

Wagon were keen to expand further; Franco Signs had been asset stripped in 1970 by Christopher Selmes, and Franco Traffic Signs was sold to the Neoflo Group, and moved into four factories in Skelmersdale employing 150 people on traffic products. Neoflo sold the business to Wagon in 1974, by which time Road Signs were employing 108 persons at Wolverhampton!

Road Signs-Franco was slowly merged onto one site and throughout the next decade became the undisputed market leader, and most profitable company in the industry.

Ivan Walker left to set up Permalite Ltd., which eventually went into liquidation. (Initial success, went to the betting shop – there was even a race-horse named Permalite!)

Wagon Industrial Holdings, following a bad investment in France, required cash, and decided that they had to sell their cash generator RSF, to ease their problems. Marshalls Universal bought RSF in 1983, promptly drained the company of cash, and ran into difficulties themselves. Marshalls Universal Group, including RSF was sold to British Syphon Industries in 1984.

Peter Leigh left in 1985 having no confidence in the new owners. RSF began to lose its market dominance through lack of investment.

Ray Williams left to form T.C.S. Ltd in Wolverhampton.

Ken White (MD of RSF) resigned over policy disagreements with British Syphon, and a succession of inept direction and management followed, resulting in a sale to a Ringway/Pathfinder consortium in 1994, leading to its closure.

ILLUMINATED ROAD SIGNS –I.R.S.Ltd

Major Boycott, an ex-Sapper officer recently retired from the Army, started a business in 1931, initially in a London office, taking orders for cast-iron signs, and sub-contracting to his ex-army friend who owned a foundry at Hobbies Ltd, East Dereham. It was decided to form a limited company in October 1931, and Stimur Manufacturing Company of Paisley bought a shareholding and Walter Stich (MD of Stimur) was co-opted to the board of Illuminated Road Signs Ltd. I.R.S. then sold Stimur products from a line south of Lancashire and Yorkshire, whilst Stimur sold I.R.S. products north of that line.

(Stimur Manufacturing subsequently became under the ownership of 3M in 1968. Bill Church started with Stimur in 1961 as an Engraver on an Alexander pantagraph – later to become Supervisor over all the vinyl converting sections ! His move to 3M Technical Service provided the opportunity to work with Cliff Thomas and Dudley Allum, and between them they set quality manufacturing standards for all reflective material converters, for a generation.)

In 1932 the share capital was increased to enable I.R.S. to enter into an exclusive agreement with Brinkman (manufacturers of glass lenses in Czechoslovakia) to import lenses for reflectorising traffic signs and advertising signs.

In August 1934, at the AGM, it was decided to approach other firms in the new industry of traffic signs with regard to the formation of a Trade Association, which was to become the Association of Road Traffic Sign Makers.

The original members were: Major Douglas Boycott of I.R.S. Ltd., Jack Rowell of Hub Iron Works of Oxford, Harry Ford of John Needham & Sons of Stockport, Messrs Clifton & Ball of the Royal Label Factory of Stratford-on-Avon, and Bernard Gowshall, the Managing Director of Gowshall Ltd. of Birmingham. (Bernard Gowshall had started in a similar way to Major Boycott with offices in London, and I.R.S. made signs for Gowshall Ltd.)

I.R.S. produced their first external lighting unit in 1934. That was the year they opened their factory in a disused Methodist Chapel in Colchester, and their first internally illuminated sign was developed there that year. Also in 1934, Captain Harold Scott, (a friend of Major Boycott), was a director of Laurence Scott Electro-motors Ltd of Norwich, who were manufacturers of traffic signals. Captain Scott became a director of I.R.S., who took over all traffic signals that were installed by LSE – and maintained them. The first maintenance depot was at Wandsworth, where I.R.S. ran a 24hour maintenance service.

By the outbreak of war, Major had become Lieutenant Colonel Boycott on the Army Reserve, and he was re-called in July 1939. He asked his neighbour, Alex Cardew, if he would look after the company for a few weeks till the end of the War!

