

“IT WAS WORSE THAN ALCATRAZ” WORKING FOR FORD AT TRAFFORD PARK

Ian McIntosh

Discussions about Fordist methods of production and, more generally, of Fordism (when it began and what it consists of) have been central to academic debates about work, employment and understanding the development of advanced industrial societies for a number of years. However, very little of the literature on this subject actually seeks to unearth the experiences that Ford workers themselves had of these ‘new’ forms of production organisation and managerial methods. This is a silence which this article seeks to fill through focusing on Ford’s plant at Trafford Park, Manchester, and the first group of workers outside the United States to be introduced to the methods and practices of the Ford company.

On Saturday the 23rd of October 1911, under the stewardship of company chairman Sir Percival Perry, the Ford Motor Company (England) moved the centre of its motor car organization in England away from London to Manchester:

... the employees at the Shaftesbury Avenue depot travelled north to Manchester by special train chartered for the occasion. The train with the employees’ chattels, packed in transport containers and delivered at the company’s expense, reached Manchester during the evening.¹

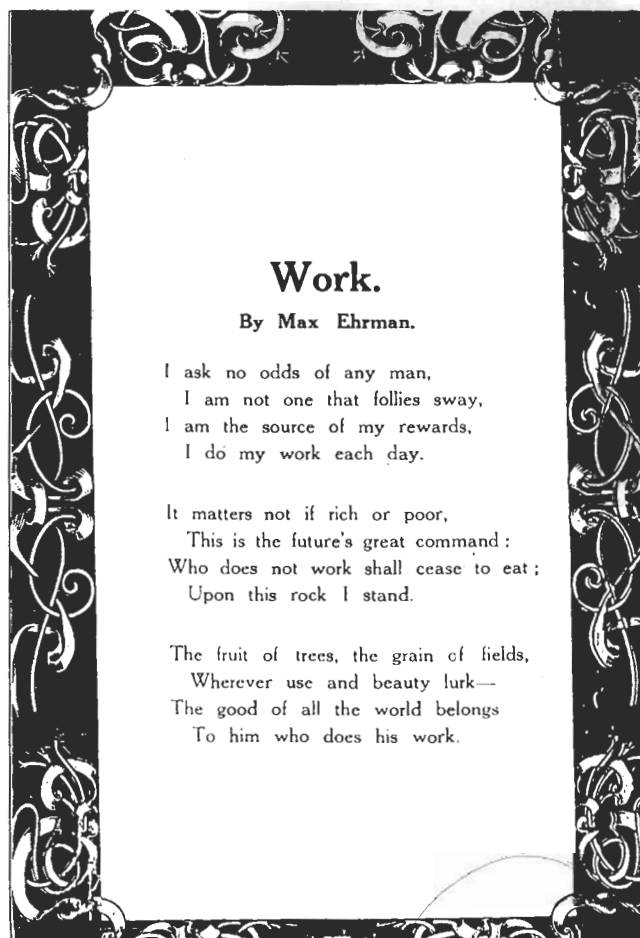
It was to be the first Ford assembly plant operational outside of North America and represented Henry Ford’s determination to break into the European market. The firm moved into derelict premises on Trafford Park – the world’s first industrial estate – previously occupied by the United Electric Car Company. An article in the *Ford Times* sketches out the rationale behind the move:

Manchester, England, was chosen for the site of this assembling plant, as it was necessary to have the factory accessible to the coast to facilitate transportation. The locality selected for the plant is in Trafford Park, the largest manufacturing centre of Manchester. This property is adjoining the Manchester Ship Canal, which will greatly aid in the handling of freight... A one-storey building is being divided into the proper departments and all necessary improvements are being made to facilitate immense production of cars for 1912.²

Trafford Park was also a centre for another valuable resource – people. As Perry wrote in 1911:

The citizens of Manchester claim that their city is the centre of the most congested population in the civilised world. It is the centre of the great cotton industry, and from Manchester to Liverpool going eastward is 40 miles, from Manchester to Leeds going westward is 40 miles, and Manchester to Preston going northward is 40 miles, and in each of these directions the whole country is nothing more or less than one huge town.³

The owners of Trafford Park – Trafford Park Estates Company – were also quick to exploit the apparently ‘limitless’ pool of labour available within reach of Trafford Park.



Work.

By Max Ehrman.

I ask no odds of any man,
I am not one that follies sway,
I am the source of my rewards,
I do my work each day.

It matters not if rich or poor,
This is the future’s great command:
Who does not work shall cease to eat;
Upon this rock I stand.

The fruit of trees, the grain of fields,
Wherever use and beauty lurk—
The good of all the world belongs
To him who does his work.

Poetry from the *Ford Times*, 1912.

No other industrial centre in the world is so strategically well suited in regards to labour. Manchester is at the centre of the most densely populated zone in the world. There is an inexhaustible fount of labour, both skilled and unskilled, at the very gates of the factories.⁴

However, as the Trafford Park Estates’ publicity material proclaimed not only do “Great factories need to draw on a large reservoir of humanity...” they also require labour of the, “. . . right tradition, the right habitations . . .”⁵ And, of course, Trafford Park offered the best kind of worker, “. . . the mechanical tradition is in the air – still more to the point, the mechanical habit is at the general fingertip. The natives are to the ‘manner’ born.”⁶

There was evidently a strong belief amongst the Trafford Park management that the working class of the Manchester region had a peculiar aptitude to work within a factory environment. As the then managing director of Trafford Park Estates, T. H. Stevens put it: “Lancashire people are brought up to work on a machine.”⁷ Thus Trafford Park seemed to be the ideal location for the attempt to emulate the huge strides in productivity being made at the ‘parent’ plant in Detroit. Even as early as 1911 as the weeds were being pulled from between the railway sleepers at Ford’s

newest plant at Trafford Park,⁸ Ford were churning out around 200 cars per day in Detroit. At the Manchester plant, however, 'Fordism' was still some way off. In the Britain at this time even the more modest ambitions of the Ford management at Trafford Park were met with much incredulity in many quarters.

*There was considerable speculation throughout the country when the decision was made to take over the buildings at Trafford Park. People were inclined to laugh at the idea of producing cars at the rate of 1,000 a week, for they could not see how such quantities would be taken up.*⁹

At Trafford Park 'Fordism' and even the famed Ford 'conveyor system' would have to wait. The Trafford Park plant was strictly an assembly plant, the parts being shipped over from Detroit.

