

Thornycroft in Basingstoke

A major boost to the economy of the town came when the Thornycroft Steam Wagon Company moved to Basingstoke in 1898. Thornycroft was originally a firm of boat builders from Chiswick, which diversified into building steam-powered lorries and vans. The original shops at Chiswick proved inadequate to cope with the demand for its vehicles. After examining several alternatives, the company chose Basingstoke for its new factory as the town was served by good road links as well as by the London and South-Western and the Great Western Railways.¹ The company purchased 16 a. of land in Worting Road where a siding could be built to connect the works to the proposed Alton Light Railway.²

On 14 April 1898 the Steam Carriage and Wagon Company submitted plans for new workshops and offices in Andover Road (another name for Worting Road).³ An auction was held on 2 June 1898 of, 'a growing crop of vetches on 16 acres, now standing on the Worting-road Field, Basingstoke, situate between Deep-lane and West Ham. To be cleared by the end of July'.⁴ Once the vetches were cleared, Thornycrofts were able to build their factory.

There is no information about the number of people Thornycroft employed at Basingstoke in the early years. The following table shows that there was a considerable increase in the number of employees between 1904 and 1912, despite an apparent reduction between 1906 and 1908.

Basingstoke weekly wages bill

Week ending	Employees' pay		
	£	s.	d.
19 November 1904	221	4	1
18 November 1905	445	19	9
17 November 1906	333	5	9
16 November 1907	155	9	4
21 November 1908	243	15	9
20 November 1909	391	9	1
19 November 1910	456	4	0
18 November 1911	700	15	5
16 November 1912	893	18	5 ⁵

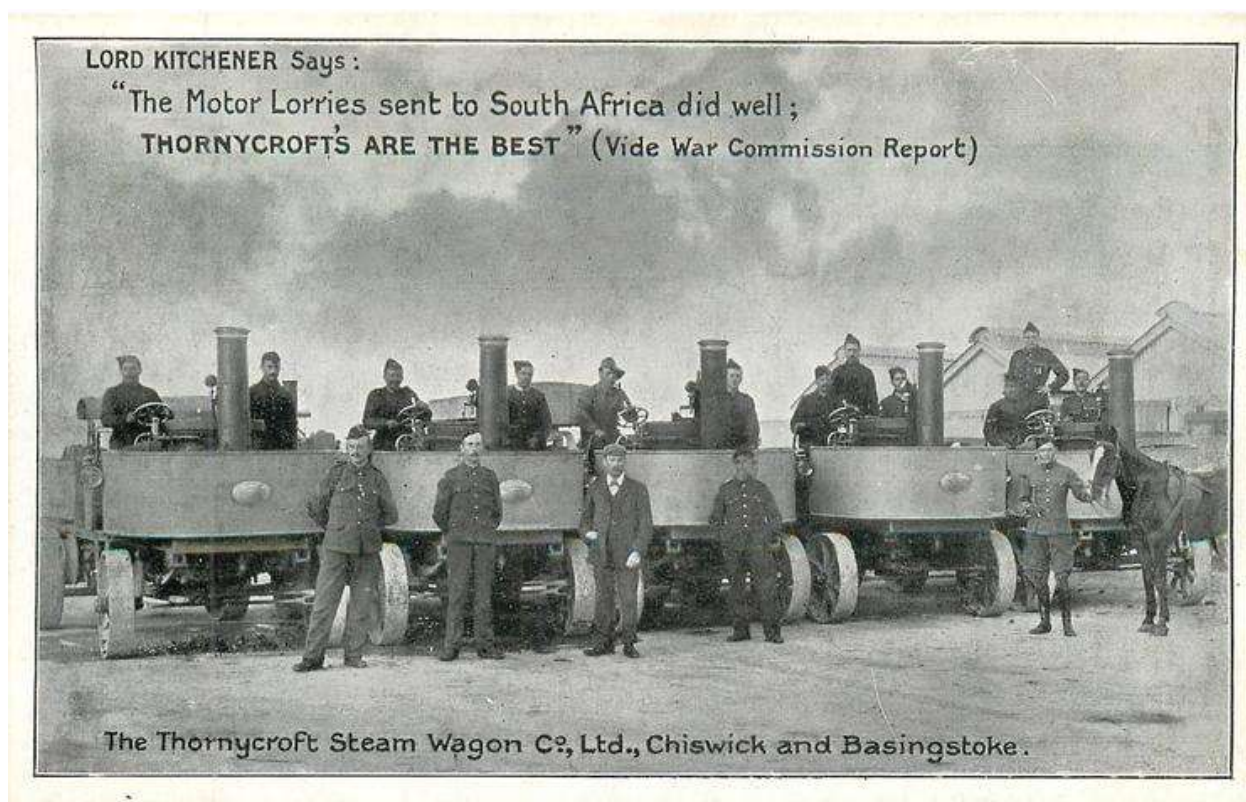
¹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 6 June 1946.

