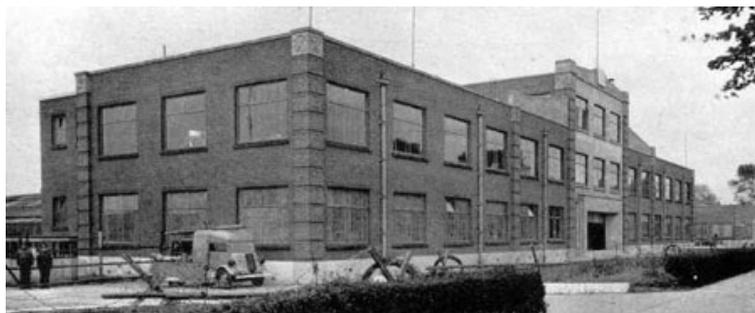


ekco-electronics.co.uk

Ekco Electronics



HOME

RADAR

DOMESTIC

SITE MAP

Domestic

EKCO Domestic Products

A brief history up to 1966

Eric Cole was born in Rochford on the 4th July 1901 and was the only son of Henry and Alice Laura Cole who lived at No.2 [Beedell Avenue](#) Westcliff (Southend on Sea). Note it is believed that 'Kirkham' was his mother's maiden name and that his father at that time was a Dairyman.

Following school, he attended Southend Technical College and was lucky that he avoided being called up for the First World War. He joined his father who by this time had set up a small business as '**Henry Cole Electrical contractor**' probably wiring up houses since electricity was still being introduced to domestic properties at that time.

In 1920, the business name was changed to '**Henry Cole and Son - Electrical Engineers**'. Trading from a shed behind **No. 2 Beedell Ave.**

In 1922 the business name was changed to **Eric Cole - Electrical Engineer** and in addition he started a separate business called E.K. Cole Receiver Company with his then girlfriend Muriel Bradshaw but still trading from his parents shed/workshop in **Beedell Ave.**



One source says that his business was repairing electrical appliance's including the rudimentary radio sets of the day (the BBC and Marconi had only started broadcasting in 1922) as well as making his own sets on a small scale (probably no more than 6 a week) and in line with many other outlets he was offering a battery charging service (they were called accumulators in those days) since most radio sets were battery powered due to the wide variance in electricity supply (the national grid at 240 volts A/C was not agreed until 1926) and DC voltage was still commonplace -- Southend at that time had 230 volts DC.



One-day in 1924 he was approached by a chap called WS (Billy) Verrells who was a schoolteacher (at that time a semi-invalid recovering after having a lung removed due to tuberculosis) who came into the shop one day for a freshly charged battery, Verrells exasperated by the accumulator letting him down in the middle of an interesting program, complained to Eric Cole that as an electrician, he (Eric) should be able to make his wireless work from the lighting mains, which at that time was on Direct Current.

Eric replied that 230 volts was too powerful to run a 6-volt set and apart from the danger of fire, the reception would be drowned by interference. Nevertheless, later that evening in his workshop Eric thinking about Verrells comments, rigged up a series of lamps between the set and the mains, which reduced the voltage to the required 6 volts and while the set worked, the hum was awful. After reading up textbooks, he inserted a high capacity condenser to smooth out the hum and took this contraption around to Verrells, who was delighted even though he still needed his high-tension battery and the glare and heat from the electric lamps was pretty bad.

Determined to improve on this, Eric substituted a resistance for the electric lamps, which got very hot however and needed a metal case to avoid the fire risk, Eric in fact later told one of his managers that it was so hot you could have fried eggs on it!

Persevering, Eric improved the apparatus and sold a few to his friends locally. When later, he succeeded in incorporating into his brainchild a device, which also supplied the high-tension current hitherto needing a HT battery, Verrells persuaded him to advertise his contraption in the radio journals with the result that while the device was still crude and not in accordance with the regulations of the Institute of Electrical Engineers covering mains devices, there was a rapid rise in sales with the result that Verrells, in spite of his illness, went into partnership with Eric Cole using Eric Cole's initials as a trade mark becoming the E.K. Company or **EKCO** for short.

