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Darby House, Brown Boveri's British headquarters

75 years of Swiss technology in Britain

FOR nearly a century, BBC Brown Boveri of Baden, Switzerland, has been one of the world's leading high technology power engineering enterprises.

Today, with a turnover of £2,860 million and with manufac-

turing facilities on five continents, Brown Boveri employs over 94,000 people and is heavily involved in many of the world's most imaginative engineering projects.

They include the immense

Itaipu hydro project in South America, the Riyadh 8 plant in Saudi Arabia (the largest gas turbine plant ever built), the JET nuclear fusion project and the Thames barrier project in the UK, and the USA's first compressed air gas turbine plant.

The links between Brown Boveri Switzerland and the UK can, through Charles Brown, senior, father of one of the company's founders, be traced back over 135 years, and the direct links between BBC Baden and England were first established in 1906.

In spite of these long-standing connections, it has been only during the past 10 years that the scale of BBC's activities in the UK have reached significant proportions.

First, in 1974, BBC acquired a majority shareholding in the George Kent group (now Brown Boveri Kent), one of the UK's major process control and instru-

mentation companies.

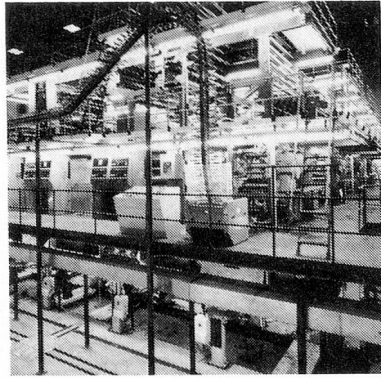
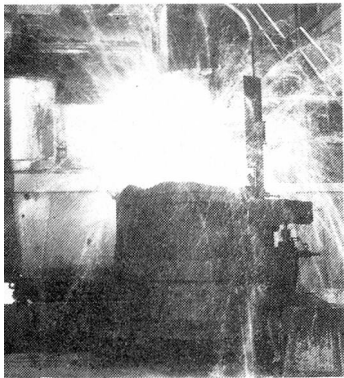
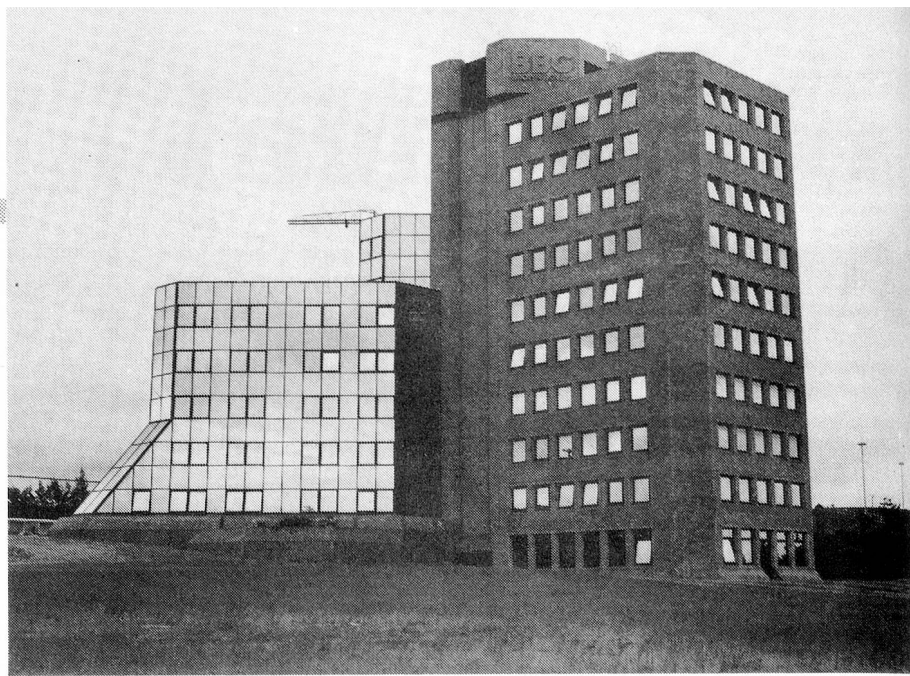
Second, British Brown-Boveri Ltd, the long-established UK member of the group, changed from being a purely marketing company into one with its own design, engineering and project handling facility.

To highlight the long-association between BBC Baden and the UK and the increasing acceptance by UK industry of the high-technology equipment developed from Swiss research and inventive engineering skills, this article is concerned with British Brown-Boveri Ltd.

Two of the most significant features of the founding and early growth of Brown Boveri are directly connected with England. First, there was Charles Brown, one of the founders of the company. Second, there was the agreement in 1901 between BBC and the British company, Parsons.

