

The Sketch



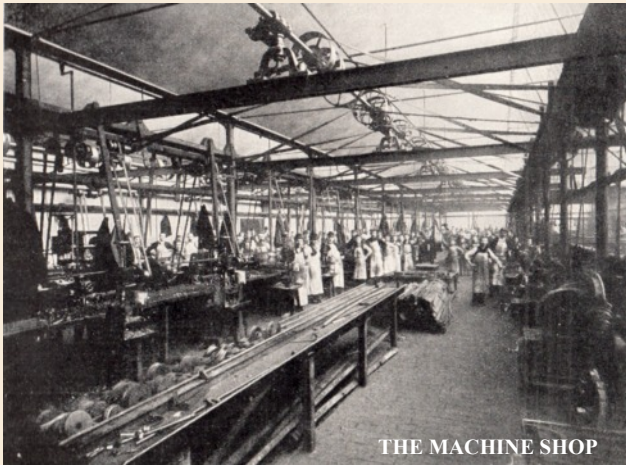
No. 174.—Vol. XIV.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 27, 1896.

SIXPENCE.
By Post, 6d.

CYCLES AT COVENTRY. It seems but a few years ago that Coventry was a small, insignificant town; a manufacturing centre, it is true, but a place so sleepy in appearance that people laughed when they contrasted it with several of the neighbouring towns, now themselves insignificant by comparison. Indeed, almost everything in Coventry has been changed. The town so long ago made famous by the fair Lady Godiva's act of humiliation and heroism has lately developed by leaps and bounds, and its name has become a by-word among ladies devoted to the newest, most up-to-date and not least attractive form of exercise.

Happening to be in this great cycling centre last week, it struck me that a visit to one of the chief cycle manufactories, of which we have lately heard and read so much, might be of interest. The Singer establishment lay close at hand, and the cabman said it was the largest of the cycle manufactories, and well worth visiting, he believed, and leave for admission would, perhaps be granted to a bona fide applicant wishing to see the place solely out of curiosity and not in order to steal ideas. Encouraged by this information, I drove to the big red-brick building that he pointed out was the headquarters of Messrs Singer and Co, and was fortunate to find the managing director of the present company, Mr George Singer himself, in his office and at liberty to see me. "You are welcome to inspect the works," he said, "and, as the men are now at dinner, you will find the place empty and at peace. The noise in some of the shops would



THE MACHINE SHOP

almost deafen you at any other time," and, summoning an assistant to show me round, he bade me good-morning.

On entering the first of the enormous shops, where hundreds of tubes in an early stage of transition are spread out in rows, awaiting their turn to undergo the next process, it is hard to realise the fact that barely five-and-twenty years ago the bicycle was practically non-existent, and the cycle trade of no real importance. It was about that time - in the year

1874 to be accurate - that Mr George Singer, a practical and clever mechanical engineer, organised and started a small cycle-manufacturing company, under the name of Singer and Co. That company it is which has since developed into the enormous and flourishing financial concern now so widely known by name and reputation. And here

it may be well to mention that Messrs Singer and Co are in no way connected, as some suppose them to be, with the Singer Sewing Machine Company.

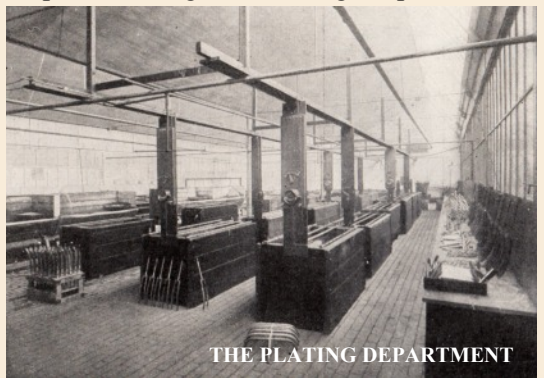
“This is the turning and machining department,” my informant said presently, as we entered a large shop containing benches and lathes almost innumerable, “one of the most interesting departments, as practically all the fine work - all the turning, the milling, the drilling, the profiling, and so forth - is done here. If all the



DRILLING AND MACHINE SHOP

machinery contained in the various sections of this department were placed in a single row it would extend for nearly a mile. The lighting, you notice, has been carefully attended to; it is arranged in such a way as to be of the greatest possible advantage and convenience to the workmen. This is the tool-making shop,” as we passed into the next room, “where we make special sorts of tools required in the construction of cycles. Here is the steel polishing shop, 174 ft. by 40 ft. These polishing spindles revolve at terrific speed, making some three or four thousand revolutions a minute, for a perfect polish cannot be obtained without speed. And here,” as he opened another door, “we make screws and spokes only. Every screw and every spoke is tempered and tested. You may have noticed that, on applying a spanner to the heads of bolts of some cheap machines, the entire head crumbles away like cheese. Screws of that sort are, of course, not made of steel, and should never be found in a first-class cycle, or, indeed, in any cycle. Now I will show you the largest shop of all, the general fitting shop. It covers