² *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 30 July 1898 and 6 June 1946.

³ HRO, 58M74/BP38.

⁴ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 May 1898.

⁵ HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 208/1/1 and 2.



Tuck postcard, early 1900s

In 1899 Thornycroft supplied steam-powered lorries to the Army in South Africa during the Boer War.⁶ In 1900 customers for its steam-powered lorries included Chelsea Borough Council, the War Office, Wholesale Cooperative Society, Bentley's Yorkshire Brewery, Vaux Brewery in Sunderland and the Northampton Brewery.⁷ The company first entered a vehicle in the War Office trials in 1901, which won first prize. In the War Office Tractor Trials of 1909 the company was awarded the first and only prize.⁸

London's first steam-powered bus was a Thornycroft steam double-decker. It served the route between Shepherd's Bush and Oxford Street.⁹ Thornycroft became a major bus manufacturer. In 1905 Thornycroft supplied a 16-seater single decker bus, four 36-seater double decker buses and a five-ton lorry to the Malta Bus Company.¹⁰ In 1905 it produced a batch of 12 double decker buses for Bristol Tramways and Carriage Company and delivered double decker buses to Cambridge Motor Omnibus

⁶ Nick Baldwin (1989) *The Illustrated History of Thornycroft Trucks and Buses*, p.7.

⁷ HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 222/1.

⁸ HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 1/18, *History and Present Position of the Company*, n.d.

⁹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 6 June 1946.

¹⁰ *Commercial Motor*, 16 Nov. 1905.

Company and the Western India Motor Company. In 1906 its customers for buses included London Motor Omnibus Company, Manchester District Motor Bus Company, Nottingham Corporation, Great Eastern Railway and London and South-Western Railway.¹¹



24 hp Thornycroft bus in Birmingham¹²

The first Thornycroft petrol-driven vehicle was introduced in 1902, a commercial vehicle with a four-ton load capacity.¹³

In 1904 John I Thornycroft & Co Ltd bought the Thornycroft Steam Wagon Company. The purchase price, including £7,000 for goodwill and £1,000 for patents, was £86,493 18s 9d. The assets of the Steam Wagon Company, including the Basingstoke site, stock in agents' hands and investments was estimated at £78,493.

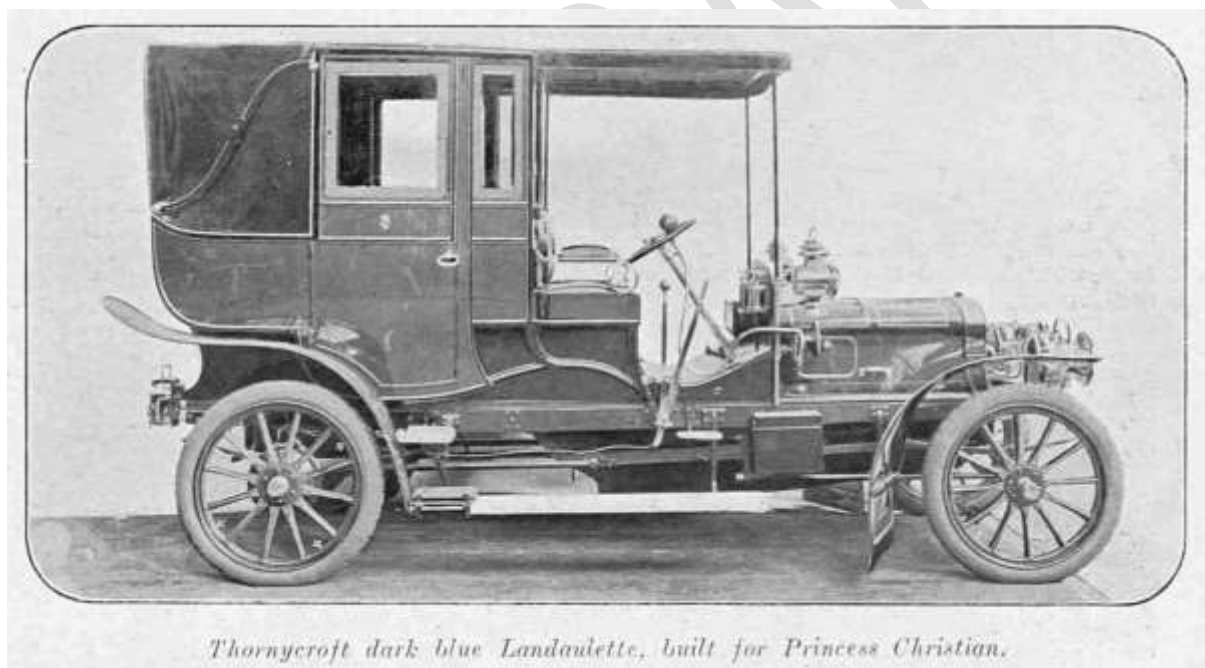
¹¹ HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 222/1.