As a result of that agreement, BBC obtained the exclusive right to manufacture and market steam turbines under the Parsons patent.

The agreement covered land installations on the Continent, and that early access to the new technology of steam turbines, together with Charles Brown's pioneering work in the field of high-speed generators suitable for



Top left: Electric melting plant at Ford's Leamington foundry. Top right: Printing presses powered by Brown Boveri equipment. Bottom: Component test-rig.



Assigned to England ... and stayed

ONE of the best known and longest serving staff members of British Brown-Boveri is Mr Armin Moehrle, general manager of the company's Service Division which is based in Brentford, Middlesex.

Mr Moehrle, who was born in Thalwil on the lake of Zurich, received his early education and subsequent engineering training while living in the region. He first joined BBC Brown Boveri in 1947.

Mr Moehrle's position was in the test laboratory for turbo machinery where he was trained to undertake installation, overhauling and commissioning of BBC plant in overseas countries. On completion of his training, he undertook various assignments in Europe and then spent three years working for Brown Boveri India.

Mr Moehrle's first assignment to England was in 1954. Initially,

it was intended to be for three months but because of his heavy involvement in the installation and commissioning of the sophisticated BBC turbo-compressors, which had been ordered by the British aerospace industry, Mr Moehrle's stay developed into one of six years!

One of the most notable projects he worked on during this period was the supply of BBC compressors to the Rolls Royce aero-engine test plant in Derby.

At this stage in his career Mr Moehrle, temporarily as it turned out, forsook the world of engineering and went with his wife, Michelle, to Normandy to manage the family owned hotel. In 1965 however, he was called back to England by the company and given the responsibility of establishing and developing a service organisation.

Mr Moehrle's success in this operation was such that in 1971 the Service Division was relocated from central London to much larger premises and workshops in Brentford. The Service Division, of which Mr Moehrle was appointed general manager in 1970, today employs 125 people and has a turnover of £7 million.

Armin and Michelle Moehrle, who have two sons and a daughter, are very much Anglophiles who maintain very close links with Switzerland and France. The family home is in Cheam, Surrey.

steam turbine drives, enabled the then very young BBC company to establish its still-held position as a world leader in this important field of power engineering.

BBC first established a sales office in the UK in 1906 but the fact that, even in those days, England was the home of such companies as BTH, Metro-Vickers, English Electric and GEC meant that business opportunities for BBC in the UK were very limited.

The world-wide depression which followed the First World War caused W. Boveri to seek a strong international partner in order to increase the sale of BBC products world-wide. In 1919, BBC entered into an agreement

with Vickers whereby the UK company was given exclusive rights to manufacture and market BBC products in Britain and throughout the British Empire.

As part of this agreement, Vickers took over part of the BBC shares but after a short period it was clear to W. Boveri that the agreement was not working satisfactorily, and in 1920 BBC regained their freedom to sell in the UK as they wished.

In 1924 the name of the BBC company in England was changed to British Brown-Boveri Ltd, and since that time BBB have been responsible for the UK sales of BBC Group products.

Because of the strength of British companies in the UK,

BBB's policy has always been to concentrate on areas of technology, and this has frequently resulted in the first usage of new Swiss-designed equipment in Britain.

Between the wars BBB enjoyed limited success through the sale of steam turbines, and in the modernisation programmes which followed the Second World War they achieved greater success with the supply of turbines and compressors.

The electrification programme carried out by British Rail led to the sale of a large amount of electrical equipment which had been developed by Brown Boveri for the Swiss Railways.

Another major order from

British Rail was for BBC to supply the turbines for one of the only two gas turbine locomotives ever to run in the UK.

While BBB made good progress in the years following the Second World War, it was becoming clear by the middle of the 1960s that any company which existed purely by importing and selling engineering products would not be able to expand.

The serious recession of UK industry had already started, and the £ sterling was becoming weak. As a result, the UK's trading position was declining rapidly and there were growing government pressures, particularly on the

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state-owned industries, to "buy British".

The problem was made more acute for BBB by the fact that almost all their major markets were state-owned – the steel industry, the electricity supply industry, the railways and a large part of the car industry.

One of the great advantages which all member companies of the Brown Boveri Group have is that they have access to advanced engineering products produced in the Swiss factories.

