn load of timber to Redditch and back in one day.

After my grandfather had started on his own, my father soon joined him upon leaving school. They were then joined by Don Rutter as office boy in July 1923, together with Billy Hill and Tommy Evans, who were two of the originals.

Archie Bellamy came to Birmingham in 1926 as a salesman for The Hull Timber and Sawmill Co., soon to become firm friends with the Vincent Family. In 1934, he joined the company as sales chief and in 1937, when the Limited company was formed, he became a founder and director together with Don Rutter, my father and grandfather.

After the war years, when we machined timber for Mulliners Ltd for military vehicles, amongst many other Government requirements, we continued to hold part of the national stock. We supplied large quantities of whitewood, deep cut on our own two modern Robinson bandsaws, to very thin sections for the manufacture of packing cases for the export of Cadbury's chocolate to the Middle East.



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We also used to send daily supply of Abura to Chloride Alcad in Redditch, to produce battery cases. I recall the sawing created so much dust that we used to issue bottles of milk to our sawyers.

Ross Bellamy (Archie Bellamy's son) joined in 1951, followed by Peter Fowles in 1953, after their National Service. They developed the sales on a much wider basis. Shortly after my grandfather died in 1964, they were both appointed technical directors. They became full directors in 1968.

In 1970, following the sudden death of my father's lifelong friend and colleague, Don Rutter, Hilton Cliff of Richard Cliff, Oldbury, came to see my father at Easter.

After much work and re-organisation, mainly by Ross and Peter, Richard Cliff Birmingham (RCB) Limited was launched in August 1970. It was based in Selly Oak, under the guidance of Hilton Cliff, Peter Fowles and Les Willetts. At this time, Bob Morgan first became involved with us through our auditors.

Three months after I joined the Company in July 1972, Archie Bellamy died suddenly, leaving a huge gap in the office.

Unfortunately, tragedy struck again when after four happy years with RCB, Hilton Cliff died in December 1974. Meanwhile, during the August Bank Holiday 1973, we had a very large fire at our stockyard on Selly Oak station, when a third of our stock was destroyed. The firemen were on the scene for four days, bringing the fire under control. Everyone helped a great deal during the ensuing weeks of hard work.

The remaining stock at "The station" yard was re-organised, following which, on December 8th, 1975, W.J. Vincent & Co Limited took over Jones Manley. The company of Jones Manley was established in 1908 and was where my grandfather had first started in the timber trade.

The stockyard and sheds at Montgomery Street were developed, before closing the vulnerable Selly Oak "station" yard in 1978. Jones Manley's yard and mill were organised using one crane with no power steering.

By 1980, the sawmill from Selly Oak had also been moved to Montgomery Street, from where my grandfather's original shed had been built, leaving RCB to expand into the whole of the premises at 473 Bristol Road, under the



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guidance of Peter Fowles. During this period, RCB had also taken over the goodwill of Bridgwater, an old established casemaker in Digbeth.

During Easter 1981, we were all totally devastated when Peter Fowles passed away, leaving widow Peggy and three young children. In 1988 Peter's son Ben joined the company as a trainee.

Difficult trading years followed during the 1980's, particularly in the industrial manufacturing parts of the country. Bob Morgan became more involved with us at that time, keeping a close control on financial aspects.

Following my father's death in February 1982, Mike Rawson joined RCB, bringing with him the goodwill and customers of Bennett & Rawson. During these difficult trading times, Les Willetts, together with Bob Morgan, rejuvenated RCB's case-making and in the last two years had more fully utilised the Bristol Road premises, including the manufacture of tv scenery for the BBC.

Geoff Willetts: -

I joined the Company in February 1978 as assistant to the General Manager, Eric Bissell. My duties were split between yard, mill, and sales.

John Vincent: -

Geoff Willetts continued the development of Montgomery Street into the 1980's, into which the BBC fabrication dept of RCB was transferred.

Developments continued and on the 1st of February 1988, Dennis Hood joined us, bringing with him the goodwill of D. Hood & Sons Limited, who had concentrated their business on sheet material. At Montgomery Street, Ross Bellamy had responsibility for the setting up of the new plywood shed, which was well-organised and worked well.

Geoff Willetts:-

The Company carried on in its traditional manner, supplying sheet and timber, both hardwood and softwood, to a wide range of customers, including pallets and cases via RCB, TV scenery to the BBC, growing quantities of



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keruing and other species to the HGV industry, joinery to local joinery shops, hemlock and Douglas fir to a local ladder manufacturer and a wide range of sheet material to many industries.

It soon became obvious that the Company's traditional customers were changing materials or closing. New outlets had to be found, which was easier said than done. Several pine furniture manufacturers were found, including Sun Furniture and a local bed manufacturer. The Company struggled to achieve the surface finish required by these customers using our old Robinson machines. The decision was made to invest in a new Weinig moulding machine from Germany. A visit was arranged to visit the factory to see for ourselves the superb finish these machines could achieve.

