

Steenbhom Ltd. - Coach and Motor Body Builders

Four of the Steenbhom brothers were involved in coach and motor body building. Abraham who established the firm, directed it for 40 years. Menasseh was an upholsterer for over 25 years, having joined the firm soon after completing his apprenticeship in 1895. David, estranged from their mother and living in Kalgoorlie, returned in 1919 to become their accountant. Jacob's involvement in the motor industry was more complex, encompassing his own company in Campsie, and initiating apprenticeship training schemes. Two other Steenbhom siblings, Ephraim and Rebecca, appear on company documents as partners, but did not take active roles.

During the company's busiest years in the early 1920s, 600 staff were employed in their purpose built factory in Alexandria.

Palmer Street ~ 1885 to 1903

Abraham began his coach building firm in 1885, at age 23, in a timber shop in Palmer Street, in the first block to the south of William Street. Within a few years he was a regular exhibitor at the Royal Agricultural Show, winning prizes for butcher's and baker's delivery wagons and light weight pleasure carriages such as sprung phaeton sulkies.¹ By 1891 he had expanded into the two neighbouring shops and improved them by replacing the timber walls of all three shops with corrugated iron.²

Abraham entered this industry at a fortuitous time. It was a well paid trade, and coach usage had been increasing over the previous two decades. Imported coaches, being large items, were expensive to ship to Australia, and were not always satisfactory for local road and weather conditions. They did not always allow quick conversion from business to family transport, a similar requirement which led to the utility car body in later years. Coachbuilders had retained their reputation for training and employing the better skilled craftsmen, while many other trades were suffering from deskilling, as fabrication moved into the beginnings of modern industrialised factories. Windows and doors, as one example, were being produced in workshops instead of being custom built on site. Unions were becoming stronger. Skilled tradesmen fought to protect their employment against "improvers", the contemporary term for workers who quickly gained limited skills, enough to gain casual employment on repetitive production

lines.³ Employers responded by forming associations to protect their own interests.

Menasseh began his path into the motor trade as a leather worker at 15 years old. His father signed him into an apprenticeship on the 7th July 1890, to Robert Gardiner of Sussex Street, a portmanteau manufacturer. His weekly payments during five years of training began at 5/-, with annual increments of 2/6. The hours of work were reasonable, from 8:00am to 6:00pm, with 45 minutes for dinner. Overtime during the first three years was to be paid at 3d per hour, increasing to time and a quarter during the final two years.⁴ After completion of his apprenticeship he worked for O'Brien and Co., a coachbuilder firm in Castlereagh Street, then joined Abraham's company.

Abraham held an executive position on the Master Coachbuilders and Wheelwrights Association of New South Wales, an employers' organisation formed in 1898. He was one of the delegation who regularly met for negotiations with representatives of the Journeymen's and other unions after the passing of the Industrial Arbitration Act of New South Wales in 1895. Conditions of employment and apprenticeship matters became a dominant topic at the Association meetings. Abraham spoke in favour of negotiations and improved employee conditions and salaries as "the men are as good as the employers", and "it would be childish not to meet the union".⁵

Judging and awards for the annual Royal Agricultural Show was regularly discussed by the Association. Some on the committee thought awarding of prizes should cease altogether, as the time required for judging led to the carriage shed being closed during the first week of the Show. Many country visitors on their annual city shopping expedition were prevented from viewing the exhibited wagons and coaches, resulting in lost sales. Other committee members thought this would leave the market too open to the better advertised competitors, instead of sales being gained by those who received acknowledgment for quality through awards.⁶ There were complaints in letters to the coachbuilders' trade journals that the number of classifications had turned prize winning into a meaningless accolade since the time that the Association had taken over organisation of judging from the Show authorities. Almost all exhibits were now receiving an award for minor details in a multitude of categories decided by the coachbuilders themselves, but which the public found irrelevant and confusing.⁷

Commercial wagons often incorporated tricky fittings to allow the deliveryman

to open and close hatches with one hand or an elbow, while handling the goods being delivered. Steenbhom's exhibit for the 1900 Show displayed his inventiveness, by including a butcher's cart with "a couple of good new features", a device for unlocking the tailboard, and a simple catch for the sliding top panel.⁸

Riley Street ~ 1903 to 1917



Abraham's firm outgrew the Palmer Street shops. In 1903 he relocated to Riley Street just north of William Street, on two properties leased from Richard Archbold. The previous tenant on one lot had also been a coachbuilder, William Parfitt. The five room single storey house was demolished. The second lot had no buildings. A single storey brick building with iron roof was built on both lots.⁹ During the next decade he rebuilt the factory to triple its floor space, rented a store for timber stock, and opened a showroom on William Street.

When Steenbhom's first arrived in the eastern edge of the city the streets were lined mainly with cottages and terraces. Their factory in Riley Street was among the early motor companies based around William Street. By the time they relocated to Alexandria in 1918 much of the area had become shops and light industry.



A photographic advertisement in 1905 shows Abraham standing in front of his new factory, next to a 1903 Darracq surrounded by three Innes automobiles. One sign on the factory facade proudly announces, "14 First Prizes Royal Agricultural Show", and a second sign reads, "Motor Car Work a Specialty". Through the window can be seen a large horse drawn passenger coach, and a commercial traveller's wagon is parked in the driveway at the left side of the factory.¹⁰ In 1905 less than one in 2,000 people owned a car. The publication containing this advertisement also included the names of the 500 owners of automobiles in New South Wales, including vehicle type, and address of the owner.