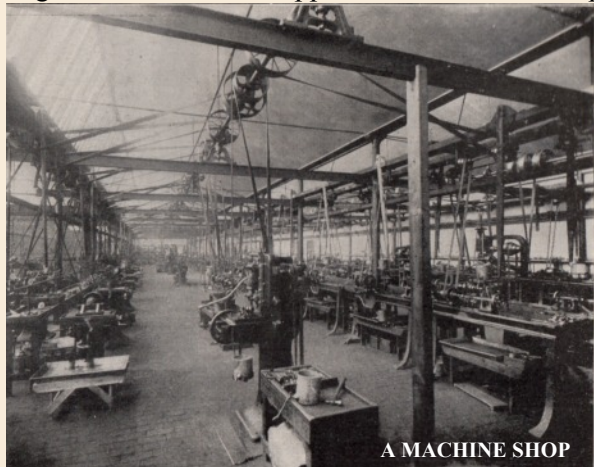
some 41,000 square feet of ground, and is one of the largest shops of the sort in the United Kingdom. Hundreds of hands work in this department alone; the frames, forks, handle-bars and other tubular parts of machines are made and fitted up here. Every part that has to be plated is copper-plated before being nickel-plated, you see,” he continued, as we entered the plating room, in the corner of which two powerful dynamos were hard at work. “Also, every sort of greasiness must be removed from the



THE PLATING DEPARTMENT

parts to be plated before the process is begun, otherwise the plating would not ‘take’. Black enamelling is a comparably simple process, but the fashion for coloured bicycles is increasing, and colours cannot be applied so easily. ‘Lined’ wheels and ‘lined’ mud-guards are also now more in vogue than formerly, and the ‘lining’ has to be done by special hands. The number of stages through which every part of a cycle must pass before the machine is ready to be packed is enormous. Almost at the last moment, sometimes after the enamelling is finished, a tiny flaw is discovered in one part or another, and a fresh limb, perhaps a new tube or a different frame, must be substituted.

You know that the 'Singer' steering locks and the 'Singer' ball-steering were first introduced by this firm? We were also inventors of the diamond frame, now so largely used. How many machines do we make annually? That is hard to say, but we turn out one about every few minutes, and there is a market for four times as many as we are able to produce. The demand in Great Britain and Ireland for bicycles is so great that we have stopped our transatlantic export trade. Yes, ladies are growing



fonder and fonder of wheeling, and no wonder. You have noticed what a number of ladies ride in this town? Boys, too, are devoted to bicycling, and take keen interest in 'seeing bikes made' when they get a chance of doing so. Many a boy wouldn't mind being 'sent to Coventry' now," he added, with a smile.

"This is the 'Grand Modéle-de Luxe', our very best machine. Quite a picture, isn't it? Rising in price? That is but natural, in the face of the present demand.

Besides, bicycles are being improved almost weekly. Notice the narrowness of that tread; that is a quite recent improvement. The bayonet-fluted crank is also a novelty. It is lighter, and looks neater than the solid crank. Again a short crank is very popular among ladies. Nothing looks so bad as a lady 'pedalling high'. Then we make the handle-bar shorter, and so bring the handles closer together than formerly, and, altogether, the machine of today is far a better and more compact one than last year's bicycle. Who actually designs these changes? Mr Singer himself, many of them, and we have an engineer always experimenting. Other alterations and improvements suggest themselves to the leading artisans. What state of things with regard to cycles will be ten years hence it is impossible to foresee. Motor cars will by then have come to the front, most likely, and it seems more than probable that a motor cycle will come after it, provided the law limiting the rate of speed at which "locomotives" may travel be altered.

(End)

* * * * *
(The Sketch was an illustrated weekly newspaper, focusing on high society and the aristocracy. My guess is this article was written by a lady journalist. I purchased it from E-bay - thanks to Alan Hillier. Mike.

Aunty Says: What a gem of a find - it's wonderful to have such a clear and unbiased eye-witness commentary on the Singer works - I love the term "manufactories" - all just as the author found it in 1896, with nothing pre-arranged. And to hear George Singer's words as recorded at first hand, his polite welcome, about the men being at dinner and the 'deafening noise' of their workplace, is bordering on the surreal.

Also, it was awe-inspiring to hear his assistant tell us, directly from his own observations, that it was George Singer himself who actually designed many of the improvements continuously being incorporated into the cycles. And even more amazing to realise that all this happened over 118 years ago. Best wishes, **Aunty.**