*The Ford car, now as ever, is unequivocally American. But the coachwork is British in design, and material, and labour. British labour is now responsible for assembling Ford cars which come from Detroit in parts. To that extent the vehicle is British. And to that extent only.*¹⁰

The same article in the first British edition (1912) of the company's newspaper, the *Ford Times*, explains why more of the car was not built at Trafford Park:

*If we attempted to construct the component parts of Ford chassis in England, we should have to increase the price . . . Frankly we could not build bodies on this side as good as the American bodies that come over with the Ford cars, at the same price.*¹¹

The first Ford factory outside of North America thus had relatively modest beginnings and ambitions. The Model T's were shipped in 'KD' (Knock Down) form, in wooden crates, from Detroit and unloaded at the Manchester docks then transported to the Ford plant by rail ready to be assembled. The making of the bodies for the Model-T's was sub-contracted out to a wood-working firm, Scott Brothers (later called Trafford Park Wood Works). One ex-Ford worker recalled:

*In the very early days, I should say 1912 or the latter end of 1911 . . . the Trafford Park Wood Works were making bodies for the Ford Motor Company, and they would ship, in the very early days, they would ship them by means of handcarts . . . Later of course we used to ship, I think it was six bodies at a time in a large trailer, with our own motor car – Ford car – attached.*¹²

According to 'Historical Notes' compiled by the Ford Company, assembly at Trafford Park was on trestles.¹³ Herbert Anderson, who joined the company in 1912, remembered the early development of the plant:

*The first jobs we ever made in Manchester were petrol tanks. And then from the petrol tanks we went to radiators, and then from radiators we started developing the press shells. We got presses in from Detroit, from the maker, we started making all our own fenders, running boards, and then we started with the body works. Then we started on our own Body Works and in the Press Shop we started making all the body panels and hoods, bonnets, and so on . . . we grew and grew and grew . . .*¹⁴

Gradually the plant was expanded. One former employee of Ford, an American named Haseldon, worked in Detroit

Table 1 : Ford at Trafford Park: Output and Employment 1910-1914

Year	Output	Employment
1910	570	35
1911	1,485	69
1912	3,081	263
1913	6,139	814
1914	8,352	1,504

Source: *Ford Times* June 1914

Table 2 : Ford at Trafford Park: Output 1915-31

Year	Output
1915	12,287
1916	16,045
1917	11,716
1918	8,785
1919	17,782
1920	46,362
1922	27,320
1923	30,619
1924	27,512
1925	22,284
1926	21,872
1927	12,591
1928	6,726
1929	25,775
1930	27,886
1931	19,591 (to September)

Sources: *Ford Times*: 'Special Edition', 1925 and unpublished paper, Ford Archives.

and Manchester and could draw parallels between the developments of both plants:

*. . . 1913 and 1914 in Manchester, was something similar to what it was in Detroit in 1910, because in 1910 and 1911 we bought nearly all our materials out in Detroit, just like we did in England in 1913 . . . by the time Manchester got going they were able to put in the conveyors for chassis assembly.*¹⁵

The quintessential feature of the Ford method of production – the 'conveyor system' – was installed at the Manchester plant early in 1914. Walter Hicks, who joined the company as an assembler, recalled the arrival of the conveyors:

*The vehicles . . . commonly known in music-hall circles as a 'Tin-Lizzie', were each built on trestles – this system or method being very slow, and as time went on the first conveyor was installed – quite new to engineering circles . . . It was a power conveyor . . . about three feet away from the ground with a pit underneath it . . . The workmen stood in a pit . . . they walked along with the chassis being built . . . the conveyor only took the chassis along . . . it enabled a rapid growth to be made in production which rose to approximately 60 vehicles per day.*¹⁶

The conveyor became very much the hub of the factory.

The works layout is devised to secure maximum synchronisation between every operation and the

automatic feeding of every stage of production. The geared 'conveyor' is the backbone of the system. This travelling bench moves on its three speeds at fifteen inches per minute, twenty-one inches per minute, or twenty-seven inches per minute, according to the pressure of production. On top speed the main conveyor will turn off twenty-one complete chassis per hour, fourteen on middle speed, and seven on low speed.¹⁷

Herbert Anderson who joined Ford at Trafford Park in December 1912 also remembered the early conveyors at Trafford Park and the later development of the overhead 'monorails':

Yes, I think it was the first in England, that conveyor, in the motor trade, that a car was ever built on a conveyor . . . The monorails came just after. . . And as the months went on we grew, the Press Shop grew, the Machine Shop grew. Then, of course, the monorails brought the stuff from those [shops] to the Final Assembly.¹⁸

With the 'conveyor system' firmly established and the plant organised around 'Fordist' principles of production ". . . motor-cars were shelled like peas from the Ford factory . . ." ¹⁹ Production rates and employment increased rapidly up to the start of the war (see Table 1).

During the First World War output levels were maintained as much of the plant's capacity was turned over to 'war production', mainly ambulances and vans. As one worker remembers at that time, ". . . we were building cars and ambulances and vans for the army . . . a high clearance, and the lightness of the car, its strength and its durability were very popular; they could get over the rough ground on the battlefields . . ." ²⁰

During the war production of container tubes for shells also took place at the Ford plant. The production of these tubes involved women workers, "Shell charge containers were still [1918] being made in the press shop. Girls stamped the Ford trade mark (wings) on each container. There were about, forty of them and they sang lustily all day long. A mid-morning and mid-afternoon break for tea was allowed."²¹ Women were employed on the shopfloor throughout Ford's stay at Trafford Park.