On the 29th July 1909 Abraham's relinquished his sole ownership of the business. Steenbhoms Ltd. was formed, with capital of £5,000, "to acquire from Abraham Steenbhom the business carried on by him as a maker of vehicle bodies." The shareholders included four Steenbhom brothers, A.N., J.E., M.B., and E.J., and three others, G.H. Turner, E. Acourt, P. McIntosh.¹¹

"A.N." and "M.B." were Abraham Newyear and Menasseh Benjamin. "J.E." was Jacob Emanuel, who, although a partner, opened his own coach and motor works in Campsie after his marriage in November 1909. He had just resigned from the army after completing eight years service in the Australian Engineers. After 1916 he closed his own business to become fully involved in Steenbhoms

Ltd. and in general industrial matters of the motor trade. "E.J." is Ephraim Josua, another of the Steenbhom brothers who was not directly involved in coachbuilding. He was a tailor of skirts and womens' costumes. His name does not appear elsewhere related to the coachbuilding business. Perhaps he was included as a silent financial partner, or maybe to keep more than half the voting directorship in the family.

Steenbhoms Ltd. leased a third neighbouring property, then rebuilt the complete factory in three stages, first by erecting a building on the third lot, then adding a second floor. Finally the internal walls were removed to give an open expanse on two floors, in a brick factory spanning all three lots.¹² The building still exists with its vintage disguised behind a much newer facade of steel framed windows.

Menasseh's workshop used a notebook in the workshop, small enough to fit in the pocket of a pair of overalls.¹³ A number of pages have dimensioned diagrams in pencil, working sketches for upholstery sewing patterns and stud arrangements, with calculations of the cost, including straps and buckles for hoods and tyre straps. Quite a few diagrams include the client's name and address and the date of job, most with the type of vehicle. The dated pages range from 1900 through to 1909. Pages from the early years are for horse drawn buggies and carriages, but most are after 1905, for upholstery of seating and inside door panels for motor vehicles. One dated 16th October 1903 is for a horse drawn hospital wagon. A couple of jobs were for clients in New Zealand. There are a few series of drawings, possibly copied from published upholstery pattern books of the period.

One page has a draft version of a letter to Mrs Davidson of Newtown, demanding 25/- for scales sold on consignment, "for which I have now waited long enough. If this amount is not paid immediately I will take further proceedings to compel you." The draft letter is written on behalf of Mrs Steenbhom, possibly related to disposal of shop equipment after Aaron's death in 1904. He ends with, "PS. I will give you till 10 o'clock Monday morning to pay."

Abraham was among the earliest of the coachbuilders to change from horse drawn carriage work to motor bodies. In 1908 his company listing in Sands Directory was altered from "coach and buggy works" to "motor coach works". By 1911 a trade newspaper reported that, "Steenbhoms are almost exclusively engaged on motor body work, of which they probably do the largest business in

Sydney.” Their principal body design was the fashionable style known as torpedo, with rounded panels and corners. The report noted that only two horse-drawn business wagons were among the almost 40 motor bodies at various stages of construction.¹⁴

A small number of cars with Steenbhom bodies still survive, and take part in rallies after careful restoration by veteran car enthusiasts. A 1909 Napier, modernised by Steenbhoms in 1912 is garaged in Newcastle. Members of the Veteran Car Club of New South Wales own a couple of Talbots and Crosleys of 1913. An FL built in France in 1903, the only known example of this marque worldwide, has a bright yellow Steenbhom body, restored by a retired engineer in Sylvania.¹⁵ Steenbhom bodies can often be identified by their name plate attached to the board under the passenger's door. The distinctive pattern of the marks left by the screws which attached the 18"x1¼" name-plate are sometimes the only clue to identification of an old car body left out in the weather to rot.

On the 25th March 1912 "... a meeting of creditors was held and adjourned".¹⁶ This might be an indication of financial problems, or it may have been to receive their creditors' support for optimistic expansion. Steenbhoms expanded in 1912 on two fronts, storage space for raw materials, and a showroom. They rented a single storey brick and stone building as a warehouse for timber stock, on the nearby corner of Riley Street and Busby Lane. It had been a foundry for a few years, then a cooperage for a short time in 1911.¹⁷ They also opened a showroom for a couple of years on the north side of William Street, at the Palmer Street corner. The location of their William Street showroom was well chosen to attract attention, in a prominent position on one of the main routes to the developing eastern suburbs, in the district of Sydney which was becoming associated with the motor trade.¹⁸ William Street still had a few showrooms of prestige brands of cars well into the 1980s.

Motor vehicles were beginning to replace horse drawn transport. When the first Motor Traffic Act came into force in 1910, the Traffic Branch was able to manage its affairs with a staff of ten police based in a small office. In their first year 2,350 new cars were registered, almost a five times increase over the total of 500 cars owned in New South Wales in 1905.¹⁹

The Sydney Motor Show of September 1912 featured over two hundred automobiles, exhibited in a newly built pavilion. The Steenbhom company did not have a display of their own, but their work was well represented on a few other

stands. Stanton Cook Ltd. had a single seater Clement Talbot with a Steenbhom body. It featured ventilators in the door panels for the comfort of the passengers, designed to match the engine cooling radiator. Davies and Fehon, the Ford agents, displayed one of their cars with an innovative adaptation by Steenbhoms. Panels were cut away exposing internal parts "to show how it works".²⁰

Steenbhoms had already been closely associated with Davies and Fehon Ltd. for a number of years, and in 1918 entered into a complex partnership involving property ownership, construction of a factory building, and administrative entanglements. The company with the Steenbhom family name was eventually owned by executives of the Davies and Fehon group of companies, with Steenbhom family members as large shareholders and managers, but holding a minority of seats among the directors.