Capital came from a Mr. Maxwell (who owned and ran 'Peter Pan Playground' - a well known local amusement park on the seafront) who by all accounts was a canny Scot, a Mr. Manners (an enterprising local builder) and a Mr. Pring - a local milkman - all of whom became directors. Interestingly W.S. (William Streatfield) Verrells became the Chairman and Managing Director with Eric Cole becoming the Works and Technical Director - a role that WS Verrells felt gave Eric the freedom to be an 'idea's man' to develop the business - leaving WSV to run the commercial activity, which gave him a new lease of life to the point that he almost forgot about his illness and much to his surprise WSV discovered he had a keen commercial sense, in fact he took charge of commercial policy and had soon engaged a sales and publicity staff.

Now that he had a viable business, Eric took the opportunity to marry his girlfriend Muriel Bradshaw, which he did in 1925.

The EKCO business name was adopted in 1926 when **E.K. Cole Limited** was formally incorporated (and floated on the stock exchange with a working capital of £2,500) and the business moved to larger premises at **505 London Road Southend and shortly afterwards to 513 London Road**.

As most of England was on Alternating Current, their sales were limited to those areas still on DC and it was soon evident that they would have to produce a model of 'Eliminator' that was usable on AC current however this involved more technical knowledge that Eric Cole possessed as an electrician but he got in touch with people who made rectifiers and condensers and managed to produce a model usable on AC, which was crude but sold very well however they realised with foresight that as mains powered radio sets came onto the market (following the adoption of the National Grid), eliminator sales would fade out so production was turned over to making mains powered radio sets, which had two and three valve sets (without speakers) using the new indirectly heated valves.

These new receivers were not very successful, being rather unreliable - not unexpectedly - since the technique was new and reliable components were unavailable and being the first actual receivers they produced, the design was somewhat experimental but they sold well such was the demand for sets.

Being well financed, a factory was built at **1135 London Road Leigh on Sea in 1927** and they wisely engaged professional engineers to design more reliable and safe products. This recruitment program (**mostly during 1928/9**) was to be one of the best moves ever made by Eric Cole since the engineers he brought in were to form the core team, which took the company to commercial success in the 1930's and beyond. At the same time he also wisely recognised that he needed 'home grown' talent so he also began to recruit bright school leavers who showed an aptitude for electronics to work alongside these professional engineers.

By **1929** with the rapid expansion, there were about 100 people working for the company and they were earning quite good profits believed to be in excess of £30,000pa, which in those days was a venerable fortune and with the new engineers setting the pace, new designs for the sets were coming through, which were exhibited at Radio-Olympia and proving to be a big success.

As a result of this, a green field site (actually a cabbage patch) was acquired in Priory Crescent Southend and work commenced building a completely new factory, which just happened to be built by a company called Bentall Estates who were owned by Mr. Manners, in fact in addition to building the factory, he went onto build a whole housing estate adjacent to the factory, which to this day is called the 'Manners Way estate'.

In **1930** with the 100,000 square feet factory completed EKCO moved in and this site was to remain the main HQ and manufacturing site for the rest of the life of the company -- with the exception of the war years (WW2).



Factory under construction 1930
(courtesy Southend Museum Services)

Here rapid expansion took place and very soon there were circa 500 people working for the company. By this time radio production by far outstripped 'eliminator' production but a big issue was the radio cabinet, which was one of the major features in selling the sets. These had been cabinet made from wood but were very expensive so the newly invented '**Bakelite**' material was considered, however the choice of cabinets was limited until one day in 1930 [Michael Lipman](#) (who at the time worked for AEG in Germany) made an appointment to see the Chief Buyer (Mr. Ratcliffe) where he showed Mr. Ratcliffe a Bakelite cabinet AEG had made for the German Telefunken company, which demonstrated what could be done with this new 'wonder material'.

As Michael Lipman recalls, Ratcliffe looking for a new cabinet design grabbed it, took it upstairs and came down a few minutes later with John Wyborn, the chief engineer, who, after asking a few questions, whisked him upstairs to the Board Room where he was introduced to Cole and Verrells. They were wildly excited and said this was just what they

needed to launch themselves into the radio-set market proper and, within an hour, he had an inquiry for 30,000 cabinets of two types and a request for a designer to come over from Berlin at once, as it was March and the new sets had to be ready for the Radio Exhibition in August. The order was duly placed and was the largest single order for Bakelite cabinets placed by a Radio manufacturer at that time.