The early 1920s proved to be years of peak production (see Table 2). In the years 1920-22, 99,804 vehicles were produced (the vast majority being Model-T's) 40,573 being produced in 1920 alone. As a writer for the *Ford Times* of April, 1925 put it:

The beginning of 1920 saw the resources of the plant taxed to the uttermost, and in spite of a production of 40,573 vehicles the year ended with demand considerably in excess of supply. By this time both the chassis and body plants had been extended out of all recognition, and, in pursuance of the Company's policy, more and more of the car had become

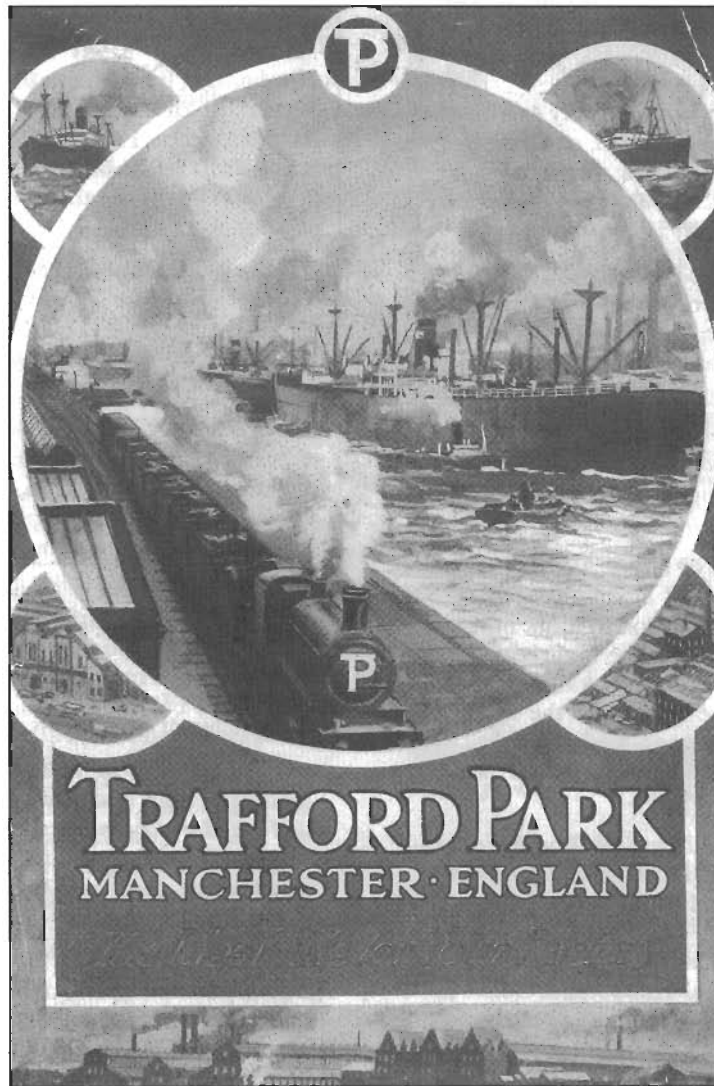
all British in material and labour . . . the Ford Motor Company (England) Limited is the greatest British car producing concern in the United Kingdom.²²

Certainly the Ford plant employed labour on an impressive scale.

The total number of employees, which naturally varies somewhat owing to the seasonal conditions prevailing in the trade, averages 2,500 to 3,000 . . . another 15,000 . . . directly or indirectly find a livelihood through Ford activities. Thus the business of Ford Motor Company (England) Limited provides a livelihood for at least 20,000 British workers, and may, consequently, be said to find maintenance for 80,000 people.²³

Production was maintained at high level during the 1920s, a production milestone being reached in 1925 when the 250,000th British Ford car left the conveyor.²⁴ However 1920

proved to be the year of peak production. Increasing competition from the 'small cars' of Austin and Morris led to the decline of the market position of the Model-T. The plant was all but closed down in 1927 for several months to enable the change over from the Model-T to the Model-A. By the start of the 1930s a major assault on the European market was planned and a massive new UK plant was to be built. Trafford Park offered little scope for the required expansion and a new site at Dagenham was bought in 1926. In 1931 the machinery and plant at the Manchester factory were moved – along with around one thousand of the work force by specially chartered trains, south to London, repeating the journey made some twenty years earlier.



Title-page of publicity brochure for Trafford Park, 1913.

We can see from the above that the Ford plant at Trafford Park grew to become a formidable car producing organisation, for many years the biggest in Europe. In 1920 when Ford's Trafford Park plant produced 46,362 vehicles, Morris built just over 3,000. However, within the context of Trafford Park the Ford factory had an even more powerful presence. For a company such as Trafford Park Estates who were trying to sell their property as an "Americanised corner of old jog-trot England"²⁵ the arrival of Ford must have represented something of a coup. What other company at that time could give such added resonance to the rhetoric and imagery found in the Trafford Park Estates promotional literature? The regular publicity and continual procession of visitors to the Ford plant helped keep Trafford Park in the public eye. At the time Ford and mass production represented 'Progress' and were at the cutting edge of industrial innovation. Not surprisingly then, the Trafford Park plant generated much interest.

*It was becoming recognised that the Ford plants at Manchester were accomplishing results in the way of production figures hitherto considered to be impossible in this country, and the number of visitors to the works showed plainly the interest which was being aroused . . .*²⁶

A trip to the Ford plant was a popular activity.

*It is evident from the thousands of visitors who pass through the factory that a journey through the Ford works is a privilege eagerly sought after. Hardly a day passes without its group of visitors, who call at Trafford Park 'just to see how the Ford's made.' The visitors comprise all classes: public men, Labour leaders, Government officials, college students, 'stars' from the theatre, school children, world tourists from many countries – there is hardly a section of society not represented in the visitor's book.*²⁷

The numbers were impressive. The official Ford factory paper for the Trafford Park plant, *Ford Man*, noted that:

*During October [1920] 140 people signed the visitor's book at the Main Factory. Practically every county in England and Wales is represented, and also several counties in Scotland and Ireland. The visitors include representatives from other large firms, educational, and welfare institutions.*²⁸

Some years later the Ford plant displayed that it still maintained a powerful hold over the public imagination: "During Manchester Civic Week [1926] more than 7,000 people visited the works and saw the British Ford car in the making."²⁹ When the 250,000th Model-T rolled off the conveyor those present included "civic dignitaries, members of the House of Commons, the Church, representatives of every important newspaper, leaders of industry and local Ford Dealers"³⁰.