Davies and Fehon were originally timber importers, with a storage yard in Pymont, and an office in New York. The Davies brothers, from a ship owning family in England, migrated to America in 1890, then four years later to Australia, where they formed a partnership with William Fehon, the retired Commissioner for Railways.²¹ On the 31st July 1911, six months after the death of Fehon, the Davies brothers registered the company of Davies and Fehon Motors Ltd., to separate their motor business from the timber import agency. Their starting capital was £40,000. It had seven directors, none named Fehon, with Lewis Davies as governing director of both the timber and motor companies.²² Arthur and Lew Davies had imported one of the first two Fords to arrive in Australia in 1904. They gained the Australasian distribution rights in 1906, and established Ford in Australia and New Zealand through a network of agents based in almost every large town. By 1915 there were almost 30,000 cars, buses, and trucks on our roads, half of them purchased in that year, and of those, two thirds were Model-T Fords.²³

Their interests were not only with Ford. In a full page advertisement of 1910 they promote four other types of vehicle besides Ford ("the cheapest car in first cost and in upkeep"), Crossley ("of gas engine fame") and Lancaster ("car de luxe"), both from England, Bianchi ("of all Italian cars it is the best"), and Grabowsky Motor Wagons ("the finest commercial wagon made in the U.S.A., the country of up-to-date business ways").²⁴

Fords had not always been the cheapest cars in Australia. Products imported into Australia from non-Commonwealth countries were charged extra duty. Ford

cars, being American, were subjected to this extra expense, making them less competitive. To counter this restriction a Canadian division of Ford had been established in 1905 to comply with the requirements of manufacture within the British Commonwealth. Among the special features needed for Australia, the Canadian branch developed right hand drive versions, with an enlarged radiator for extra cooling. The "Made in USA" markings were ground off the engine blocks.²⁵

For ease of handling during shipping, major sub-sections of the Ford cars were bolted to internal panels of crates, so every car needed to be assembled and tested after arrival. In Australia an estimated 15% had bodies totally replaced for customers who thought the imported work too flimsy for Australian roads. Electric starters were often added to replace the crank handle. Personalised upholstery could be ordered, or nickel plated trim, instead of the brass fittings which needed more regular polishing. For assembly and body work, Davies and Fehon formed links with motor body builders in each state, in some cases as partners, in others as contractors.²⁶

The Motor Traders' Association

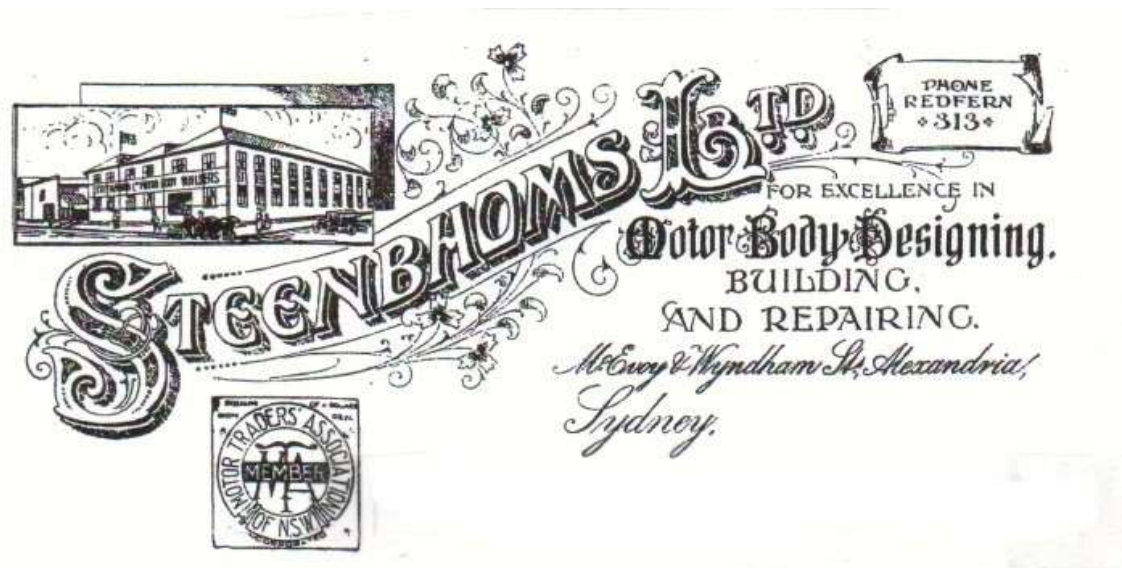
In 1911 the Minister for Customs announced an extra 10% tariff on imported automobiles. On the evening of 5th December 1911 a meeting was held, attended by over sixty motor businessmen and the managing directors of the major motor trade companies. The opening speaker introduced the problems which would be caused by the increased tariff, (fewer sales, tradesmen laid off). Arthur Davies spoke second and tabled a motion calling for the formation of an association "so the trade could approach the Minister in a solid body." The speakers following reinforced the points made by the first two, and a unanimous vote established The Motor Traders' Association of NSW. Their first task was to contact the motor sectional committee of the Chamber of Commerce to advise that an industry specific organisation had formed, and to discuss options of how to deal with the tariff. This resulted in a deputation speeding south to protest to the Minister in Melbourne, at the same time as he was announcing the removal of the extra tariff.²⁷

The rules of the Association were published in February the following year, with an invitation for all interested companies to join; importers of motor cars, tyres and oils, body builders and manufacturers of accessories.²⁸ Jacob became one of the Association's outspoken advocates in matters related to Australian

production, employees' conditions, and apprentice training schemes. Abraham withdrew from similar roles which he had undertaken in the earlier period of horse drawn coachbuilding, in order to attend to the business of the company.