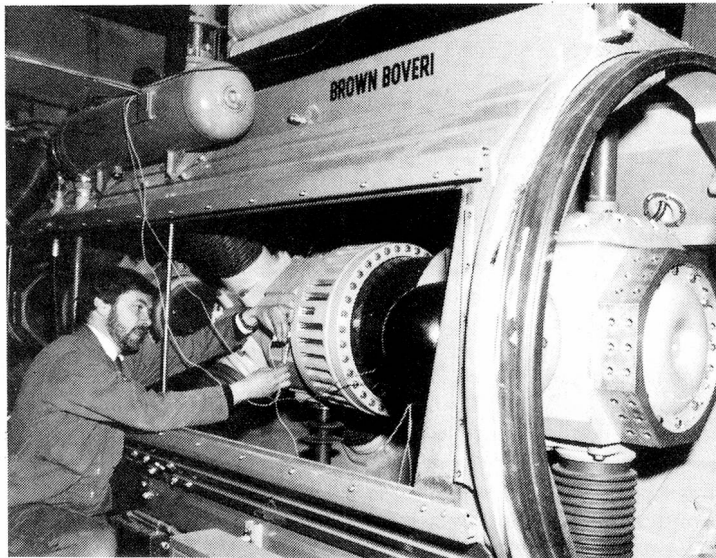
Research and development have always been the basis of the group's international success. BBC maintains one of Europe's largest privately-funded R & D programmes with an annual investment equal to 10 per cent of sales. In 1982 the level of investment was £296 million.

It was decided that the growth potential for BBB lay primarily in importing from Switzerland the technology of the group with the essential equipment and combining this with a greater proportion of UK engineered and manufactured goods.

To implement this policy a specialist division of BBB was established in 1972, and in 1976 this division was relocated in Telford in the West Midlands, the centre of British heavy industry.

The design, engineering and installation of industrial drive systems formed the main activities of the new division. Additionally, the division was responsible for marketing the BBC range of electro-heat equipment and for handling power installation and contracting projects.

Within a very short period, the division had achieved a rapid rate of growth. Among the notable orders it gained were those for drive systems for both the public and private sectors of the steel industry; induction furnaces for



Brown Boveri equipment being installed in the Dinorwic power station

Ford's plant at Leamington, test rigs for British Leyland, and contracts from the National Coal Board.

The fact that many of the division's orders came from state-owned industries proved that the policy of combining UK engineering and manufacture with Swiss advanced technology was the right one for growth.

In the UK the power generation, transmission and distribution industry is largely state-owned, and the pressures placed on the industry to "buy British" are considerable.

In spite of this, BBB have been, during the past few years, extremely successful in introducing to the UK some of the advanced technology developed by BBC.

The most notable examples are the first order placed in the UK for generator breakers for use in nuclear power stations, the first UK order for a new type of lightning arresters developed in Switzerland, and the first UK orders for Swiss-made SF6 metalclad switchgear for use at 66kV ratings. The latter order was for

the ICI plant at Billingham.

The most recent success in this field is at Dinorwic in North Wales where a large amount of Swiss designed and manufactured protection equipment has been installed by British Brown-Boveri at Europe's largest pumped storage power station, now nearing completion.

Until 1965 BBB's entire service team consisted of only a few people. Since an efficient, locally-based service organisation is an essential prerequisite to sales, the management of BBB took the decision in 1965 to establish a fully-equipped UK service department.

It would be able to undertake not only complete turbocharger servicing but also the servicing of the increasingly sophisticated electronic and electro/mechanical equipment being introduced to the market by BBC.

With the help and co-operation of the various service departments in Baden, the new UK service organisation soon proved to be extremely successful, and in 1971 was relocated in much larger premises at Brentford, near

London Airport.

The Service Department of BBB today also undertakes work for the BBC Group, and its engineers travel as far afield as Borneo, the Philippines, Iran and South Korea to install and commission some of the most sophisticated power and process plant produced by BBC.

The world-wide depression, which began to affect the UK in the late 1970s, inevitably made an impact on the levels of business available to British Brown-Boveri Ltd.

The drastic run-down in the steel, shipbuilding, car and other manufacturing industries meant that many traditional markets were effectively closed to the company.

It was therefore decided that in order to ensure the company's long-term future through increased competitiveness, a programme of rationalisation was necessary.

This programme involved restructuring into one division the marketing and engineering activities of some of the key departments and the centralisation of the company's administrative functions into one location.

Because the company had successfully operated in the Telford area for some years, plus the fact that the Midlands would always be an area of major importance to the company, it was decided to relocate the headquarters and the business base for a major part of the company's activities in Darby House in Telford.

By July 1982 the move had been completed, and the fact that British Brown-Boveri is currently enjoying a significant input of orders, despite the continuing severe conditions in the market, indicates that the products and services offered by BBC Switzerland still enjoy a high degree of acceptance by UK industry.