By the mid-1920s the factory had reached a peak of automation. J. Harrison visited Trafford Park and the Ford plant in 1925:

Trafford Park struck me immediately as an obviously industrial town. Train lines, tram lines, mud and cobbles were the features of its roads which left their impression. Its buildings were for the most part factories of all shapes and sizes: stone, concrete, brick, corrugated iron and wood. As we pulled up in front of the office door a new chassis coyly poked its bonnet out of the door of the factory yard . . . scarcely a minute passed before it was replaced by another

*and then still another. We sat fascinated watching this factory dripping cars.*³¹

The same observer tells us, in reverential tones, of the technology in the plant:

*A five-spindle automatic lathe makes these screwed ends at the rate of about thirty per minute. One man is employed continually feeding this and a similar machine making the balls for the drag link . . . we can see a number of big presses and hammers working side by side. Here and there among the giants one sees an odd small press and an electric welder. A few oil fired furnaces also come into the picture as does a red-hot cyanide bath and a painting bath for the frames. The operator at the cyanide bath wears goggles to protect his eyes from glare, and a stack draws off the poisonous fumes from the surface.*³²

The writer continues to depict the 'heroic' environment of the factory floor:

*To the visitor unused to the work these machines which raise their steel heads far above the puny bipeds who work them are truly awe inspiring . . . The great hammers are the most impressive in the whole works – even more impressive than the far famed conveyors . . . There is a crash, a sheet of flame: beneath one's feet the concrete trembles . . . The black bodies of the machines, the white floor and walls, the smoke and red glare – what a subject for the painter!*³³

Despite the extensive use of machinery/automation and the minute division of tasks on the shopfloor, allied to an overwhelming emphasis upon productivity, the Ford management and Ford admirers were keen to stress that the factory was organised such that production levels could be met without any undue stress upon the workforce. In 1914 a special edition of the *Ford Times* proclaimed that:

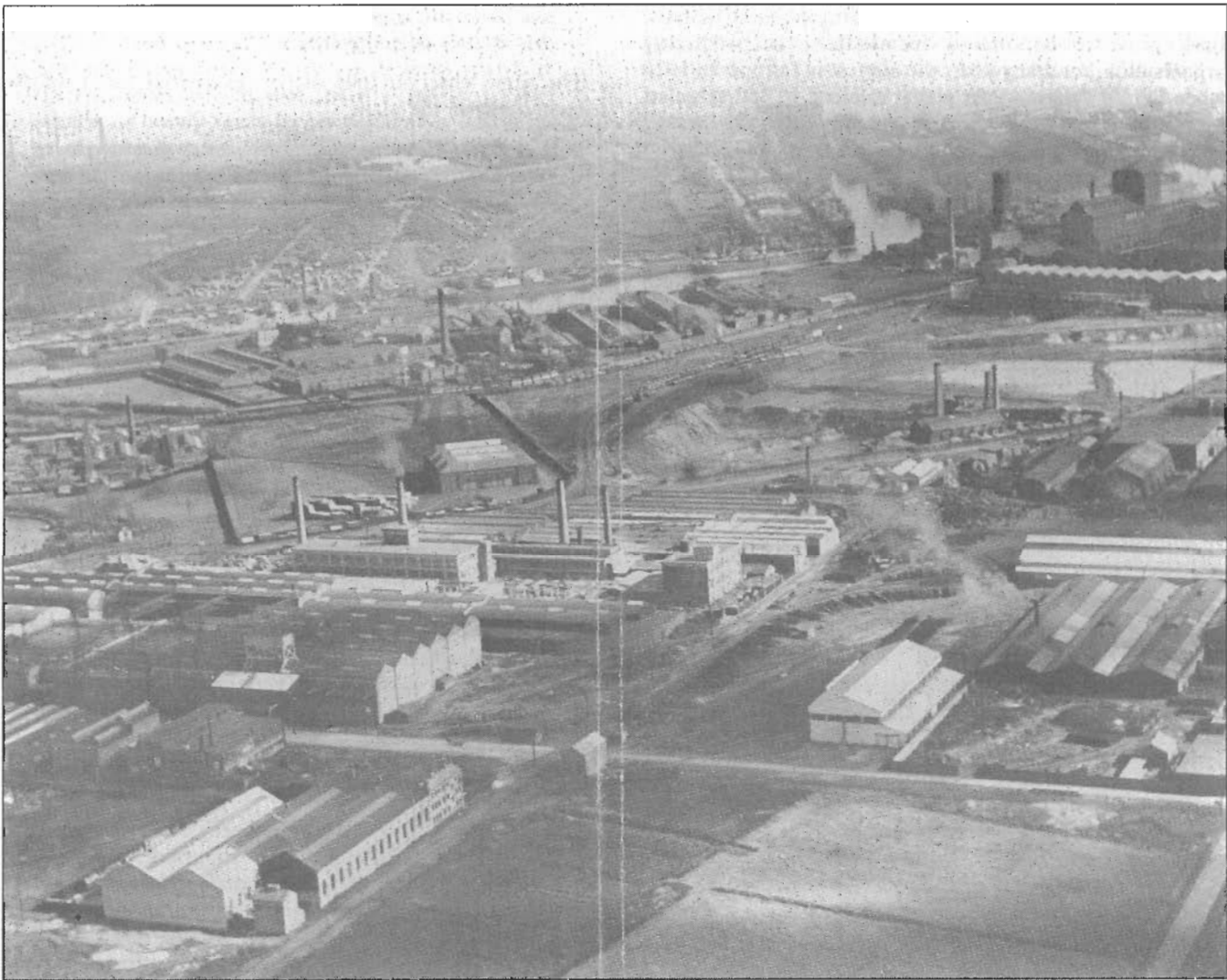
*Yet no man has hurried himself unduly. There is no suggestion of the 'hustle' that is popularly supposed to be inseparable from intensive production. There is less stir, more leisurely movement in the Ford factory, than probably any other works can show.*³⁴

The British Ford management were keen in some respects, at least, to distance themselves from the worst excess of unbridled American industrialism for fear of upsetting more traditional British sensibilities: "Yet there is no 'Hustling' for all work is well and ably carried out in thoroughly English and workman-like fashion."³⁵ In the 1920s we find the same desire to play down the output of labour power required of the workforce:

*Let us now look at the workers – how conscientiously they grease and oil every component that requires lubrication. Each man when he has finished with a tool places it where his fellow can reach it easily. There is no 'go slow' or 'ca'canny' feeling here: for Ford honesty and goodwill does not extend only to the customer. These workers on the conveyor, already the highest paid in the industry, know that Ford prosperity spells their prosperity.*³⁶

As far as the Ford management were concerned, at least in terms of their public pronouncements, class conflict had been eliminated at Ford plants around the world and the Trafford Park factory was no exception.

In England, where Trades Unionism is developed to a high degree . . . it is often a matter of comment



Aerial view of Trafford Park, 1913.

