

In a bombed-out factory, how a

The Briton who gave Volkswagen a new life

HE STARTED with a foul-smelling bomb-site, a few starving workers and the mockery of his superiors ringing in his ears. Within four years, he had performed industrial wonders and helped put post-war Germany back on its feet.

Now nearly a third of a million people owe their jobs and prosperity to the quiet, pipe-smoking British major who rebuilt Volkswagen from the ashes and transformed its Beetle from a Nazi curio to an international classic.

This morning, senior VW executives from Germany will honour the major's memory at the Imperial War Museum when they launch an official biography of this unlikely company hero and present three vehicles to his regiment.

It will be an incongruous scene as the cream of German industry salutes the management skills of a British Army officer amid the tanks and guns of the museum. But then, the story of Major Ivan Hirst is an extraordinary one.

In 1945, as his humble Beetle production line was taking shape amid the rubble, Major Hirst was visited by Sir William Rootes, the grand old man of the English car industry.

The future Lord Rootes was on the hunt for useful machinery and manpower for his own factories. He took one look at Hirst's makeshift operation and declared: 'If you think you'll ever get cars built here, you are a bloody fool, young man!' He could not have been more wrong.

At the outset of the Second World War, Ivan Hirst was a 23-year-old Manchester University graduate and Territorial

HOW I SEE IT



by
**Robert
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Army officer working in his family's optical engineering company near Oldham. After he led his infantry unit to France and back again in 1940, poor health steered him towards a post in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME) with whom he returned after D-Day in 1944.

His task was to set up a factory near Brussels to repair tanks. An able manager and engineer, he thrived at the task and, come the end of the war, sought a similar posting.

He was duly seconded to the British military government in Germany and placed in charge of what remained of the old Volkswagen plant in Wolfsburg.

This one-factory town had been created by Hitler in 1938 to produce the bug-like 'People's Car' or 'Volkswagen' for ordinary families. It did not happen. The outbreak of war meant production was switched to the Kubelwagen, a military car, and an amphibious vehicle called a Schwimmwagen.

The factory also used slave labour to work on the V1 'doodlebug' rocket. RAF bombings ruined the plant and, when Major Hirst arrived in August 1945, he found a cluster of tents and huts.

'There was a terrible stink,' he recalled later. 'All the drains had been damaged in the air raids.'

What was left of Wolfsburg was teeming

major's driving force created a classic car



with displaced people, refugees and ex-prisoners of war with umpteen languages between them. With a few enterprising Army colleagues, Major Hirst had to craft this lot into a workforce, despite the absence of any particular task.

'Nobody gave me a real brief,' he said later. 'I was just told to go there and do something.' That 'something' was a brainwave.

The initial plan was for Major Hirst to wind down the factory and dismantle the machinery.

An official British report had sniffily dismissed the Beetle design as 'quite unattractive to the average buyer'. The anonymous Whitehall dunderhead concluded: 'The vehicle does not meet the fundamental technical requirement of a motor car. To build the car commercially would be a completely uneconomic enterprise.'

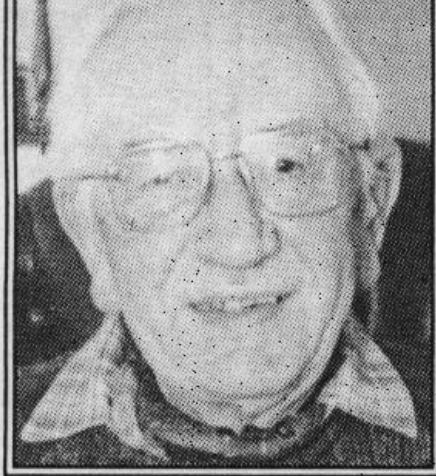
Like the Beatles some years later, the Beetle was soon to make a fool of its critics.

MAJOR Hirst believed that mass production was worth a go, as did Colonel McEvoy, the local REME commanding officer. They found the best-preserved vehicle in the factory, painted it khaki green and drove it off to headquarters on a sales mission.

The Army was desperately short of cars and REME was overstretched repairing those it had. Taking up the Beetle had the added advantage of providing a civilian use for a military plant.

Just two weeks after Major Hirst's arrival in Wolfsburg, the Army ordered 20,000 VW saloons. The factory and the Beetle were saved. But Major Hirst's problems had only just begun.

Raw materials were painfully hard to come by, much of his factory had no roof and his 8,000 workers - existing on little more than potato soup - proved erratic. The denazification process saw key workers removed and many



Major Hirst in retirement

refugees moved on. By early 1946, though, Major Hirst had got production up to 1,000 cars per month. By October, his team had produced their 10,000th.

'Congratulations, young man, but you've got a long way to go until you overtake the Model-T Ford,' remarked one of the many VIP visitors who had started to take a keen interest.

Again, the scepticism was misplaced. The Beetle would, in due course, cruise past the 15million record set by the Model-T.

Major Hirst, always in uniform, proved popular. 'He was never to speak to the workforce with the arrogance of a victor,' writes Ralf Richter, the author of the new biography, 'but always maintained the more friendly tone of a well-meaning boss.'

When the major turned 30, the staff gave him a special certificate reading: 'For our energetic British officer Major Hirst - the rebuilder of the Volkswagen factory'.

The major always refused to take the credit, maintaining that it was a team effort. But when he went home on leave at the end of 1946, to see his wife Marjorie for the first time in two years, chaos broke out at the plant.

Production ground to a halt for two months until he came back. He went on to pioneer unthink-

Above: Hitler opens the VW factory in 1938. Inset: Major Ivan Hirst in his Army days

able concepts such as after-sales service, export drives and public relations. But the more successful he became, the more he was working himself out of a job.

By 1949, the British Board of Control decided the business could fend for itself. Major Hirst found a suitable German successor, one Heinrich Nordhoff, and left in 1949 with a terse note of thanks from Nordhoff and a bunch of flowers.

Life post-VW was something of a disappointment for Major Hirst. After running a couple of steel plants, he was even briefly unemployed before ending up in Paris as head of translating for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

He retired to his native Penzance, where he always had a VW Golf in the driveway. He continued to play down his past, even when, in 1992, the VW boss of the day addressed Prime Minister John Major and the Institute of Directors with the words: 'Without Major Ivan Hirst, my company wouldn't exist today.'

RALF Richter notes: 'It is an ironic twist of history that the decisive role in the reconstruction of the successful German automobile maker was played by a British officer.'

Major Hirst died in 2000, shortly before the people of Wolfsburg named a street after him. But his legacy lives on.

Not only is Volkswagen Europe's largest car maker, not only did the Beetle pass the 21million mark - later to be surpassed by the Golf - but VW has even acquired that great British marque, Bentley.

I wonder what the long-forgotten Lord Rootes would have to say about that.

Additional reporting by Ray Massey