¹² *Commercial Motor*, 13 Apr. 1905.

¹³ Alan Townsin (2001) *Thornycroft*, 12-3,

Sales for the preceding three years ending 31 March were £36,403 in 1902, £59,146 in 1903 and £83,236 in 1904.¹⁴ A proportion of those amounts would have attributable to the assets and sales of the Chiswick works.

Although lorries and to a lesser extent vans and buses were the main products of the Basingstoke factory, Thornycroft also built a number of motor cars. All but one of the 20 vehicle numbers from 198 to 217 were allocated to 10 h.p. cars, the first of which was sold in 1903. A group of 16 20 h.p. cars were built in 1904. These appear to have been aimed at the upper end of the market: customers included Sir Theodore Doxford, Sir Walter Palmer, Viscount Esher, Mrs J Thornycroft and Lord Montagu.¹⁵ Princess Christian, the third daughter of Queen Victoria, took delivery of several Thornycroft cars from 1905 onwards, including a 30 h.p. Limosine in 1906.¹⁶ Thornycroft stopped making cars in 1913 to concentrate of lorry production.¹⁷



Thornycroft 24 h.p. landaulet at the Motor Show at Olympia, 1905.¹⁸

Before the First World War demand by the army for military lorries had been very small. They probably had no more than 100 in running order at the outbreak of war. On the morning of August Bank Holiday 1914 representatives from Thornycroft

¹⁴ Abridged Prospectus in *St James's Gazette*, 11 July 1904.

¹⁵ HCT, Thornycroft Archive Box 222, Vehicle Register.

¹⁶ Richard Twelvetrees (1946) *Thornycroft Road Transport Golden Jubilee*, 6; and HCT, Thornycroft Archive Box 222

¹⁷ Townsin (2001), 19.

¹⁸ *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 18 Feb. 1905.

visited the War Office and were asked to deliver as many motor vehicles as they could to the park the War Office was about to establish in Kensington Gardens. During the following week Thornycroft delivered over 40 lorries and a number of its employees volunteered as drivers.¹⁹

Thornycroft immediately began to manufacture 500 lorries for the army as a stock order. The Basingstoke works were extended and output greatly increased, even though some 20 per cent of the men at Basingstoke were members of the Territorial Army and had joined the army at the outbreak of war.²⁰ On 13 August 1914 *Commercial Motor* magazine reported, 'Several hundreds of Thornycroft employees have been called up for military service'. Later in the war, a number of men joined the Royal Army Service Corps, Mechanical Transport Division, in charge of companies in the field.²¹

During the First World War the only vehicles that Thornycroft produced were J-type lorries and chassis for the War Office, with the exception of a small handful of J-type lorries that were supplied to private operators and around 120 X-type lorries that were supplied to the India Office from 1916.²² The War Office chose the Thornycroft lorry chassis to be the one to be fitted with anti-aircraft guns, both at home and overseas. By the end of the war, some 5,000 lorries had been supplied to the War Office as transport vehicles, ammunition lorries, mobile anti-aircraft guns, etc. The majority of which were used in France and Flanders, but some were also sent to Italy, Salonica and Egypt.²³

In Feb. 1915 Sir John E Thornycroft travelled to France²⁴ to investigate the workings of Thornycroft's lorries and spares delivered since August 1914. The report of his visit refers to Basingstoke fitters being employed at the repair shop in Paris. It also explained that each division of about 20,000 men needed 150 vehicles for its ammunition and supply columns. Those vehicles were loaded up at the different rail heads, which were about 15 or 20 miles behind the fighting line, then driven to some convenient position at a safe distance where they could not be shelled by the

¹⁹ Anon (1919), *Half a Century of Thornycroft Progress and Five Years of War Work*, pp.39-40.