At about the same time, due to lack of previous investment, we were in desperate need of new HGV's. I settled for our first of many Mercedes.

During these early years, it was becoming obvious that we were outgrowing the old offices in Montgomery Street. It was decided to convert the old saw shop and storage area into new offices. These buildings had been bombed in the War where horses were kept. After many meetings we decided upon a plan for the ground and 1st floor. Finally, some 12 months later, we were ready to move in. We moved in over a weekend, to the delight of all.

Whilst all this was going on, the scenery department got busier and busier, so it was decided to set up a new division, called Heathcliff, duly named after Cradley Heath in the Black Country area (where a new unit was to be rented) and Richard Cliff. Scenery poured out in all shapes and sizes for some time afterwards. Unfortunately, the BBC, Pebble Mill studios were to be demolished, which resulted in us losing our profitable contract. The unit, which had been so successful, sadly finally closed. RCB was soon to follow, as the profit from the scenery had been so good but was not viable any longer.

I must tell you about an incident in the mill (of which there were many)! One day, I went to the toolroom or "Ted's Shop" as it was known, during breaktime. Alongside others, I heard a huge bump on the roof of the toolroom and being showered in dust, we ran out to hear Lenny. He had been given the job of clearing the sawdust and shavings from the mill roof. The old extraction system would occasionally block, sending clouds of material over the roof, often ending up on the bridge over the canal and sometimes, covering the new cars from Longbridge, which were waiting to be exported by rail.



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I quickly climbed a ladder to see a pile of dust and old pipework, but no sign of Lenny, only a gaping hole in the mill roof and a long length of rope. Until, I noticed a pair of eyes appearing from the dust, followed by a face. I was extremely worried Lenny was injured. Fortunately, he said, "hello mate!" whilst coughing out dust. He said, "I did as I was told and put a rope around my waist, in case I fell." I replied, "well done Len, but the rope is supposed to be shorter than the drop!" I gave a deep sigh of relief that he was not injured, followed by a group of the lads, helping him down. Thank goodness health and safety is taken more seriously today.

The premises were constrained by Montgomery Street to the front, the Grand Union canal to the rear and Small Heath bridge to the left, with the old Chrome works to the right. Although we had a good-sized mill and storage yard, which was now well-organised, it was only capable of a given quantity of timber and sheet material.

It was decided to move sheet material and some timber into external storage at East Side Freight Limited. Unfortunately, excess stock became a serious problem that lasted for the remainder of my time with the company, resulting in substantial storage costs and impacting upon the Company's cash flow. At one point, we had to use the yard of Hampson Haulage in Hay Mills to store more timber, where we had to leave a side loader and our old colleague, Colin Alder, to offload many HGV's every day.

As time went by, we managed to purchase new lorries to add to our existing stock. We now could keep pace with our competitors regarding surface finish and delivery. During these challenging times, we managed to keep a good level of staff, only losing the odd one or two from time to time. I have to say, "thank you very much to all the staff," who stayed with the Company, of which loyalty I had not experienced previously.

I must admit this now, that John was always keen on anything new, which could be hard work at times. One day, he called Barry Leach (Finance Director) and me into his office to discuss a meeting he had had with a man, who explained to him about a revolutionary product for the future. I can remember only too well, saying to John, "it will never take off!" thinking it was a "one day wonder of an idea." The system was "The Internet!" Dear oh dear, what a mistake I made. Little did any of us know what was to come.



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On another day John said he had spoken to a family friend who was working for a company who owned many other companies one of which was having problems sourcing Western Red Cedar for their production of garden buildings.

The company was Compton Buildings of Fenny Compton near Banbury. Compton were currently buying cedar from another company within their group. The situation we were informed, was not ideal. Following a call to Compton's buyer, John and I were soon on our way to their offices.

We were very well received by their buyer where we discussed their requirements. We were handed a list of components in cedar that they used daily. The list amounted to many thousands in total. We were asked if we were interested and if so, could we submit prices accordingly. We left on very good terms although we were under pressure to submit our prices as a matter of urgency. Compton, besides a competitive price, wanted to know we were serious about a long-term relationship after problems they had in the past.

John and I returned home in the knowledge we had a huge amount of work to do to prepare the quotation. John spent hundreds of hours looking at the components, listing every operation required to produce them. Listing them on spread sheets which he loved producing!

Finally, after an exhaustive few weeks, we were on our way down to Fenny Compton again. We came away, fingers crossed we had done sufficient to possibly secure an order.

After a few days the all-important call came in for us to return once more. We were handed our first trial order. I will never forget that day because as we left their offices, we shook hands and drove to the nearest pub to celebrate.

The first order was a huge success, thanks to our excellent machinists. Our relationship grew from strength to strength in the coming years. Compton has since been taken over and rebranded as the Greenhouse People with whom we still do good business.

