

SHADOW FACTORIES: SHALLOW SKILLS ?

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This paper examines the Shadow Factory component of the wartime expansion of manufacturing production in Britain, and its implications for skill formation and gender in the workplace. A "Shadow Factory" programme formed an integral part of the re-armament strategy of the British Government. The term came into widespread use to describe duplicated facilities under the direct control of the parent company, as well as distributed facilities managed by other companies with appropriate skills.

In the aircraft industry these plants represented a government sponsored attempt at technology transfer from the automobile industry. Initially the government constructed a series of coordinated aircraft manufacturing facilities to be managed by the motor industry. These were followed by a number of integrated plants which eventually devolved to the established aircraft industry. They produced 22% of this industry's total output during World War II, including 45% of heavy bombers.

The rationale was that the introduction of metal fabrication to both aircraft and motor industries had narrowed the difference between them. The managerial skills developed in mass car production were deemed essential to the volumes now required from an aircraft industry that had survived the interwar period on limited government orders.

An additional problem was that the economic recovery underway in Britain in the second half of the 'thirties was based on newer light engineering and electrical manufacture in the Midlands and South East of England. The shortage of appropriately experienced labour had prompted the dilution of the proportion of skilled employees, and the deskilling of component tasks. Women were seen as a significant additional source of factory labour. Consultation with unions was not attempted until 1938. An agreement was reached in the crisis conditions of 1940 on the relationship between traditionally established wage levels and those of the male and female wartime employees.

This paper examines the genesis of policy decisions which produced outcomes which may be traced to the recent takeover of Austin-Rover by British Aerospace. These are related to the deployment of new manufacturing technology, its impact on work organisation, and the responses of managements, unions and workers.

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