²⁰ *Half a Century of Thornycroft Progress*, p.44.

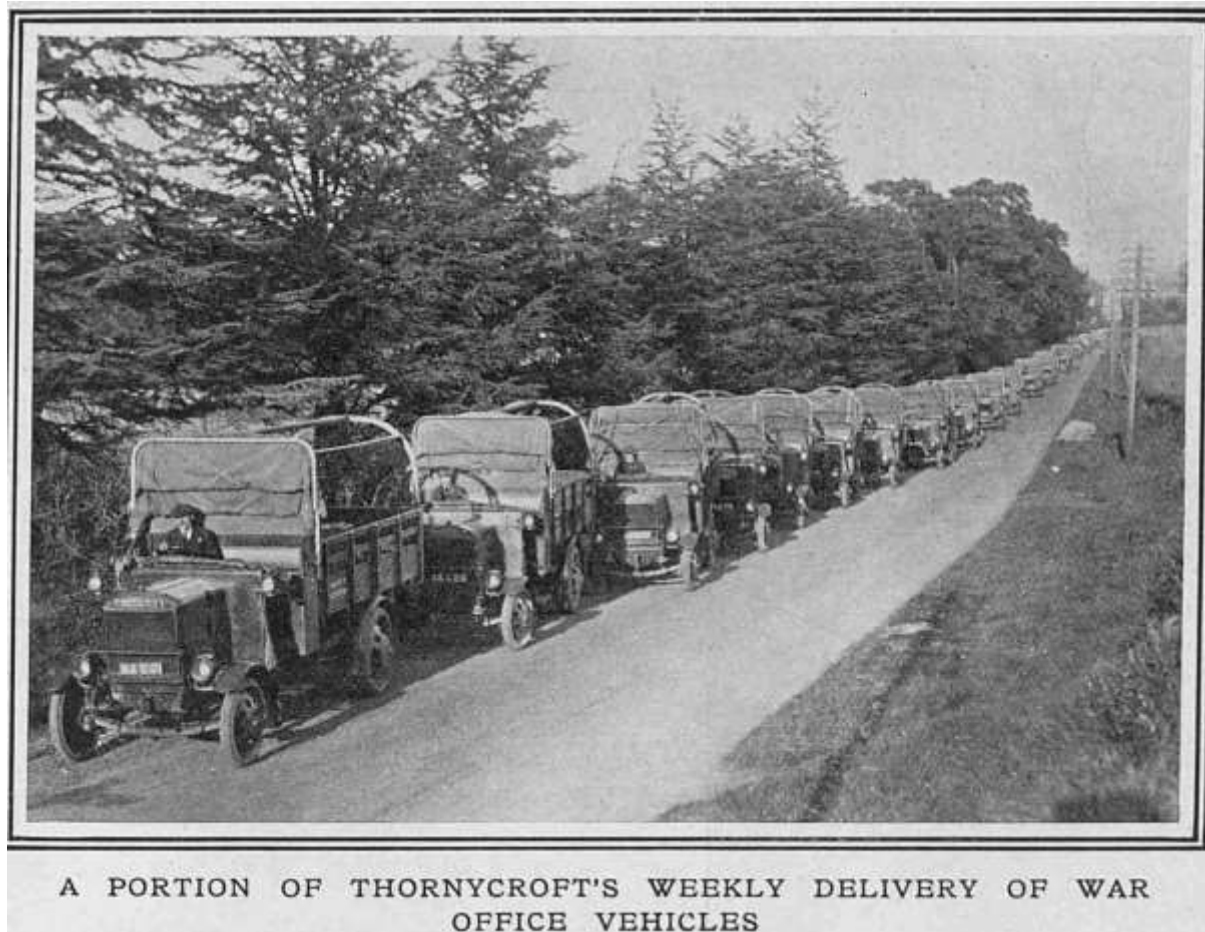
²¹ *Half a Century of Thornycroft Progress*, p.40.

²² HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 222/1.