*that the Manchester Ford Plant can be run with such an entire absence of friction . . . Labour troubles between the Company and its employees are non-existent.*³⁷

The major factors held responsible for the much vaunted dissolution of conflicts of interests between labour and capital were the relatively high wages, the eight hour day, the establishment of the Sociological/Education Department and the introduction of a profit sharing scheme (1914), and, to a lesser extent, the investment saving scheme (1920). These were as much a feature of the Ford regime as was the introduction of the moving conveyor. It was asserted:

*Henry Ford's idea is entirely and demonstrably altruistic. It sprang from a native kindness and a paternal concern for the interests of his employees . . . it entirely disposes of any suggestion that Henry Ford's concern for the wellbeing of Ford employees is really a desire for the greater efficiency that spells greater profits.*³⁸

This was typical of the paternalistic rhetoric of the Ford company and Henry Ford's belief that his industrial methods could be the catalyst not only for increased production but could also pave the way towards a better society.

It enables him so long as the prosperity of his Company endures to make provision against the

*day of need. It means good work without frictional loss: it means good living, and, because it removes those financial harassments and cares which dwarf a man and are, in all probability, a potent contributory cause of intemperance, it means good thinking and the broader view which makes for social progress.*³⁹

To this end the pages of the *Ford Times* and the *Ford Man* were full of imagery which reflected such ideas of social progress and homilies and poems celebrating the role labour, of the correct sort, would play in realising such a vision.

*They are a happy lot, these emancipated Ford workers – and they are quick to appreciate the big opportunities of the big factory . . . The ideal conditions under which they work and the considerate treatment they receive are two big reasons Ford workers are loyal . . .*⁴⁰

But what did the workforce think of the role they would have to play in the 'Heroic' future that was said to be awaiting them? One wonders if the "puny bipeds" and the "half naked vulcans" which were rushing the "dazzling white-hot ingots to the hammers" described above, shared in Ford's optimistic vision? It is worthwhile pausing to reflect upon the person who is employed amidst the technology to "... continually feed this and a similar

machine making the balls for the drag link" or the operator standing at the cyanide bath who had to "... wear goggles to protect his eyes from the glare... and the poisonous fumes...".⁴¹

Not surprisingly many who worked at the Trafford Park plant experienced life on the shopfloor somewhat differently. Former worker, John Reid, joined the plant in the early 1920s and recalled that:

*You could not speak, you could not turn around, you could not even go to the toilet. It was ridiculous. Every minute was accounted for. I have been in there at eight in the morning crying because I could not get my quota done. We were all fighting with one another to keep a job. One gaffer used to come around with snuff at three in the afternoon when you were on your last legs, and offer it to you, just to wake you up and keep you going... it was his method of getting the most out of his men. Every gaffer was in competition with the others. I was so frightened of being late I ran out of the house in a panic one morning to catch a tram... no tram came and it wasn't until someone pointed out that it was Sunday that I realised that I shouldn't be going to work at all. You were getting three times the wages anywhere else so they wanted the work out of you.*⁴²

Such an emphasis upon production and discipline should come as no surprise. The large amount of fixed capital used at the plant meant that large volumes of output were essential to give an adequate return on the investment and to ensure that prices were kept low enough to enable sufficient numbers of Ford cars to be sold in the market place. To this end a minute and detailed division of tasks was an essential component of the Ford plant at Trafford Park. A necessary, though less publicised, counterpart to this was the strict organisation and regulation of labour

power which necessitated an exceptionally high degree of control over the workforce by management. A factory such as Ford's had to be able to meet the demand for its products to the full in order to stay cost effective. Thus the Ford plant came to be an essay of 'rationalisation' and labour power was the precious commodity that could under no circumstances be misused.


*All employees had a badge in the shape of a Model-T... I am sure mine was 8018. That was an easy means of identification. The Ford police could pull you up and ask you where your badge was if you were not wearing it. The police themselves had to clock in at various points around the factory at set times during the day.*⁴³

This view of the system of control operating at the factory was supported by an ex-Ford employee who wrote about the Trafford Park plant in the *Daily Worker*, "Everything is organised to suppress the individual personality, and make each person part of the system. One becomes number X, provided with a badge stamped with a number, which must be worn in plain view, both to be admitted and while working."⁴⁴ Such a system also relied upon much effort on the part of management in terms of supervision and surveillance.

*A time-and-motion man would stand over you with a stop watch and notebook and never speak, never smile. I would go in to start on the half-past-two shift and never speak to anyone until I finished at 11.00 at night. There was a chap there we used to call 'Spot-The-Ball', if he caught you talking he would look at the badge you had to wear that had your number on it so he could report you.*⁴⁵

Other ex-Trafford Park employees give similar accounts.

The work is exceedingly monotonous and speeded up to the highest degree. One must not speak to the



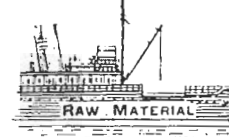
NOTE THESE COMPARISONS

BEFORE TAKING
A SITE
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COMPARE

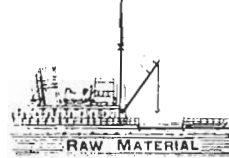
THE COST OF
TRANSIT
FROM SHIP
THROUGH FACTORY
TO CONSUMER

EX SHIP
LIVERPOOL
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INLAND FACTORY
IN LANCASHIRE




RAW MATERIAL
QUAY PORTERAGE 3/- TO 6/-
CARTAGE 6/-
RAIL TO INLAND TOWN
CARTAGE 3/-
FACTORY
CARTAGE 3/-
RAIL TO CONSUMER

EX SHIP
MANCHESTER DOCKS
THROUGH
FACTORY IN
TRAFFORD PARK



RAW MATERIAL
RAIL 6/-
FACTORY
RAIL TO CONSUMER

**SAVINGS SO GREAT THAT
TRAFFORD PARK
SUITS MANUFACTURERS
BETTER
THAN TO
HAVE LAND GIVEN ELSEWHERE**



**SAVING
IN TRANSIT CHARGES
FROM SHIP TO CONSUMER
14/-^s TO 17/-^s
PER TON**

MANUFACTURED GOODS
FOUR SERVICES AVOIDED

Advert pointing out the benefits of locating firms at Trafford Park.



Trafford Park Road (looking west), showing railways alongside.

*chap working next to you, or you were liable to discharge or suspension. A man in a bowler hat parades the works on the lookout for anyone talking.*⁴⁶

The same man recalled that:

*[... he] used to go 'round the toolroom with a bowler hat on and if there was some swarf on the machine he wouldn't come to you and say, 'Oh, clean that machine', he had a stick and he'd tap you with it and he'd point ... and you'd either clean that machine or, again, you were sacked.*⁴⁷

Ford made it difficult for workers to walk out of the plant.