Another meeting was held in 1914 to attend to the problems which would be caused by a new proposal for increases of import duty. Jacob invited motor body builders to the Duke of Manchester Hotel, on the corner of William and Riley Streets, to collect data for a submission to the Interstate Tariff Commission. The war, however, interrupted the Commission's work.²⁹ Import duty rates plagued the motor trade for over a decade, during the same period as motoring was becoming established as a major industry. After the war, in 1917 restrictive import legislation was enacted, and tariff increases in 1920 caused unemployment.

Alexandria ~ 1918 to 1926



In 1917 legislation was passed placing an embargo on the import of a range of products, to assist the building an industrial infrastructure in the country. War time inquiries showed that Australia's reliance on imported machinery was a risk for security. After August 10th 1918 imported cars would have to arrive without bodies, with the intended effect of increasing the skills and manufacturing capacity which already existed here. At the time there was no substantial manufacture of engines or chassis. The motor trade objected. It was impossible for existing coachbuilding plants to make enough bodies to keep up with sales requirements. There was not enough stock of essential raw materials in the country. There was a shortage of skilled labour. An estimated 10,000 bodies

would be needed for the next year's sales, but only 2,600 could be manufactured, if raw material could be quickly obtained, and the output of existing factories increased. The normal output was approximately 1,100 bodies.³⁰ The trade accepted the embargo as an excellent idea in principle, but wanted it eased in gradually as the industry increased its manufacturing capacity. The Motor Traders' Association's submission included summaries for each state, of materials held in stock, current unemployment figures, and estimates of body manufacture capability for the next few months. The cost of a standardised American body was about £60, including duty and freight of £24/10/-, compared to £100 by current local production methods (even allowing for a degree of exaggeration in the comparative costs). The industry would need improved machinery and substantial restructuring of its methods.

Davies and Fehon installed the Steenbhom company in a factory in Alexandria. Their initial output of Ford bodies received compliments at the motor show, included as part of the Royal Agricultural Show in 1918. "The 'Sydney' body is a great improvement on the well-known, but now unprocurable, imported model. Costing but a few pounds more, the outlay is well worth while."³¹ They expected to be able to turn out 200 bodies a month.

The location of the new factory was four adjoining properties on separate titles totalling 1¼ acres, on the north side of McEvoy Street, spreading from Botany Road to Wyndham Street. During the following years the site was sometimes referred to as Steenbhom's, sometimes as Davies and Fehon's, and sometimes as Davies and Davies, another of the Davies brothers' companies. The four lots, owned by Brightwell and Sons, a cartage company, were mortgaged to Lewis Davies on the 9th January 1918 for £3,000, with term payments due at 7% interest per annum, to be paid at quarter year intervals, with the balance due on the 31st December 1922.³² Initially there were two factories or warehouse buildings, one each on the two lots facing McEvoy Street. The building on the lot at the Wyndham Street corner was valued for council rates at £6,000 until undergoing expansion in 1921, to be then valued at £9,000. The second lot, at the Botany Road corner, was originally a single story factory on part of the property, valued at £2,583. During 1920 it was completely rebuilt as a two story factory filling the whole block, valued for rates at £20,000.³³ The new factory added almost 30,000 square feet.

The Davies brothers had restructured their companies. On the 24th October

1919 they had registered a new company, Motor Tractors Ltd., with £20,000 capital, "to carry on business of indentors and importers". Both Arthur and Lewis Davies were directors.³⁴ From the beginning of March 1920 they advised that their motor car interests and Fordson tractor agency, previously handled by Davies and Fehon Ltd., will be controlled by Davies and Davies Ltd and Motor Tractors Ltd. respectively.³⁵

According to a notice in a trade journal in September, business was booming.

"An illustration of the strides which motor body building is making in New South Wales may be found in the demand of a local firm for workmen. Messrs Steenbhoms Ltd., motor body builders at Alexandria are employing 450 hands, but these do not suffice for all the work ahead. The firm is now advertising for no less than 150 workmen to be added to their permanent staff."³⁶

In December the same journal reported,

"Davies and Fehon Motors Ltd., Sydney agents in New South Wales for Ford cars, report business rather above normal, but, thanks to the extensive body-building facilities they now possess, it is possible to obtain one or other of their models from stock."³⁷

The cost ranged from £250 for the standardised model, and with a selection of options, up to £305 for "a special Sydney body of a low and rakish design ... with tank at rear, and a vacuum pump feed. ... [for] the man who wants something different."³⁸

To better service the needs of different sectors of the motor trade, the Motor Traders' Association restructured, with separate committees for importers of cars, importers of tyres, accessory firms, motor body builders, petrol and oil firms, garage proprietors, motor engineers, and country and metropolitan retailers. Each committee would have three representatives on the general council. Country areas would have nine representatives, each from a different district, and car importers would have six. The representatives for body builders were Steenbhom, Sweeny, and McNeil.³⁹ Henry Sweeny and Jacob Steenbhom took turns as chair of this sub-committee for the next five years. Sweeny had his own company in Summer Hill. Sweeny's family had been coachbuilders in Parramatta since the 1880s, and Henry's own company was the Centennial Coachworks in Summer Hill, in a factory built in 1908, custom designed for motor body work.⁴⁰ He and Jacob were staunch advocates of Australian workmanship.