²³ *Half a Century of Thornycroft Progress*, p.47

²⁴ HCT Thornycroft Archive 2/1.

enemy's guns. Then when it was dark they went forward as close as they could get to the men's position, where the supplies were either carried, or taken by horse transport if the distance was too great.²⁵



J Type 3-ton lorries ready for delivery to the War Office in May 1915²⁶

During the war, Thornycroft's Basingstoke factory was one of the first factories in England to employ women on motor vehicle construction. By the end of the war they amounted to more than 35 per cent of the workforce. The Basingstoke factory also made a large number of motors for boats. It also undertook the manufacture of some of the first Stokes Trench Mortars and many thousands of shells. It made 3,010 depth charge throwers for the Admiralty for use against German submarines. Most of the destroyers and other vessels that were likely to encounter submarines were fitted with the Thornycroft depth charge thrower. The manufacture of the depth charge throwers was largely done by women. The Ministry of Munitions sent representatives

²⁵ HCT Thornycroft Archive, 1/7.

²⁶ *Tatler*, 26 May 1915.

from firms in other parts of the country to the Basingstoke works to see how women were employed.²⁷

Trials of the Thornycroft Aerial Torpedo took place in Hackwood Park in March 1917 in the presence of military observers. The trials demonstrated that the torpedoes had a mean range of 1,473 yards.²⁸

At the height of the war Thornycroft was employing 1,550 people in Basingstoke, of whom around 550 were women.²⁹ As happened elsewhere in Britain, however, by early 1919 most of the women had left. On 26 February 1919 there was a presentation and concert at Thornycroft's canteen 'to commemorate the departure of the girls from the works'.³⁰

In 1919 Thornycroft purchased 36 a. of the former West Ham Estate. They used West Ham House as a boarding house for up to 40 of their pupils and apprentices and converted the 16 a. field adjoining the works as a playing field comprising football and cricket pitches, a bowling green and tennis lawns.³¹

After the First World War, the War Department thousands of Army lorries were surplus to requirements. A Government organisation for the disposal of ex-Army vehicles was set up in Slough. Dealers were able to offer reconditioned ex-Army J-types for about a quarter of the price of new ones.³² The market became saturated with secondhand lorries.

In November 1920 Thornycroft discharged some 700 staff, including all the men on the night shift (over 300). A representative from Thornycroft gave the following reasons for the reduction:

- general economic uncertainty that caused a number of people to cancel their orders resulting in a surplus of unsold stock;
- lack of demand from India where Thornycroft were doing a large amount of business, due to the general financial difficulties all over the world;

²⁷ *Half a Century of Thornycroft Progress*, pp.44, 51 and 93.

²⁸ HCT Thornycroft Archive, 3/2 Results of trial.

²⁹ Townsin. 23.

³⁰ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 1 Mar. 1919.

³¹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 31 May 1919; *Hampshire Advertiser*, 20 Dec. 1919.

³² Townsin, 28.

- Australia being unable to buy any vehicles as it cannot send any money to Britain because it has not successfully sold its wool crop;
- a glut of American commercial vehicles being sold worldwide, including 'many thousands' in England that were allowed in free of import duty; and
- the effect of the ironmoulders' strike (from September 1919 to January 1920).³³

Those staff reductions had a significantly detrimental impact on the prosperity of the town, as can be seen from the following table.

Week ending	Employees' pay		
	£	s.	d.
25 September 1920	7945	13	4
2 October 1920	8219	3	4
9 October 1920	7922	15	11
16 October 1920	7792	6	4
23 October 1920	7799	14	5
30 October 1920	7783	6	1
6 November 1920	7736	15	10
13 November 1920	4462	9	10
20 November 1920	4137	15	10
27 November 1920	4130	8	5 ³⁴

On 15 January 1921 the manager at Woolston works wrote to Sir John Thornycroft who was in Switzerland:

Your brother rang me up from Basingstoke and told me about his proposal to work short time, viz, to shut down altogether on Fridays and Saturdays, or on Saturdays and Mondays. Meanwhile I had discussed the matter with Donaldson and Mr Cook and we decided on a further batch of discharges which took place yesterday, to be regarded as final for some time at any rate, in view of the general distress from unemployment.³⁵

The reports to the AGM in 1922 and 1923 explained that the sales of motor vehicles had been adversely affected by competition from countries with depreciated currencies, by the sales of surplus War Department vehicles and by the 'heavy depression in trade'.³⁶ However, things appeared to have picked up by 1924. At the 1924 AGM Sir John Thornycroft reported that there had been a 40 percent increase

³³ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 6 Nov. 1920.