*When you went in on a morning you would take your coat off and put it on a sort of rack which ran down the middle of the factory floor. When the whistle blew for work to start a commissionaire would haul the rack by a rope up to the ceiling, just like the old kitchen clothes airer, and it did not come down again until lunchtime. We had half an hour for lunch ... the janitors used to come round with a trolley, it had a tea urn on it and small bags with perhaps a couple of sandwiches in and a cake. I think the bags cost 6d each and with your tea and your bag you had to squat down where you could to have lunch.*⁴⁸

Another employee offered a slightly different interpretation of the 'clothes rack':

... each man was given a hook on a series of racks and his clothes were placed on that hook, and the starting buzzer was the signal for those racks to be drawn up to the roof ... the Ford Motor Company have always been insistent on punctuality ... it placed a man rather in the public eye to suddenly

*appear there in the gangway where the racks were, and wait until the racks were lowered and he was allowed to place his clothes on them. So it had a certain psychological control in that respect.*⁴⁹

Another employee remembered the power of management at the Trafford Park plant.

*When I went for an interview for a job at Ford, I saw Mr Rigg, the personnel manager. I started at eight o'clock one morning with another new employee, Dick Jones. Joe Berry was our foreman, and he soon showed how strict he was. By 10.15, Dick was sweeping his bench down – finished. He was no good as far as Ford were concerned and he was told to collect his cards.*⁵⁰

From the point of view of enforcing discipline and maintaining a malleable workforce the 1920s in Manchester was a particularly good period for the Ford management. Another employee recalls, "... there was always a queue of men looking for a jobs outside the Ford factory ... With tens of thousands out of work in Lancashire in the 1920s, competition for a job anywhere was keen. For a highly-paid job at Ford it was cut-throat."⁵¹ A Trafford Park resident also recalled the crowds outside the Ford gates, "... I remember them all stood outside Fords ... I can always remember the men all standing there waiting to see if anyone was wanted and someone would get called in for a job ..."⁵²

Another feature of the 'Fordist' methods of production was the insecurity of employment. For some this was part and parcel of the 'American' system of 'Hire-and-Fire':

[I] came to Manchester, and that's when I came to Fords, and that was a very traumatic experience

because Fords was run on American lines, it was run on the hire-and-fire principle . . . it certainly was a very unusual place because . . . instead of going in the morning and leisurely starting work . . . everybody got the tools out and by the time . . . the buzzer was blowing they were actually starting work. Run on very, very American lines Fords was. And if they got a bit slack they fired people, if they got a bit busy they took them on.⁵³

Ford's American neighbours in Trafford Park, Westinghouse, adopted similar methods.

The name Westinghouse was synonymous with the hire-and-fire dictum favoured by American management. Yellow slips in the wage packets denoting dismissal were a constant reminder of the arbitrary power of the company. Any attempts at trade union organisation were treated with scant regard and yellow slips were the certain lots of wouldbe organisers.⁵⁴

Others recall the lay-offs: "It was always known as 'stop-and-start'. It was typical of Fords. On the conveyor you could be stopped work at two o'clock in the afternoon, or any time they wanted according to the demand they had for cars."⁵⁵ Fred Harwood worked in the Ford toolroom in the 1920s.

I was made a foreman at the age of twenty-four. If the line was stopped because of a faulty machine, I used to pay the lads off for an hour. They would go out of the factory and across the road in First Avenue to the houses that were there then. People living there used to sell teas and cakes and so on, and have their parlours as a cafe. When the machine

in the factory was repaired, off I would go across the road to call the lads back to work again . . . my boss was Jimmy Ivers. He was a sod. He used to sack half of his lads about six times a week . . .⁵⁶

Edgar Barlow also experienced the uncertainty of employment that was a constant feature of working at Ford's: "You would go in on a morning and you never knew when you would finish. It would depend on how many vehicles they wanted you to make that day. When they reached that number the foreman might come and shoo you away like a lot of fowl."⁵⁷ Jack Rogers joined the Ford plant in 1919 and remembers the ease with which labour was recruited when required:

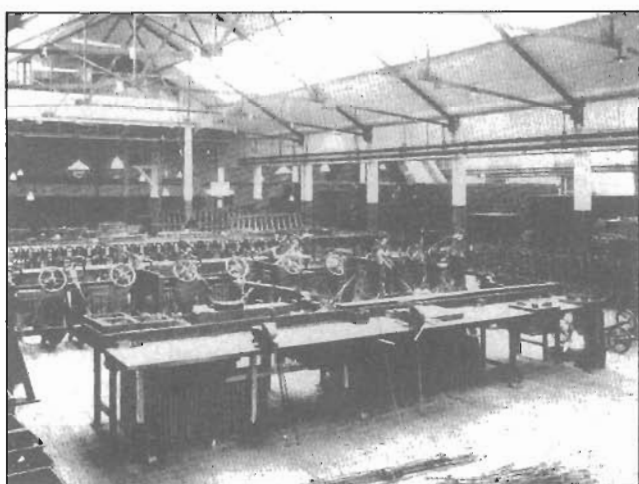
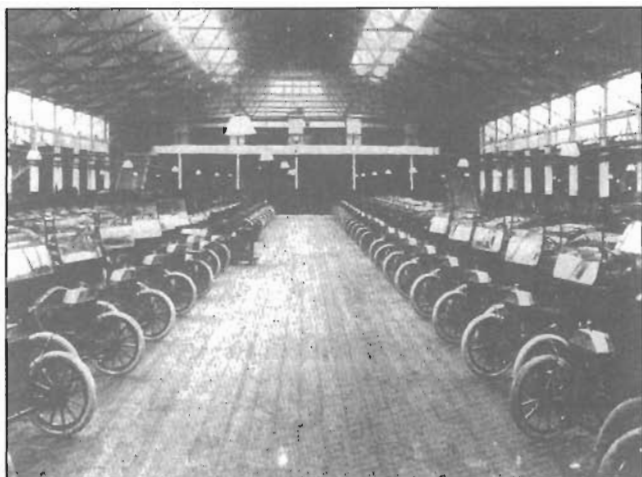
There was a small office on the outer wall of the works and casual labour used to hang around this office outside, and there was a small picket window, and when vacancies occurred someone would come to this window and say we're hiring men now, come round' - and the men made their way round through the gates into the office and they were interviewed to see if they were satisfactory . . .⁵⁸

However the enduring consolation for the Ford workforce, apart from having a job when many did not, was the higher than average wages: "Well we worked so many hours and it was real hard work . . . Many times we got kicked. Many times we got pats, so one balanced the other and then we were recognised occasionally in the pay packet, which is the most important of all."⁵⁹

But to earn those wages the workforce at Ford had to agree, for the length of the working day, to surrender themselves totally to a suffocating regime which placed productivity before all else. In the early 1920s lists of



Ford's assembly plant, Trafford Park.