After Dunkirk, Colonel Boycott returned, and realizing that the War was going to be a long job, suggested to Alex Cardew that the company should be wound up. Alex decided to purchase Colonel Boycott's interests and try to run it. He had already brought in other work making shovels and buckets for Air Raid Precaution Departments, and later obtained orders for bomb keys – making some two million before war ended.

In 1946, Martin Dupont was introduced to Alex Cardew, who needed an office manager for the London Office.

By 1949, the premises in Colchester had been outgrown, and a factory was purchased at Watton, near to the iron-founders Page Hunton Ltd. of Carbrooke, who had been supplying sign castings to I.R.S. for many years. Martin took charge at Watton as Works Director.

In 1950, Martin Dupont and his wife purchased the Cardew Family shareholding.

By 1953, the factory was too small, and they moved to Thetford. Mr. Stich decided to sell Stimur, and sold his I.R.S. shares to the Dupont family, and retired from their Board.

In 1951, an old established timber firm of Newsoms of Gainsborough, (which a young man named Neville Robinson had joined upon leaving school, and had started his National Service the previous year,) had set up a traffic sign division, and I.R.S. and Newsoms inter-traded. They started to manufacture road traffic signs to use the offcuts of plywood and plastics which were produced whilst they had a very large contract for timber framed houses. Neville returned in 1952, as assistant to the manager of the Sign Dept. A change of policy in 1954 led to them deciding to sell off their traffic sign unit to I.R.S. Ltd, and Neville was asked by Martin Dupont to join him and by 1959 became General Manager.

In the 1960's, Martin Dupont, as Chairman of ARTSM at the time, was co-opted onto Sir Walter Worboys Committee, and also by B.S.I. to review BS 873. The traffic sign industry went into recession. Whilst the Worboys Committee was meeting, no local authority wanted to spend money on signs that could become obsolete. I.R.S. moved into self-adhesive vehicle graphics, and manufacturers of commercial signs. The GPO became a major customer for expanding portable barriers and folding portable warning signs.

Thetford Borough Council required the IRS site for re-development, and this led to the move to Swaffham. The work that they had done for the Aircraft industry and War Dept. under their AID and ARB approvals, was discontinued, so the lathes and milling machines were sold at Thetford, after the traffic sign equipment had been moved to Swaffham in 1964.

Neville Robinson became joint Managing Director in 1971, and took full control in 1977 when Martin Dupont became Chairman.

Wm. SMITH & SONS

William Smith started his business in 1842 as a Blacksmith, and the development of the business together with the family history is superbly recorded in a book written by Norma Smith and published in 1991. It is a fascinating story of a wonderfully talented family (musically as well as in engineering), whose patented "Two Wheeled Street Sweeper" was followed by several other associated street cleaning inventions, which led to a prosperous business selling throughout the World for 100 years.

The foundry was started in the 1860's to make the parts for their machines, but they had always been casting and lettering plates, so the move to casting the new road signs in 1930 was a natural extension of their business.

The first real road sign was sold in July 1930 when they produced a plate reading "Please drive slowly through Sleights" for North Yorkshire County Council. The sign posts were also cast in the works, and the igniting gases escaping from the core of the casting, caused flames to shoot across the foundry floor.

Increasingly throughout the 1930's, road signs took over from the traditional machinery manufacturing, but during the War, the War Office's demand for the Smith's Road Sweeping Machine kept them going. Post War, saw the road sign business expanding again, and Peter Smith, following his wartime evacuation to Canada – and National Service upon his return, joined his father Charlie in the business fulltime in 1950.

Mobile cabins for road workers was one of their products at this period – they were still being made when David Gardner joined Peter in 1958.

It wasn't until 1964 that Wm. Smith & Sons became a limited company, and this coincided with Worboys Report and 3M Company marketing Scotchcal and Scotchlite, applied through heat applicators. A close association for mutual benefit was forged, and overnight, foundrymen and painters became signmakers!

Charlie Smith died in 1977, and Mark Smith joined his father in the business that year having completed a technical apprenticeship with Ozalid.