(STEENBHOMS LTD.)



(This appeared on a completed body frame.)

This is a specimen of the work of our Apprentices... who have just completed their first years instruction.....



(This was displayed on a built-up body frame.)

At the first annual Motor Show of the MTA, held in the Royal Hall of Industries, Moore Park, in January 1920, Steenbhom's display featured sign boards shouting their pride in the Australian product. The sign on an internal structural frame read, "Made in AUSTRALIA from AUSTRALIAN TIMBER by AUSTRALIAN APPRENTICES taught by highly skilled AUSTRALIAN CRAFTSMEN in AUSTRALIA'S Leading Motor Body Works." Bodies of a Buick and a five seater Ford were surrounded by samples (with sign boards) of local products used in manufacture; Australian horsehair, leather and wool for upholstery, Australian brass and metal work cast and forged in Steenbhom's own workshop, and local timbers which had previously been neglected by the trade. The whole exhibit was draped with wide ribbons in red,

white and blue. The MTA journal reported, "As representing one of the pioneers of the motor bodybuilding industry in Australia, Steenbhom's exhibit was of unusual interest. It gives an excellent idea of the extent to which the industry has become all-Australian." The Australian content in other exhibits were also noted. Only about 28% of the value of the American Lincolns was now imported. Probert's display, featuring a Ford roadster, was "never free of a crowd", the journal said, "Needless to say, all but the glass in the windscreen was made in Sydney."⁴¹



Steenbhom display of motor bodies and components

Jacob attended the conference of the Federal Council of Australian Motor Traders held in Melbourne from the 20th to the 23rd April 1920. A proposal to increase the tariff rate on motor chassis was causing renewed concerns. Higher prices would retard sales, at the same time as the industry was still recouping their investment from fast expansion, and was absorbing large numbers of newly trained returned soldiers. They would find it very difficult to meet their promise of employing trainees if the new tariff was adopted. The chairman, at the closing of the conference, stated that if they had not had a few successes in six years of fighting against government interference and oppressive legislation, the Australian motor trade would have ceased to exist.⁴² The tariff was adopted, and caused widespread unemployment.

Repatriation Vocational Training

In January 1919 Jacob submitted a proposal to the Repatriation Department for training of returned soldiers. By March 1920, with the assistance of an advisory committee of four coachbuilders, the scheme was already under way, based in the Technical College in Ultimo.⁴³ A similar scheme soon followed in

Melbourne. Many of the initial intake of 200 trainees in New South Wales were already employed, with 100 trainees in Victoria well advanced towards completion. After only a few month's training the Body Building School was able to display the quality of their work at the M.T.A. Motor Show in January 1920. Their own display featured two completely finished bodies for a Ford and a Buick, and partly completed frames and an unpainted body, while Steenbhom's display showed their work incorporated in bodies ready for the market.⁴⁴

As a participant with the delegation which visited the Victorian training facilities at Wirth's Park, South Melbourne, Jacob advised that the trade might not be able to fulfil its promise of absorbing 600 apprentices. This visit was held during a three day meeting in Melbourne in late April 1920 of representatives of the motor trade. Once again proposed increases in tariff rates on chassis would cause a slump in orders for cars. Delegates had arrived from four states to discuss their submission to both houses of Parliament. Representatives from Western Australia and Queensland who were unable to attend in person took part by telegram.⁴⁵

Increasing the tariff rate resulted in reduced sales, as expected. By June 1921 the Motor Body Builders' Union joined the employers association in criticism of the tariff. Over 100 became unemployed in Melbourne. In Adelaide, 200 lost their jobs, although those working had reduced their hours to half time employment. The Brisbane branch of the union asked if New South Wales could place 75 body builders. A large number of repatriation trainees were out of jobs, and those still passing through the scheme were unable to complete their instruction because of the absence of practical experience.⁴⁶

During 1922 the old Darlinghurst Gaol was converted to the new East Sydney Technical College. The new gaol at Long Bay which opened in 1909 allowed the old gaols to be converted to industrial uses. Women prisoners were moved from Biloela Gaol, part of Cockatoo Island, and men from Darlinghurst. When it closed in July 1914 there were proposals to re-use the Darlinghurst Gaol as boys' or girls' high school, but it was taken over temporarily as a wartime internment camp. After the war it was handed over to the Education Department, and dedicated for technical education in February 1921.⁴⁷ Maintenance of the old stone buildings and conversion for classroom use took a couple of years. Their intention was to move courses which did not use large heavy machinery from the Ultimo College. Jacob was at the forefront of establishing a portion of the

Darlinghurst campus for motor body building, and securing a head teacher with an annual salary of £410/17/4.⁴⁸ The expected starting date of August 1922 was not met. By the start of 1923, when the whole Darlinghurst College was due to begin, the Education Department had expanded the body building course to include all aspects of motor engineering.⁴⁹