During the same time John had been asked to machine and supply a quantity of cedar cladding, on behalf of one of our Canadian suppliers to a project called the Millenium House in London. This was a new house full of energy saving ideas for the future. It appeared on TV, hosted by Carol Vorderman. Little did we know what impact this first house would have upon the market and certainly for Vincent Timber.



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John's enthusiasm certainly changed the direction of the company. This time I was fully on board with the new venture we were taking on. Following the initial order for cladding, John started to place ads. in architectural magazines which resulted in a steady flow of enquiries coming through. We had little to offer the architects who contacted us in terms of literature, often photo-copying typed sheets we had made up. As basic as they were, it worked until such a time as we had produced lovely glossy brochures.

The cladding market was continuing to grow not only now in Cedar, but also Siberian Larch, Thermowood, softwood and hardwood. I had a meeting with a Mike Creelman from Cape Cod of Halifax, Canada, who offered us a pre painted softwood cladding, which we decided to add to our stock range.

One of our first orders came from the Falkland Islands, following a visit there from a government official who happened to leave a magazine in which John had placed an advert. The magazine had been left in a hotel, whose owner spotted our advertisement and subsequently, ordered sufficient cladding for two houses. This we shipped via Portsmouth on one of the official supply boats that left every few weeks.

During the following years the vehicle flooring business continued to grow. Following the retirement of Ross Bellamy this was past into the capable hands of Ben Fowles (son of Peter). Sheet was also growing in other sectors headed by Peter Knight. During this time, we could be found at various exhibitions for both cladding and vehicle flooring.

Our presence in Selly Oak finally ended when we were forced to close our timber centre there known as VTC. Our retail unit had been under the railway arches and was becoming part of the redevelopment of Selly Oak. This was a very sad day when the doors closed for the last time, as we had been there so long and were well known locally for servicing builders and retail customers alike.

We had a great team of sales staff, each one creating their own outlets, which in total added to the success of the company. In the last few years John's brother, David, left the company to seek pastures new within the trade. David in turn, had opened new avenues for the company, some of which were still going strong when I retired.

The company changed its name to Vincent Timber, allowing myself, Les Willetts, and Terry Rose to become directors of the company. Les left following



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the closure of RCB, followed by Terry, who retired after a record number of years with the company.

On the 1st of June 2010 the baton was to be passed onto someone else, to carry on the good work and see the Company go even further forward. Long live Vincent Timber!

Darren Powell: -

Andrew Allen, a long-standing member of the Vincent Timber Sales team, was chosen to become Geoff's successor as Managing Director. Looking back, although there was a vision for the company, it did just trundle along due to problems not being addressed. Primarily overstocking.

It was a shock to us all when on the 14th of July 2018 the CEO John Vincent passed away from a long-standing heart condition. When it is said that he loved wood, he truly loved wood with a great passion. He would be greatly pleased to see how his son Jake has progressed and matured so quickly to become an established leader in the business, moving quickly from mill operative in 2013 to the role of Operations Director today.

Roll forward to January 2020 when being promoted from within Vincent Timber, I took on the roll as MD. My gosh what a challenging time was ahead. There are always demanding times within business, but one could never have envisaged the Covid-19 pandemic erupting just 3 months after taking on the roll, resulting in shutdowns, shortages in supply and rising material prices. This, followed by the war in Ukraine, which has caused rocketing energy costs and rising interest rates impacting on every business and family.

During the early days of the pandemic the opportunity was taken to start remodelling the internal layout of the offices to make them more open plan yet have the benefit of separate meeting rooms. A new state of the art computer system was installed offering significant software upgrades across all departments including accounting, production, transport and sales, providing a greater insight into all areas of the business.

Through all the turmoil, my team and I have kept a keen eye on costs and waste within the company. Major projects were identified and phase one of a transformation plan was put together. Jake Vincent was and still is very much at the heart of these significant steps towards the company becoming a much



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more efficient and leaner business. With the unwavering support and blessing of the Vincent family, the substantial savings resulted in the company being able to make much needed investment with a keen eye on moving the company forward to Carbon Zero and the next 100years.

Much organisation and overdue maintenance has been done to transform the offices and yard alike. Always with an eye on cost versus return. Organisation within the yard has meant the closure of a costly local extra storage facility.

The moving of the production staff mess room, resulting in the planned demolition of the old, dilapidated offices, made way for the extension of the sheet material department. While new electric side loaders heavily reduced savings in breakdown costs. The list goes on. Every step has been supported by wise counsel from Carol-Anne Vincent, who has been a great source of support and reassurance helping make the best decisions for the business and its staff.

Through all the modernisation of the company we place great value in our staff who are coming on the journey with us. We do so hope they will take advantage of the new chill out area down by the canal.

It doesn't stop here. The recent acquisition of Benchmark Timber an internet-based business along with the purchase of new lorries and neighbouring land will help Teamvincent build for the next generation and beyond.

Long live Vincent Timber!



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