Views of assembly plant, 1914.

'Meritorious Performances of Ford Workers' were printed in the *Ford Man* – in an attempt to inspire the workforce to even greater levels of output. There is evidence to suggest that working within such an environment of frenzied productivity took its toll on the Trafford Park workforce in a very real way. The *Ford Man* of September 1920 noted that:

*Three thousand eight hundred and twenty-five calls were made on the Medical Department at the Main Factory during July, and one thousand six hundred and seventy seven attendances were made at the Body Works ambulance room during the same month. Of these the Main Factory claimed 1,143, and the Body Works 492, for arm or hand wounds. You can qualify for a wooden leg in about twenty minutes – but it takes twenty years to grow a real one.*⁶⁰

A month later the *Ford Man* revealed the figures for August:

*It's better to act 'Safety First' now, than to study it up after you come out of the chloroform. The doctor and his assistants had a busy time during August. Nearly six thousand cases were treated in the ambulance rooms at the Main Factory and the Body Works. This is a considerable increase on the July figures, and we don't like it. Certainly the cases were not all accidents, and probably the treatment received prevented more serious ailments and loss of time, but there are still too many employees who think that 'Safety First' does not apply to them. Are you one of them?*⁶¹

Not surprisingly, the Ford management laid the blame for the high level of accidents in the plant not on the particular context within which the work took place but on carelessness of individual workers:

*... special safety devices and machine guards are employed wherever practicable. But long experience has proved that the main factor in the prevention of accidents is psychological. Men must be taught, in the most impressive way possible, the necessity for constant and methodical carefulness in their methods of working... Safety First posters are displayed in the shops, and it is the duty of all departmental foremen to check the slightest tendency on the part of any employee to careless or slack methods.*⁶²

The same article added – in a stark contradiction to the aforementioned figures – that, "Ford men are taught the essential value of conscientious and careful work, and the result is a remarkable freedom from those accidental injuries which are so regrettable a feature of an unorganised factory."⁶³

The Ford plant at Trafford Park was certainly 'unorganised' in one sense. Although union members worked in the plant there was never any union recognition or organisation within the factory, "I have been a union member since I was sixteen but there was no union organisation, no shop stewards at Ford."⁶⁴ However claims made by the Ford management that labour troubles were non-existent were somewhat wide of the mark. The early years, at least, at Trafford Park saw the company and its requirements of 'flexibility' from the workforce meet with some resistance from a British workforce unused to Ford's 'American approach'. An example of such resistance was a strike by tinsmiths.

*When the tinsmiths went out on strike in 1913 they remained out for six months. The trouble arose because labourers instead of tradesmen were employed to hold the tin plate sheets while the tinsmiths worked on them. They contended that labourers were being taught the trade. By advertising widely in... newspapers Sgt Johns who was then in charge of the Employment Office easily obtained workers at the wages offered. Gradually it was borne in on the strikers that they were not indispensable and after 25 weeks a deputation asked to see Mr. Perry. They asked if the men would be victimised if they returned and on being reassured they applied for re-employment. Many had to be refused.*⁶⁵

It seems that some of the workers were to learn the hard way about the 'Fordist' approach to industrial relations. A strike by Bodybuilders and Joiners in 1913 coincided with a visit to the works by Charles Sorensen.⁶⁶

*The strikers got rowdy and men were manhandled but Sorensen went to the main gates of the works and asked the men among them who were anxious to get work, what they could do and if they suited the work available they were engaged on the spot. The strikers seeing the great demand for work on the part of the men being engaged feared for their own jobs and did not remain on strike for long.*⁶⁷

An ex-Ford worker vividly recalled another encounter with the American management in the shape of a formidable and much feared American manager called

Ford News

Volume 8

Trafford Park, Manchester, August, 1927

Number 1

A REQUIEM

THE LAST MODEL "T"

At 11.58 a.m. on the 19th August, 1927, the last Model "T" Chassis to be manufactured in this country left the Main Assembly Conveyor a completed unit. What memories such a statement conjures up! What history has been made since the first Model "T" was given to the World! Over fifteen millions have been manufactured and sold throughout the world, and now, almost for the first time in the history of Ford Motor Company (England) Limited, the main assembly conveyor is empty. To one who normally traverses these Works this is impossible. One instinctively thinks of this particular assembly as a very serene centre of bustle and industry. It is the assembly over which hundreds of thousands of visitors to this plant have marvelled. It is here that the uninitiated actually sees the car grow before his eyes, and where a motor-car grows from an apparently endless stream of parts. Throughout the British Isles the Manchester plant is talked of as one of the industrial wonders of Europe, and to those people who will always remember these Works as a wonderfully clean, orderly, efficient lesson in industrialism, where workmen perform their duties as near ideal conditions as possible, it is difficult to conceive the sadness that overtakes one on a visit to these particular points of interest.

Our Managing Director, Mr. H. S. Jenkins, along with the Works Superintendent and the Works Foreman, watched the extremely simple but wonderfully impressive operation of the last Model "T" leaving the main conveyor. It was a sad party. Many of these men were far from happy, since they have become so used to the Model "T" as their ideal. They knew its chassis from A to Z and



from 1 to infinity, and the very personal interest as distinct from the business interest is one that strikes deep down. One of these men helped to assemble and deliver to the dealer the very first Model "T" car ever turned out in this country, and it is very fitting that this man should help to handle the very last. It is a record of which anyone might be proud.

Thus passes the world famous Model "T." Its requiem will be sung, not only in this country, but throughout the world. From the wildest parts of Africa and India, from the Russian Steppes, from the battlefields of the great war, and from all lands wherein humans live, be they White, Black or Yellow.

The full significance of all this can only be estimated when we bear in mind that well over fifteen millions of this particular model have been made and sold, and we must brace ourselves with the knowledge that even that colossal achievement is simply a prelude to still greater industrial magnificence. The introduction of a new Ford car is an epoch-making event in industry generally, and it behooves all of us to prepare for what we are all confident will be a very worthy successor to Model "T."