Jacob and the whole advisory committee stepped down from their positions at the annual meeting of the M.T.A. Motor Body Builders on 20th January. Conflicts had been growing during negotiations with the Department of Technical Education, about incorporating the body building repatriation training scheme within their expanded aims. Jacob and Henry Sweeny had been appointed as advisers, but had not been invited to any consultative meetings. A second thread of conflicts had arisen during the previous year, related to negotiations about changes to union award rates and work hours. Both body painter employees and their employers wanted a variation from the fixed 44 hour week. The M.T.A. representatives were accused of exploiting the soldiers for cheap labour. In order to move the training scheme forward, one of the M.T.A advisers was willing to vote with the union representatives. New objections were continuously being brought up, as though the union had decided to disrupt any arrangement the employer's representatives found acceptable.⁵⁰

A few months after the wages award, which included the requested variation, the Coachbuilders' Union brought their industrial campaign into Steenbhom's factory, using an apprentice as a pawn. Pay rates for apprentices was proportional to their "efficiency mark", usually assessed by the Repatriation Department after a formal application by the apprentice or the employer. Without having made any complaint or filing an application, one of Steenbhom's apprentices suddenly found his efficiency mark raised from 60% to 70%, "and then, almost before he could draw his breath", mysteriously assessed as 90%. The apprentice was astonished about the sudden improvement in his work. Following the re-assessment, the union lodged a complaint that Steenbhoms Ltd. were not paying their apprentice at the appropriate rate. Secret meetings had been held between the Union and the Repatriation Department, which neither the apprentice nor representatives of the Body Builders' Committee were invited to. After the Motor Traders' Association approached the Minister for Repatriation the case was dropped, but a compromise negotiated. All parties approved of the compromise except the Coachbuilders' Union.⁵¹

In June that year, in his report to the Body Builders' Committee, Jacob complained about the neglect of apprentices. During a visit to the Technical College he discovered that quarterly reports to employers were being ignored, and many students were not even equipped by their employers with basic drafting instruments. The Technical College was also neglectful, in not requesting the employers fulfil their obligations to their apprentices.⁵²

As a formal acknowledgment of his work with the repatriation scheme, on the afternoon of 30th October 1923, Jacob received a presentation from the Director of Technical Education, on behalf of the two dozen returned soldiers employed by Steenbhoms Ltd. Since the start of the scheme, most of those who had completed their training with Steenbhom's were now receiving above award wages, and quite a few now held responsible positions with their own and other companies. Jacob was complimented for his "untiring energy and unselfishness to have the right thing done in the right way."⁵³

The Final Years

The dissolution of the family company was caused by a chain of events spanning the first half of the 1920s. Manufacturing and marketing of automobiles underwent radical change, and the Davies brothers involvement in the industry shifted from distribution to financial interests. The Steenbhom brothers' entanglement with the Davies companies, which had ensured their fortune for a number of years, became the source of their enterprise's collapse.

At the beginning of the 1920s most cars cost more than £300, which was at least a year's salary for most people. Hire purchase was a concept regarded with suspicion by many, and by some even as immoral. The popular Model-T Ford was among the most affordable at £280. The Davies brothers estimated that sales could only increase by establishing an acceptable form of time payment. In December 1921 they established the Australian Guarantee Company Ltd, [AGC] with capital of over £40,000 and an overdraft allowance of £100,000 from the Bank of New South Wales. New Ford cars could be purchased with a 50% deposit and a maximum repayment period of 15 months.⁵⁴ The first Ford financed by AGC was outfitted with a Steenbhom body. It was sold to Henry Tebbutt of Boggabri for £199/10/0, with a deposit of £80/10/6.⁵⁵ As the sales of Fords increased through their financing company, the Ford distribution company of Davies and Fehon Ltd. contracted other companies besides Steenbhoms Ltd. for

manufacture of bodies for their imported chasses.

The following year, on the 19th September 1922, ownership of the four lots of the Alexandria properties and factories changed hands. Brightwells sold two of the lots to Steenbhoms Ltd., and the other two to Motor Tractors Ltd. and Davies and Fehon, the two Davies companies still involved in car body manufacture and importing.⁵⁶

Motor trucks were becoming more common, replacing horse drawn transport. Promotional articles appeared in the trade journals describing how to adapt previous methods of handling goods for a vehicle which could carry larger and heavier loads.⁵⁷ To supplement their reduction of Ford body manufacturing, the Steenbhom company increased their output of standardised bodies for this increasing commercial market. They rented space in Hiles Street, a short walk from their factory, to house their stock of trucks with bodies and trays, and began to feature commercial vehicles in motor show displays.⁵⁸ One of their innovations was welding the complete metal body panels into a single integrated shell, instead of the common method of using rivets and bolts.⁵⁹

As cars become more affordable a few body building companies expanded substantially with large investments. Complete cars, including chasses and engines, began to be manufactured. Australian manufacturing in general had increased by the first years of the 1920s to employ more than agriculture.

The Ford company in America suspected their Australian agency was not performing as well as possible, and questioned the structure of their network of dealerships. In America Ford dealers did not sell other cars, while Australian dealers could freely sell competing brands. Changes to Australia's import legislation and tariffs also caused them concern about their future trade and manufacturing. In November 1923 Hubert French and Mel Brooks arrived in Sydney to begin a comprehensive survey of all aspects of Ford trade in Australia. Their report, after travelling the whole country for 10 months, resulted in a complete overhaul of Ford's local enterprise. During 1924 there were many rumours about their intentions, confirmed by their public announcement in March 1925 of the establishment of a major factory in Geelong for manufacture of complete cars.⁶⁰

The dealers' network established by the Davies brothers was replaced by outlets with a tighter control over sales of competing brands. Ford also

negotiated with the Davies brothers to replace their exclusive right to import Fords with an arrangement whereby all financing of time payment of Fords would be conducted through their Australian Guarantee Company Ltd. During the next year the Steenbhom company became a sort of shunting yard, where the Davies brothers placed their redundant business assets before disposal, in a manner which could raise loans for their other financing ventures.

