

# The Earliest Days of Triumph

Twenty year old, German born Siegfried Bettmann arrived in England in 1883 and started work at the White Sewing Machine Company, London division, under the management of George Sawyer, but was laid off in 1885. The company made bicycles, sewing machines, roller skates, and a multitude of other things.

Based on his experience making bicycles, he founded the Triumph Cycle Company at Coventry in 1886 with financial backing from George Sawyer, who became Chairman. Shortly after, he founded S. Bettmann and Company, his import-export company.

Fellow German-born Mauritz Johann Schulte was employed in 1887 having gained experience in bicycle manufacture at William Andrews' cycle factory in Birmingham. The next year Schulte encouraged Bettmann to transform the business into a larger scale manufacturing company. Consequently, Bettmann purchased a site in Coventry, using money lent by his and Schulte's families. Then, in 1889 the company began producing the first Triumph branded bicycles. So successful was the enterprise that the company incorporated in 1890.

Another company, Robert Bunting and Sons, also founded in 1887 in Sheffield, manufactured steel profiles; tools like hammers; machinery like forges, rollers, wiredrawers; and parts like rims, guards, and spokes. Clearly one of Bettmann's bicycle parts supplier, or at least one of them. Bettmann is mentioned as being a Director in 1897 – to guarantee supply and quality for his own company(?), one can only surmise.

In 1895, three important events happened. In March he became a naturalised British citizen, and in July he married Millie (Annie) Meyrick in her home town of Shifnal, just northeast of Birmingham, after which he returned with his bride to his home in Coventry. And at some point during that year, a prospectus was launched to raise £45,000 Sterling to open a subsidiary for cycle production in his native city of Nuremberg, Orial TWN (Triumph Werke Nuremberg), which he did in 1896.

The company was registered on 12 February 1897 as the New Triumph Cycle Company, primarily to acquire the business of the Triumph Cycle Company. In June, the name was changed to the Triumph Cycle Company, enjoying the financial backing of the Dunlop Tyre Company.

With public attention on motorcycles at that time, in preference to bicycles, the decision was made to go that way. So, in 1902, Triumph motorcycle manufacture was started. A year later it was started in the German plant.

When the Great Depression hit in 1929, Triumph sold its German subsidiary as a separate, independently owned company, which became part of the TriumphAdler Company. The Nuremberg firm continued to manufacture motorcycles under the Triumph brand until 1957. Surprisingly then, "Triumph" motorcycles were being made and used on both sides during WWII. Does that make Steve McQueen's attempted escape over the wire on a Triumph motorcycle historically correct?

Interestingly, Schulte resigned as General Manager in 1919 over a disagreement with Bettmann over what direction the company should take. He was for car production while

Bettmann favoured continuing with motorcycles. Schulte's successor as General Manager was Colonel Claude Vivian Holbrook who worked for the War Office during World War 1 as a motorcycle procurement officer. Interestingly again, he was the brother of Norman Douglas Holbrook Commander Royal Navy VC, after whom the NSW town of Holbrook is named!

Holbrook persuaded Bettmann to acquire the assets and Clay Lane premises of the Dawson Car Company and start producing a 1.4 litre model called the Triumph 10/20. This became the basis for the success of the Triumph Motor Company formed in 1921.

By the mid 1920's Triumph had grown into one of Britain's leading motorcycle and car makers, with a 500,000 square feet plant capable of producing up to 30,000 motorcycles and cars each year. In 1931 the name changed to Triumph Company. Triumph sold off its bicycle manufacturing facility to Raleigh in 1932. But by 1933 Triumph was struggling financially forcing Bettmann out as Chairman. He retired completely in 1934.

The company hit serious financial problems in 1936 resulting in the Triumph motorcycle businesses being sold to Jack Sangster of Ariel Motors, manufacturers of a variety of items including pennyfarthing bicycles, to become the Triumph Engineering Company, which itself was to become a subsidiary of BSA in 1961. Bicycle production was acquired by Coventry Bicycles.

In July 1939 the Triumph Motor Company went into receivership and the factory, equipment and goodwill were offered for sale. Thomas W. Ward purchased the company and placed Donald Healey in charge as General Manager. However, the effects of World War II again stopped the production of cars as the Priory Street works in Coventry was completely destroyed by bombing in 1940.

After the war, what was left of the Triumph Motor Company and the Triumph brand name was bought by the Standard Motor Company which formed a subsidiary, Triumph Motor Company (1945) Ltd., with production transferred to Standard's factory.

Bettmann became Mayor of Coventry in 1913. In 1919, he founded the Annie Bettmann Foundation, which is still operating today; I quote from the official website, for "people aged 21 -40 living in or within 3 miles of boundary of Coventry who are about to start a business or are within 5 years of the start of a business". He died ten years after his wife on 17 February 1951 aged 88, leaving a memorable legacy.

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