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FOUNDATION STONE LAYING CEREMONY

OF

ACROW'S CORONATION WORKS at SAFFRON WALDEN

BY THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER

THE RT. HON. R. A. BUTLER, C.H., P.C., M.P.

ON MARCH 18th, 1955.

It was in December, 1950, that I met, for the first time our compatriot, Mr. W. A. de Vigier, Managing-Director and Chairman of Messrs. Acrow (Engineers) Ltd., of South Wharf, London, W.2.

The interview which he had kindly accorded to me, impressed me at the time to such an extent, that I recorded it in one of the issues of this paper (No. 1149, December 15th, 1950) concluding my biographical notes with the following words: "With unfailing interest, we shall follow his career which started from humble beginnings and will, I am sure, lead him to still greater heights".

These prophetic words, I am glad to say, have become true. Who has not seen the yellow boards with the name of "Acrow" written across it, wherever scaffolds are erected? There is hardly a street in the City of London alone without it, a striking sign that this firm is rapidly extending its business.

Those who have had the privilege of meeting Mr. de Vigier, either on business or socially, can hardly fail to be vividly impressed by his dynamic personality. Without trying to repeat the various stages of his phenomenal career, which started in 1936, when at the age of 24 he landed in this country with great expectations, an interminable will to succeed, but little money — in fact his worldly belongings amounted to £50 — it can be said that his achievements remind one of some of the industrial magnates in our great sister republic of America.

One, and I am sure, not the least factor of his success is due to the happy and congenial relationship which exists between the management of this big concern and its staff, of this I had a striking proof when attending the 17th Anniversary Dinner and Dance of Acrow's at the Grosvenor House, Park Lane, W.1. on Friday, October 2nd, 1953, when over 1,500 guests, divided between the company's office staff, work people, agents and customers, celebrated another mile stone in their history.

This again was noticeable at the foundation stone laying ceremony, on March 18th, of the Coronation Works at Saffron Walden (Essex), where as well as the Directors and Departmental heads, workmen and their families from the various factories were present.

Owing to the continuous expansion of the firm's business, it had been found necessary to decide upon the construction of a new works at Saffron Walden, where already a factory employing between 300 and 400 workhands exists (other works are at Uxbridge, Glasgow, Leeds and Bristol), and it is my endeavour to describe the laying of the Foundation Stone ceremony by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The sun was brightly shining on Friday, March 18th, when I arrived at the Headquarters at South Wharf. After so many dreary days it gladdened one's heart to see a little sunshine, and seemed a good omen, heralding in a day of such importance. Although I have during nearly 30 years had the privilege of attending a good many functions of one kind or other, amongst them the launching of Swiss Merchant Marine vessels at shipyards on the Scottish borders, the first flight over London with Swissair, as well as the first non-stop flight by the latter company from London to Samaden, I had never yet been present at the laying of a foundation stone, an experience to which I was looking forward with pleasant anticipation.

Without much ado we started in one of the company's cars on our 40 miles journey to Saffron Walden a picturesque little Essex town. The journey was interrupted at Epping for a luncheon offered most generously by the company.

Shortly before 3 o'clock we arrived at the site where the Coronation Works of Acrow's are going to



ARRIVAL OF THE CHANCELLOR.
Left to right: The Chancellor, Mr. W. A. de Vigier.

be built, and where the making of roads had already begun. The building-site is situated on a plateau offering a fine view over the countryside, comprising about 40 acres. I was told that on completion these works will be able to employ about 1,000 workhands.

Besides a builders shed, which was suitably decorated for the occasion, a large marquee was erected where the official guests, numbering about 70 assembled, and a temporary pavilion in which the laying of the foundation stone was to take place. From a high mast the Union Jack and the Swiss flag gaily fluttered in a strong breeze. The hoisting of the Swiss flag on such an occasion was indeed a *beau geste*, and I take it that it was meant as a compliment to the Chairman, who hails from our country, as well as a mark of respect to the Swiss Minister and Madame Daeniker who were present.

Familiar sounds greeted us on arrival, the Band of Her Majesty's Scots Guard, by permission of Colonel H. N. Clowes, D.S.O., O.B.E., played a number of Swiss melodies, I am sure that must have been the first time this famous band has ventured to render some of our popular folk tunes, and mind you they played them well, and quite as good as *f.i.* the "Stadtmusik, Solothurn".

Punctually at 3.30 p.m., the Rt. Hon. R. A. Butler, accompanied by Mr. de Vigier arrived, they went straight to the pavilion, where in the meantime the official guests had taken their seats, both were heartily cheered by the assembly. In front of the pavilion a large number of the staff were gathered to watch the proceedings.

It goes without saying, that on an occasion like this speeches play an important part, they were all on a high level, short and interesting.

The first speaker to ascend the rostrum was Mr. A. A. Hobbs, Director at Saffron Walden, who extended a very cordial welcome to the Swiss Minister and Madame Daeniker, saying that the company was greatly honoured by their presence, after welcoming the other guests he introduced to the audience the Mayor of Saffron Walden, His Worship F. W. Goddard, the latter in his address emphasized the importance for the town of this event, saying that the population will greatly benefit by the opening of an additional factory. In expressing thanks to Mr. de Vigier and his Board of Directors for having again chosen Saffron Walden for their field of activity, he voiced his pleasure at the very cordial relations which have existed in the past between the Company's officials and his Council.