Their first steps took only four months, with the final blow coming a year later. In June 1925 the finance company restructured to become a public company, the Australian Guarantee Corporation Ltd. On the 22nd September Motor Tractors Ltd. sold their part of the Alexandria property to Steenbhoms Ltd. for £6,500, leaving only one lot not owned by Steenbhoms Ltd.⁶¹ In November Davies and Davies Ltd. company ceased trading.⁶² In May the next year Davies and Fehon Ltd's capital was increased to £200,000 by the creation of 125,000 shares,⁶³ and Steenbhoms Ltd was voluntarily liquidated. Four months later in July, a new company called Steenbhoms (Australia) Ltd.⁶⁴ was formed to acquire the assets of the liquidated company, with their capital of £20,000. This was supplemented immediately by a mortgage of the Alexandria properties to the Bank of New South Wales for a further £20,000. Steenbhoms (Australia) Ltd was in turn liquidated one year later in July 1927.⁶⁵

After 40 years of successfully building coach and motor bodies, Abraham, at 62 years of age, opened a small petrol station and garage in Earlwood, in his wife's name.⁶⁶ Menasseh had to risk a mortgage on his home and pledged domestic furniture to raise capital, in order to open a shoe shop business. David, with his accounting experience, took on a position for a few years with an insurance sales company, then opened a small tobacconist shop in Rawson Place, near Central railway. Jacob attempted to continue building car bodies, but indulged in a series of dishonourable business ventures, forming new companies to acquire his failed companies. His personal and business financial arrangements caused a bankruptcy which lasted 12 years.

-
- 1 *Royal Agricultural Show Yearbooks, 1892, 1894, 1895, 1899, 1900*
 - 2 *Sands Directories: 1887 to 1902; NSCA: CRS 17 Macquarie Ward Assessment Books (microfilm copy): 1883, 1891, 1901*
 - 3 *S. Fitzgerald, Rising Damp, Melbourne, 1987, pp.157-160.*
 - 4 *Menasseh Steenbhom, Apprenticeship Certificate, Rae Sekel's collection*
 - 5 '*Master Coachbuilders and Wheelwrights' Association of New South Wales' and 'A Change in Policy by the Arbitration Court', The Australasian Coachbuilder & Wheelwright, Sydney, 15th Aug 1904, p.84 and 15th May 1904, p.25.*
 - 6 '*Master Coachbuilders and Wheelwrights' Association of New South Wales', The Australasian Coachbuilders & Wheelwright, Sydney, 15th May 1904, p.25.*
 - 7 '*The Royal Agricultural Show', The Australasian Coachbuilders & Saddler, Sydney, 15th April 1900, p.16.*
 - 8 *loc.cit. and P. Cuffley, Buggies and Horse Drawn Vehicles in Australia, Victoria, 1981, p.94-5.*
 - 9 *NSCA: CRS 17/8 Macquarie Ward Assessment Books (microfilm copy): 1902, Assessment nos. 1527-29; 1907, Assessment no. 1444.*
 - 10 '*Steenbhom advertisement', New South Wales Motorists' and Cyclists' Annual, Sydney, 1905.*
 - 11 '*Steenbhoms Ltd.', Dun's Gazette, Vol.2, 2nd August, p.57*
 - 12 *NSCA: CRS 17/8 Macquarie Ward Assessment Books (microfilm copy): 1909 Supplement, Assessment no. 41.*
 - 13 *M. Steenbhom, Workshop Notebook, 1905-1909, Author's collection, 10x16 cm.*
 - 14 '*Steenbhom's Ltd.', The Australasian Coachbuilder & Wheelwright, Sydney, 15th September 1911, p.199.*
 - 15 *Members of the Veteran Car Club of New South Wales to G. Luke, 1997/98.*
 - 16 '*Steenbhoms Ltd.', Dun's Gazette, Vol.7, 25th March 1912, p.224*
 - 17 *NSCA: CRS 17/8 Macquarie Ward Assessment Books (microfilm copy): 1907, Assessment no. 1437; 1914, Assessment no. 1300.*
 - 18 *M. Kelly, Faces in the Street, William Street Sydney 1916, Sydney, 1982, p.132, 162*
 - 19 '*History of Sydney's Traffic Department', The Australian Motorist, Melbourne, 1st November 1918, p.92-3.*
 - 20 '*Sydney Motor Exhibition', The Australasian Coachbuilder & Wheelwright, Sydney, 15th Oct 1912; 'Sydney's Motor Show', Sydney Morning Herald, 7th October 1912.*
 - 21 '*Lewis Davies', Who's Who in Australia, 1929, p.965; Conversation with Fehon family*
 - 22 '*Davies and Fehon Motors Ltd.', Dun's Gazette, Vol.6, 7th August 1911, p.105*
 - 23 *N. Darwin, The History of Ford in Australia, Victoria, 1986, pp.4-14*