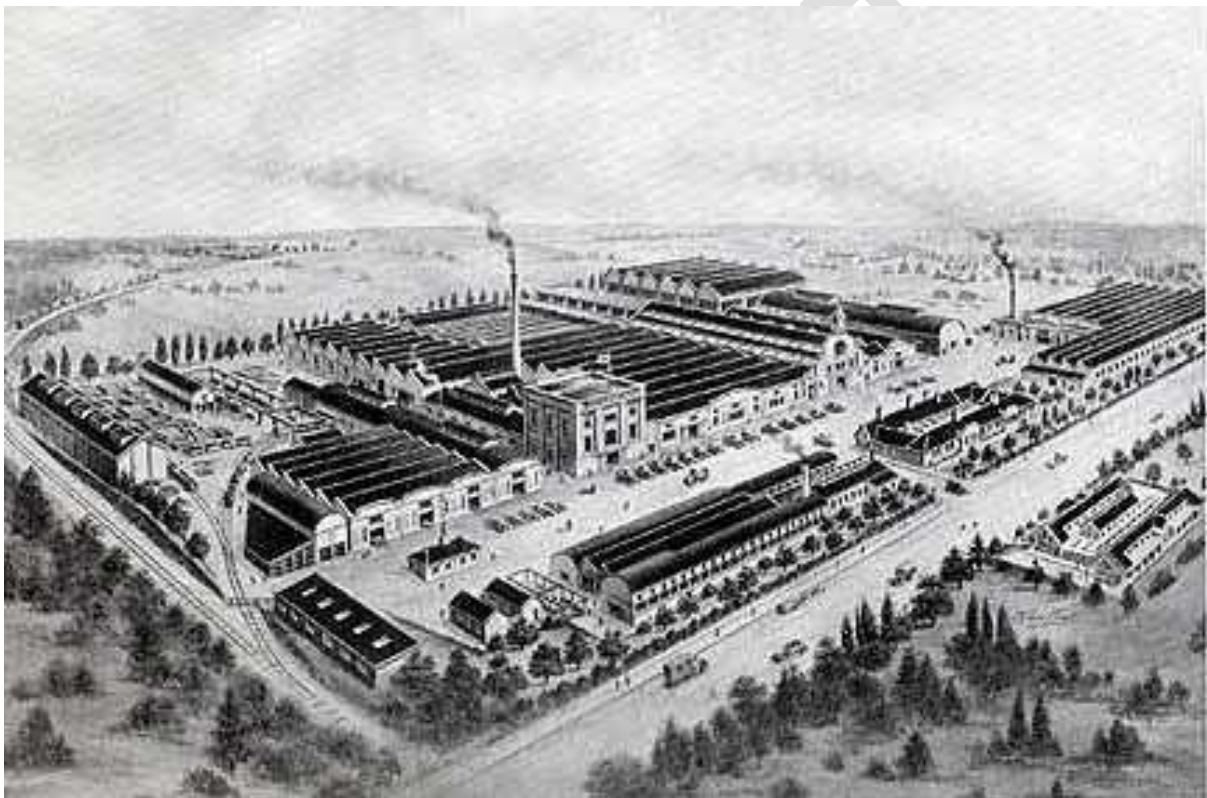
³⁴ HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 208/1/5.

³⁵ HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 3/12.

³⁶ HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 11/2.

in vehicle sales and in 1925 there was a further 50 per cent increase in sales.³⁷ In 1927 Thornycroft introduced the Lightening coach that was capable of carrying its full passenger load at 50 mph.³⁸

In 1928 Sir John reported that they had secured a good share of the orders placed by railway companies for lorries and buses and that about half of the motor business was exported.³⁹ Thornycroft lorries made in Basingstoke were known throughout the world. The firm had branches in Brazil, Argentina, Egypt, India, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and China.⁴⁰



Thornycroft's factory in 1930.⁴¹ The yard that ran through the middle of the works was 800 feet long by 90 feet wide. One of the shops was 360 feet long and 75 feet wide.⁴²

In 1930 Sir John reported a drop in overseas sales due to a reduction in the purchasing power of their overseas markets caused by a collapse in the price of their products (wheat, rubber, coffee, etc.). The following year he announced that, despite having secured good orders from Brazil and supplied a fleet of buses to Cairo, the

³⁷ *The Times*, 23 Dec. 1924 and 10 Dec. 1925.

³⁸ Twelvetrees (1946), 37.

³⁹ *The Times*, 15 Nov. 1928.

⁴⁰ *Commercial Motor*, 3 Feb. 1939.

⁴¹ A Pictorial Review of the Activities of John I. Thornycroft & Co. 1930.

