

And Then There Were None

I'm not going to pretend that this is an comprehensive resume' about the UK Cathode Ray Tube industry but I hope it makes interesting reading for former Mullard, Philips Components and Philips Display Components colleagues. It might even provoke some comments.

I suppose the story started about 70 years ago when Cathode Ray Tubes (CRT's) started to be mass-produced. Philips was quick to recognise that this was a product that would help create the TV market and make money. A factory was built in Simonstone to manufacture Black & White CRT's. Soon after a glass factory was built across the road and then an Electron-Gun factory in Blackburn.

Other Companies followed, Mazda in North London, after changing its name to Thorn Tubes they moved to Skelmersdale. This factory closed during the 1970's

We the consumer were not satisfied, COLOUR was wanted and in 1964 the first Colour Tube that was made in the UK was in a Mullard factory, Simonstone. Shortly after I joined Mullard in 1963 our technical colleagues in Simonstone were the first outside the US of A to make a Shadow Mask, a major component used in Colour CRT's.

The demand for TV grew at such a rate that a new CRT factory was needed, Mullard Durham was built in 1971 and opened by Ted Heath. At its peak in 2002 they made about 3.4 million Colour CRT's employing some 1500 people. Mullard Washington, the original Washington and not the USA version, was built to make Deflection Yokes. This factory made about 16 million DY's p.a. exporting them to many Philips CRT factories all over the World; they even made a special one and sold them to Sony. Blackburn factory also played a major role making Electron-Guns. It still makes CRT cathodes.

With this high TV demand and the growth of CRT computer displays, other companies came to the UK to make CRT's, Sony built a factory in South Wales then many years later, in about 1995 the Taiwanese company ChungHwa built a factory in Motherwell shortly to be followed by LG building their factory in 1997 in Newport South Wales. This company soon became part of the joint venture, LG Philips Displays.

Almost as soon as these latter two factories were commissioned the CRT market changed. Monitor CRT's halved in price over about a 2 years resulting in monitor tube manufacture being uneconomic in the UK. The ChungHwa factory was designed to make only 14-inch CRT's, they switched from Monitor tubes to 14-inch Colour TV tubes. The LG factory was more fortunate, it could make 14 and 21-inch tubes and took action to adapt their factory to make 14 Monitor tubes and 21 inch. TV CRT's.

It soon became clear that another competitive pressure was on the CRT, Flat Panel displays, again something that the market had been wanting for years, providing the possibility of the TV set on the wall.

All of these pressures resulted in ChungHwa ending production in Motherwell in 2002. Then the LG Philips factory in Newport closed in 2003. Competitive pressures increased, CRT manufacturers tried to fight back against Flat Panel Displays by reducing prices, they had no choice, but eventually it was too much. Earlier this year LG Philips Displays announced the closure of the Durham and then Sony announced that its Bridgend plant would also close.

It has to be said that Durham put up a magnificent fight, it made over 65 million CRT's during its 34-year life. What is even more astounding is that about 15 years ago they were given a target to make a 50 pounds, 21 inch. TV tube. Not only did they achieve this target, as price pressures increased they continued to respond in terms of performance improvements superb quality at a product cost of less than half their 1990 target.

What was once the largest CRT manufacturing country in Europe is no more. All UK CRT assembly factories have now closed, DY and Electron-Gun production at Sony and Philips moved to Slovakia about 3 years ago. The Glass factory in Simonstone has also closed all that remains of a once major UK industry is Cathode manufacture in Blackburn.

I suppose an old codger like me has to say that this is progress but I must say, it's a sad time and I wish all those who have lost their jobs find their new career quickly.

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(Woodcock)