-
- 24 *'Davies & Fehon Ltd.'*, *The Australian Motorist*, Melbourne, September 1910, p.14
- 25 Darwin, *op.cit.*
- 26 *loc.cit.*
- 27 *'Motor Traders' Association of N.S.W., Suggested Tariff Increases Results in Formation of Strong Body'*, *The Australian Motorist*, Melbourne, 1st January 1912, p.487
- 28 *'N.S.W. Motor Traders' Association, Draft of Rules'*, *The Australian Motorist*, Melbourne, 1st February 1912, p.591
- 29 *'Report of the Chairman of Bodybuilders' Section, M.T.A., on the year 1919'*, *The M.T.A. Journal*, Sydney, March 1920, p.14
- 30 *'Embargo on Motor Car Bodies'*, *The Australian Motorist*, Melbourne, 1st September 1917, p.63
- 31 *'The Royal Agricultural Show, Sydney: Ford Notes'*, *The Australian Motorist*, Melbourne, 1st April 1918, p.7
- 32 LTO: Old System Title, Bk.1120 No.733
- 33 NSCA: CRS 652/17 Alexandria, East Ward Assessment Books (microfilm copy): 1920, 1921, & 1922, Assessment no.107
- 34 *'Motor Tractors Ltd.'*, *Dun's Gazette*, Sydney, Vol.22, 10th November 1919, p.319
- 35 *'Davies and Fehon, Alterations in the Company'*, *The Australian Motorist*, Melbourne, 1st June 1920, p.430
- 36 *'Body Builders Wanted in New South Wales'*, *The Australian Motorist*, Melbourne, 2nd September 1918, p.37
- 37 *'Ford Cars, Prompt Delivery New, in Sydney'*, *The Australian Motorist*, Melbourne, 2nd December 1918, p.148
- 38 *loc.cit.*
- 39 *'Motor Traders' Association of New South Wales'*, *The Australian Motorist*, Melbourne, 2nd September. 1918, p.17, and 1st October. 1918, p.58
- 40 A. O'Connell, *'Henry Aird Sweeny'*, *Ashfield and District Historical Society Journal*, Sydney, No. 14, 2001, pp.151-164
- 41 *'The M.T.A. Motor Show'*, *The MTA Journal*, Sydney, February 1920; Photograph of Steenbhom's display, Author's collection
- 42 *loc.cit.*
- 43 J.E. Steenbhom, *'Report of the Chairman of Bodybuilders' Section, M.T.A., on the Year 1919'*, *The M.T.A. Journal*, Sydney, March 1920, pp.14-15
- 44 *'M.T.A. Motor Show, Royal Hall of Industries, Moore Park, Sydney'*, *The M.T.A. Journal*, Sydney, February 1920, p.30
- 45 *'Federal M.T.A. Meets in Melbourne'*, *The M.T.A. Journal*, Sydney, May 1920, pp.2-3; *'Meeting of Federal Council of Australian Motor Traders'*, *The Australian Motorist*, Melbourne, 1st May 1920, pp.392-3

-
- 46 'Motor Body Builders, Disastrous Effect of the Tariff on Chasses', *The Australian Motorist*, Melbourne, 1st June 1921, p.368
- 47 J. Cobb, *Sweet Road to Progress: The History of State Technical Education in New South Wales to 1949*, Sydney, 2000, pp.26-7
- 48 'Technical Education for Bodybuilders', *The M.T.A. Journal*, Sydney, 15th May 1922, p.40
- 49 'The Old Gaol Becomes a Modern College for Technical Scholars', *The M.T.A. Journal*, Sydney, 15th January 1923, pp.52-3
- 50 'Motor Body Builders, Chairman's Report for 1922, Trouble With Soldiers Industrial Training Committee', *The M.T.A. Journal*, Sydney, 15th May 1923, pp.45-48
- 51 'Repatriation Trainee. Department Lends Itself to Manoeuvres in Industrial Squabble', *The M.T.A. Journal*, Sydney, 15th March 1924, p.9
- 52 'Body Builders' Section, Neglect of Apprentices', *The M.T.A. Journal*, Sydney, 15th June 1924, pp.40-41
- 53 'About Us & About' (industry news column), *The M.T.A. Journal*, Sydney, 15th November 1923, p.44
- 54 *The Story of the First 50 Years of Australia's Largest Finance Company*, Sydney, 1975, pp.1, 4
- 55 L. Mostert, *Historic Australian Davies and Fehon Bodied Model T Ford Tourer*, Perth, 29th March 1994 (Fax from owner)
- 56 LTO: Old System Titles, Bk.1277 Nos.777 and 778
- 57 'Loading and Unloading' and 'The Motor Lorry's Advance', *The M.T.A. Journal*, Sydney, February 1921, p. 37
- 58 'Steenbhom Advertisements', *The M.T.A. Journal*, Sydney, February 1921, p. 55; August 1921, p.9
- 59 'Steenbhom's Ltd., Autogenous Welding', *The M.T.A. Journal*, Sydney, February 1921, p.129
- 60 N. Darwin, *The History of Ford in Australia*, Victoria, 1986, pp.26-39
- 61 LTO: Old System Title, Bk.1402 No.106
- 62 'Davies and Davies Ltd.', *Dun's Gazette*, Vol.34 p.383, 7th December 1925
- 63 'Davies and Fehon Ltd.', *Dun's Gazette*, Vol.35 p.327, 10th May 1926
- 64 'Steenbhoms (Aust) Ltd.', *Dun's Gazette*, Vol.35 p.347, 17th May 1926
- 65 'Steenbhoms (Aust) Ltd.' *Dun's Gazette*, Vol.38 p.101, 1st August 1927
- 66 'Steenbhom's Earlwood Garage and Service Station', *Dun's Gazette*, Vol.39 p.225, 19 March 1928