⁴² *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 19 Apr. 1930.

vehicle side of the business had been severely affected by the general state of trade.⁴³

The accounts showed a loss in each of the years 1932, 1933 and 1934. During the year ending 31 July 1932 the Basingstoke works had suffered, 'substantial reductions in staff and salaries'.⁴⁴ Following a critical report for the Westminster Bank by Peat, Marwick, Mitchell & Co, the bank wrote to Sir John Thornycroft on 23 April 1934 referring to:

'...the recent disastrous trading results; the deterioration of the liquid position of the company; factors which, if continued, cannot but lead eventually to a receivership ...the continued existence of internal differences in the management and direction of the business, which have had, and which, unless arrested, must continue to have, disastrous effects upon the organisation of the Company, having regard to the fact that constant disagreement on matters of policy cannot but hinder the business.'

The problems that were identified at Basingstoke included plant being out of date, poor organisation with departments working in watertight compartments and not communicating with each other and that there were too many different types of vehicles.⁴⁵ As well as producing buses and coaches, the Basingstoke factory in 1933 was producing the following types of lorry: the Stag lightweight six-wheeler; the two ton Handy; the two and a half ton Bulldog; the three ton Tartar; the three ton Dandy; the three and a half ton Speedy; the five ton Strenuous; the six ton Amazon; the six and seven ton Taurus; the seven and a half ton Mastiff; and the 11 ton Dreadnought.⁴⁶

The reports strongly criticised Tom Thornycroft, the General Manager of the Basingstoke works. They referred to his irregular attendance at the works and general non-availability and that, 'any discussion with the Works Director ends in generalities and no finality'. It recommended that he should sever his connection with the Basingstoke works. At the AGM in November 1934 Sir John announced that Tom had ceased to be General Manager at the Motor Vehicle works and had

⁴³ *The Times*, 20 Nov. 1930 and 12 Nov. 1931.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 29 Nov. 1932, 28 Nov. 1933 and 20 Nov. 1934.

⁴⁵ HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 12/2.

⁴⁶ *Twelvetrees* (1946), 24.

resigned his Directorship and that C.R. Charles had been appointed General Manager and Director in his stead.⁴⁷

The 1935 accounts showed another loss. The directors said that this was entirely due to the motor vehicle side of the business and that they had found it necessary to reorganise the Basingstoke works, which was taking longer than expected. As a result, sales were 20 per cent lower than the previous year.⁴⁸ The effect of these problems meant there was a fall in the number of people employed at the Basingstoke works. In 1930 Thornycroft was employing some 1,800 people in Basingstoke.⁴⁹ This had dropped to 1,108 by 2 July 1934,⁵⁰ with a further fall to 731 by 1 April 1936.⁵¹ The firm returned to profit in 1936 and was able to pay dividends on its ordinary shares in 1938.⁵²

There was a massive increase in production during the Second World War. Thousands of motor vehicles and other military equipment were lost in Belgium and France by the time of the Dunkirk evacuation and had to be replaced.⁵³ During the war, Thornycroft diversified once again into munitions and was working round the clock with a night shift whose hours were 8 pm to 8 am.⁵⁴ Thornycroft was employing 2,500 people, over 800 of whom were women.⁵⁵ 1,000 tons of raw material were delivered to the railway siding and unloaded by crane each month. New buildings were erected on the west side of the light railway. By the end of the war there was a covered operational area of 21½ a.⁵⁶ A 25,000 square foot shop that was erected during the war for the production of guns was later converted into a machine shop for the production of cylinder blocks and heads.⁵⁷

At the start of the war, the government asked Thornycroft to produce a military vehicle driven on both front and rear axles to carry a three ton load, that was capable of climbing gradients up to 1 in 2, was able to operate in sand for long periods and to

⁴⁷ HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 12/2.

⁴⁸ *The Times*, 3 Dec. 1935.

⁴⁹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 19 Apr. 1930.

⁵⁰ HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 12/1/8.

⁵¹ HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 12/1/10.

⁵² *The Times*, 5 Nov. 1936 and 3 Nov. 1938.

⁵³ Twelvetrees (1946), 79.

⁵⁴ Arthur Attwood, *Around Basingstoke*, vol. 2, 73.

⁵⁵ *Basingstoke Gazette*, June 21, 1985.

⁵⁶ Twelvetrees (1946), 41-2.