Then Mr. W. A. Vigier, Chairman and Managing-Director of Acrow (Engineers) Limited, who received a hearty ovation on mounting to the speakers desk, said:

Your Excellency, Mr. Butler, Your Worship,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

We are very privileged to have with us today the Right Honourable R. A. Butler, Chancellor of the Exchequer, to lay the foundation stone of our new Works, to which we have given the name Coronation Works.

These Works are so called because they were first planned in the Coronation Year of Her Most



THE CHANCELLOR'S ADDRESS.

1st row, L to R: The Mayor of Saffron Walden, Mme. Daeniker, Mr. H. C. Drayton, The Swiss Minister, Mr. W. A. de Vigier, Mr. A. A. Hobbs.



MR. BUTLER LAYING THE FOUNDATION STONE.

Gracious Majesty. It was then that the Board of Directors realised how much keener competition was becoming abroad, and felt that it was in these days of relative prosperity that we in Acrow should build the most modern works of its kind to ensure continuity of work should leaner years come again, and particularly in order to hold our hard-won position in world markets.

It is our intention to build Coronation Works out of profits, and the speed of their expansion will, therefore, to a great extent, depend on what Mr. Butler will leave us after his next Budget.

With one of Her Majesty's most eminent Ministers among us, I feel it is an appropriate moment, as a Swiss, to say "thank you" for the great opportunity, the warm hospitality and the liberal understanding which England has shown me in allowing me to work and live over here among you. I firmly believe that this country, with its vast resources in the Commonwealth, offers greater opportunities than any other country in the world. In 1936, when Mr. Bauscher and I started Acrow, all we had was £50 each and an idea to replace timber (which was then commonly used for formwork in building construction) by mechanical devices made of steel. This idea succeeded to such an extent that, today, steel has almost completely replaced timber for such purposes. As a result, the country must be saving millions of pounds worth of timber which would have had to be imported from overseas, home grown timber not being suitable for formwork.

You at Saffron Walden are not only saving foreign currency in this way, but you are also earning foreign currency by your vast exports to other countries. I feel pretty safe in saying that there is hardly a country on this side of the Iron Curtain which is not regularly receiving some products made here at Saffron Walden.

To a large extent this result has been achieved by the formation of Associated Acrow Companies in fourteen overseas countries, namely Canada, Australia, South Africa, Rhodesia, the United States of America, Peru, Argentine, Brazil, Uruguay, Venezuela, France, Italy and Germany, and Iraq. All of these Companies are supplied with Acrow products manufactured in Great Britain, and our new Coronation Works will enable us more adequately to meet the ever-increasing demands these Companies make on us.

I was particularly keen that the foundation stone for our new Saffron Walden works should be laid by Mr. Butler, firstly because he, more than any other man, has been responsible for the commercial and industrial prosperity which this country now enjoys. This makes him the most fitting person to lay the foundation stone of any factory anywhere in Great Britain, but when the factory is at Saffron Walden, it is doubly appropriate that the foundation stone be laid by the man who has represented Saffron Walden in Parliament for over 25 years.

There is only one qualification for foundation stone laying which Mr. Butler does not appear to

possess. Unlike Sir Winston Churchill, he is not, as far as I know, a member of the Bricklayers' Union.

Before asking Mr. Butler to lay the stone, I would ask him if he would be good enough to say a few words to us.

Loud and long applause greeted the words of the popular Chairman.

The next speaker was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Rt. Hon. R. A. Butler, C.H., P.C., M.P., he too was accorded a spontaneous reception. He thanked Mr. de Vigier, and his Board of Directors for having asked him to lay the Foundation Stone for the new Coronation Works, an honour which he greatly appreciates. The Chancellor in a humorous vein mentioned, that he has little experience in laying foundation stones, "I do", he continued, "occasionally drop some bricks in the House of Commons, but so far never laid any".

Mr. Butler, like his co-speakers, laid great stress on the importance of this new and important venture for the town of Saffron Walden, paying a tribute to the Chairman for the enterprise, tenacity and foresight he has shown in such a remarkable manner in all his dealings both at home and abroad, especially he commended the firm for their policy in ploughing back the profits into business. In concluding his address, the Chancellor remarked that it afforded him special pleasure to perform this ceremony, owing to the fact that he is representing Saffron Walden in Parliament.

Amidst the cheering of the onlookers, and the

playing of the National Anthem, Mr. Butler proceeded to lay the Foundation Stone.

The last speaker was Mr. H. C. Drayton, a Director of the well-known City financial group of the same name, and a personal friend of the Chairman. He referred to the pleasant business relations which have always existed between his group and the Acrow company paying tribute to the integrity, resourcefulness and foresightedness of Mr. de Vigier, wishing him and the company success in all their further undertakings.

This concluded the official part of the afternoon, and the company adjourned for tea, which for the official guests was served in the marquee. The workman and their families had separate quarters allotted, where besides tea beer was also served. It was a very happy party indeed, and Mr. de Vigier, accompanied by his charming wife and equally charming daughters, acted as perfect hosts.

Evening was now approaching fast, and after much handshaking the participants departed having witnessed an impressive and important ceremony which will remain for ever in their memory.

May we, on our part, tender to Acrow's our sincere good wishes on their latest big venture, may the Coronation Works prosper and bring new glory to this concern which has in a relatively short time become world-wide known.

We are proud that a countryman of ours has played such a prominent part in achieving so much, in doing so he has also brought honour to our country.

ST.



THE FOUNDATION STONE "TRULY LAID".

Left to right: Mr. Butler, Mr. W. A. de Vigier.