Our illustration shows the lowering of the engine into the frame.

"The Last Model T", Ford News, August 1927.

Bill Squires. Squires ('hell of a temper') was walking through the plant when a wheel fell off a truck and just missed him. He instantly fired the man who was loading the wheels onto the truck, "This lad went down on his knees to Squires, grabbing at his trouser legs pleading to be kept on. But he had to go."⁶⁸

However, even within the confines of a regime as strict and draconian as that in operation at Ford's Trafford Park plant people still bring to bear their own particular interpretations and experiences of their working environment. At Ford some coped better than others, "We were prepared to accept the discipline, the money was so good. I was used to the discipline anyway. I had ten years in the army and I could stand the discipline for the sake of having a good job."⁶⁹ Others had an altogether different opinion of the Ford regime at Trafford Park. One former employee chose to compare the Trafford Park Ford plant to another famous American institution and in so doing highlights the contradictory position that many such workers found themselves in at once showing perception of the oppressive nature of the Ford plant and displaying relief at gaining employment there:

*I went along at nine o'clock in the morning. The gates were open and a new Model-T was just about to come out. One service man was inside the car, checking it over and the other was taking the engine number. I just walked in . . . and saw Mr Johnson, he was chief electrical engineer. He was astounded when I walked up to him and asked for a job . . . It was worse than Alcatraz, but I was in . . .*⁷⁰

NOTES

- 'Ford Interviews' refers to a series of unpublished interviews carried out between 1952-3. They were held, along with much of the material referred to below, at the now closed Ford Archives, Corporate History Office, Eagle Way, Brentwood, Essex. Thanks to David Burgess-Wise (formerly, Manager, Corporate History Office) for access. Tapes of interviews carried out by the Manchester Studies Group were also consulted. Thanks to Dermont Healy, Manchester Metropolitan University, for access.
- 1 'Ford Motor Company', unpublished manuscript held at Ford Archives UK.
 - 2 *Ford Times*, 1911, vol.4, no.13, p.3.
 - 3 *Ford Times*, 1911, vol.4, no.9, p.233.
 - 4 Trafford Park Estates, *Trafford Park - Britain's Workshop and Warehouse* (1923) p.15.
 - 5 Trafford Park Estates, *Trafford Park: The Ideal Site for Your Factory* (1920) p.20.
 - 6 *ibid.*, p.20.
 - 7 *Evening Chronicle*, 12 January 1937.
 - 8 'Ford Motor Company'.
 - 9 'Ford Motor Company'. These figures were attained on at least two occasions during December 1920 and March 1922.
 - 10 *Ford Times*, (UK Ed.), June, 1912, no.1, p.3.
 - 11 *Ford Times*, (UK Ed.), June, 1912, no.1, p.3.
 - 12 Ford Interview, no.29.
 - 13 'Ford Motor Company'.
 - 14 Ford Interview, no.20.
 - 15 Ford Interview, no.25.
 - 16 Ford Interview, no.9.
 - 17 *Ford Times*, November, 1915, p.118.
 - 18 Ford Interview, no.20.
 - 19 Trafford Park Estates, *Trafford Park - Britain's Workshop and Warehouse* (1923) p.15.
 - 20 Ford Interview, no.13.
 - 21 'Ford Motor Company'.
 - 22 *Ford Times*, April, 1925, (Special Edition), p.78.
 - 23 *ibid.*, p.8.
 - 24 *Ford News*, vol.5, no.10, May, 1925.
 - 25 Trafford Park Estates, *Trafford Park Manchester: The Ideal Site For Your Factory* (1920) p.5.
 - 26 *Ford Times*, April, 1925, (Special Edition), p.7.
 - 27 *ibid.*
 - 28 *Ford Man*, December, 1920. From 1924 the name of the paper was changed to the Ford News
 - 29 *Ford News*, October, 1926.
 - 30 *Ford News*, May, 1925. The interest in the Ford plant at Trafford Park was such that a *Ford Times* of 1931 shows a photograph of two 'Daily Mirror' newspaper vendors who were apparently able to sell papers on the strength that they contained a page of pictures of the Ford factory.
 - 31 *Ford Times*, May, 1925, pp.337-8.
 - 32 *Ford Times*, February, 1926, p.188.
 - 33 *Ford Times*, February, 1926, p.195.
 - 34 *Ford Times*, 1914, (Special Edition), p.47.
 - 35 *Ford Times*, January, 1913, pp.198-9.
 - 36 *Ford Times*, May, 1925, p.338.

- 37 *Ford Times*, April, 1925, (Special Edition) p.39.
 38 *Ford Times*, 1914, (Special Edition), p.53.
 39 *ibid.*
 40 *Ford Times*, July, 1913, no.10, vol.6, p.4.
 41 *Ford Times*, February, 1926, p.193.
 42 *Manchester Evening News*, 22 June 1978.
 43 *Manchester Evening News*, 23 June 1978.
 44 *Daily Worker*, 31 January 1930.
 45 *Manchester Evening News*, 21 June 1978.
 46 *Daily Worker*, 31 January 1930.
 47 Manchester Studies Group, Tape 967.
 48 *Manchester Evening News*, 21 June 1978.
 49 Ford Interview, no.5.
 50 *Manchester Evening News*, 23 June 1978.
 51 *Manchester Evening News*, 21 June 1978.
 52 Manchester Studies Group, Tape 742.
 53 Manchester Studies Group, Tape 93.
 54 E. & R. Frow, *Manchester's Big House in Trafford Park*, Manchester (1983) p.1.
 55 *Manchester Evening News*, 21 June 1978.
 56 *Manchester Evening News*, 23 June 1978.
 57 *Manchester Evening News*, 21 June 1978.
 58 Ford Interview, no.5.
 59 Ford Interview, no.22.
 60 *Ford Man*, September, 1920.
 61 *Ford Man*, October, 1920.
 62 *Ford Times*, April, 1925.
 63 *Ford Times*, April, 1925.
 64 *Manchester Evening News*, 22 June 1978.
 65 'Ford Motor Company'.
 66 Charles Sorenson – or 'Cast Iron Charlie' as he was known – was a central figure in the development the Ford Motor Company.
 67 'Ford Motor Company'.
 68 *Manchester Evening News*, 23 June 1978.
 69 *Manchester Evening News*, 23 June 1978.
 70 *Manchester Evening News*, 21 June 1978.

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