⁵⁷ *Financial Times*, 13 Dec. 1946.

maintain a speed on main roads of up to 40 mph. Thornycroft supplied over 5,000 of these vehicles.⁵⁸

By the end of the war the Basingstoke works had built and delivered 8,230 bren gun carriers together with 1,850 sets of flotation gear to enable them to cross canals and rivers under their own power, 13,000 wheeled vehicles including mobile cranes and 1,578 vehicles specially designed with large generating units to supply current directly to mobile searchlights, 11,000 connecting rods for engines of tank landing craft, 5,637 balance weights for aero engines, 670 sets of two-pounder guns, 1,700 sets of 17-pounder guns and 15,000 sets of torpedo parts.⁵⁹ In addition, Thornycroft produced nearly 2,000 Nippy and Sturdy vehicles for essential civilian work under permits issued by the Ministry of War Transport.⁶⁰

In April 1948 the vehicle manufacturing side of the company, including the engine works at Reading, was moved into a separate subsidiary, Transport Equipment (Thornycroft) Ltd (TET).⁶¹ At the time, the average number of workmen Thornycroft was employing in Basingstoke was 1,400. The total wages paid in that year was £448,616, giving an average wage of £320 a year. The average number of administrative and clerical staff was 398. Their salary bill was £148,058, giving an average salary of £372 a year. The total labour and administration cost was £596,674 and the total cost of materials and fuel was £1,624,266.⁶² The works staff were working a 44-hour week and the office staff were working a 39½-hour week.⁶³

In 1949 Sir John Thornycroft announced that that TET had received a large order for Mighty Antar lorries from the Iraq Petroleum Company, the new Trident lorry would come into production in early 1950, improvements in production methods and layout had been made during the year and a number of new machine tools had been installed.⁶⁴ The following year he announced that the government had placed an

⁵⁸ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 6 June 1946.

⁵⁹ Twelvetrees (1946), 79-80.

⁶⁰ Twelvetrees (1946), 82.

⁶¹ Townsin (2001), 100.

⁶² HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 14/14.

⁶³ HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 14/13.

⁶⁴ *The Times*, 17 Nov. 1949.

order for Nubian and Mighty Antar fighting vehicles and that improvements had been made to the Nippy, Sturdy and Trident lorries.⁶⁵



The Mighty Antar was capable of carrying loads across the desert of up to 100 tons⁶⁶

On 1 March 1961 TET was sold to Associated Commercial Vehicles (ACV) for approximately £1.5 m. The sale included the full 63 a. site, of which some 40 a. were available for development. At the time of the sale, TET was employing some 1,300 people in Basingstoke.⁶⁷

In November 1961 ACV announced that the Basingstoke works would concentrate on producing specialised models such as the Antar, Big Ben and Nubian, while other parts of the group would be responsible for mass-produced vehicles. However, in June 1962 ACV became part of the Leyland Group, whose subsidiary, Scammell, was also producing specialised lorries. Scammell's presence within the group led to a tailing off of orders from the Basingstoke works.⁶⁸ In 1972 British Leyland announced that it was selling the Basingstoke works to the Eaton Corporation of

⁶⁵ *The Times*, 23 Nov. 1950.

⁶⁶ *The Times*, 23 Nov. 1950.

⁶⁷ HCT, Thornycroft Archive, 4/2/7.

⁶⁸ Townsin (2001) 126-7.

Ohio. At the time BL was employing about 1,100 people in Basingstoke. Around 350 people took voluntary redundancy, Eaton's pledged to employ the remaining 738 in their transmission business. The last lorry was built in Basingstoke in 1972 and the sale of the works took place on 14 January 1973.⁶⁹

As well as being the largest employer, Thornycroft played an active role in the social life of the town. By 1900 it had started the Thornycroft Athletic Club, which fielded a cricket team and a football team that played in local leagues.⁷⁰ The firm organised the end of war celebrations that were held on 16 November 1918. This comprised a procession of floats that was just short of a mile long that paraded round the town in the afternoon, followed by a bonfire and fireworks display on the common.⁷¹ The Thornycroft Entertainment Committee organised concerts that were held in the canteen including the Victory Concert and Masked Ball in aid of Sir William Treloar's Fund for Tuberculous Children and a concert for the Mayor's Unemployment Fund.⁷² The Thornycroft Operatic and Dramatic Society was founded in 1920.⁷³

Bob Clarke

⁶⁹ *The Times*, 28 Oct. 1972.

⁷⁰ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 2 June and 20 Oct. 1900.

⁷¹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, Nov. 23, 1918.

⁷² *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 25 Jan. 1919 and 19 Feb. 1921.

⁷³ *Thornycroft Basingstoke Works Magazine*, January 1929.