This boded well for Michael Lipman since shortly afterwards EKCO made him an offer he could not refuse and he joined the company as a Production Engineer for the new factory with responsibility for the installation and equipment of a tool room, machine shop and mass production assembly facilities.

The new sets in their Bakelite cabinets were an instant success, as were the loudspeakers in cabinets to match - in those days the speakers were separate from the receivers, largely because the early valves were 'microphonic', i.e. they were affected by the speaker vibrations, which caused distorted reception.



Main Assembly Hall 1932

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After the new year of 1931, a fresh range of combined receivers and speakers were designed, again with Bakelite cabinets in a range of colours. The factory was extended, having proved to be too small for the projected output, and all was set for a still more successful season in 1931-32.

Some ten assembly lines using the conveyor-belt technique were built, which was another innovation unique to EKCO at that time and this allowed 6 models to be produced alongside each other.

The crash of 'Credit Anhalt' in 1931 and the European economic crisis, which forced the Labour Government to resign, led the new National Government to impose swinging import duties on industrial products from around the world, with foreign goods charged at a higher rate than imperial items. This hit the cabinets from AEG in Germany and would have crippled EKCO in the marketplace.

Urgent action was called for and EKCO suggested to AEG that the cabinets be made in the UK. The upshot of this was that an agreement was entered into whereby, for an annual fee and a royalty, a factory would be erected by EKCO adjacent to the main plant using presses supplied by AEG. This agreement was very onerous at the time however the Plastic's factory was built and the future supply of cabinets was assured.

In May 1932, EKCO produced their first 'staff magazine' called 'ECHO'S', which gave a very good snapshot of the growth of the company -- at that time - since the following statistics were given. In the first 6 years of existence, capital had risen from £2,500 to £400,000, floor space had risen from 50 Square feet to 172,200 Square feet and output (sales) had risen from £1,000 to £1.25 million (in excess of £53 million at 2007 rates)

However even as this was being printed, there was a disastrous fire in the design laboratories, which destroyed all the design data and models for the coming season (1932/33) and, due to this dislocation; there was not time to redesign the new range.

As a result, the two principal models for the 1932 season were built on the same basic chassis and in the same cabinets as for 1931. This proved to be disastrous, as the trade expected something entirely new each year, and did not order as well as in earlier years, so while production went ahead at not too great a rate, it soon became apparent that there was a 50% drop in sales with large stocks of unsold sets building up, which by January 1933 brought about a financial crisis and the shares dropped on the Stock Exchange since the investor's were not very anxious to finance unsold stocks. The result of this was that the company had to make wholesale reductions in staffing levels and manning was reduced to a level where only essential 'technical staff' were retained.

Of the financial backers, both Mr. Maxwell and Mr. Manners sold their interest in the company and both 'Billy' Verrells and Eric Cole had to mortgage their houses to provide some much needed capital as well as cashing in Insurance policies to back a bank overdraft, which was needed to see the company through the few difficult months until the new 1933 season. Nevertheless, like a Phoenix from the Ashes (literally) the company emerged stronger than before mainly because of the wise decision taken in 1928/29 to engage top line engineers who now - under the guidance of Eric Cole set about designing new sets to a much higher standard and quality, which allowed the company to go up market.



RS3 assembly line 1932

Eric also commissioned two outstanding designers, Serge Chermayev and Wells Coates to design cabinets for the company. Both of these designers had built themselves high reputations as architects and designers in the modern ([Art Deco](#)) movement and now they set to work designing new radio cabinets taking advantage of what Bakelite could offer and breaking away from the previous convention of trying to get the Bakelite cabinets to imitate wooden ones.

The result of this was the launch in **1933** of the AD64 radio designed by Serge Chermayev and in **1934** of the AD65 Round Radio, which, with its Wells Coates designed cabinet truly became a piece of 'Art Deco' furniture to grace any contemporary room.

This latter set was produced in both cream and black, against the advice of the trade who shuddered at the idea of trying to sell a black object. In fact, this round set was to outsell the rest of the market, and is today invariably featured in design exhibitions and in TV programmes on the thirties period as typical of the era.

It was these architect-designed sets, which put Eric Cole back on the map and led to a further expansion of manufacturing facilities.

Now that the company was solvent again, phase two of the building plan could go ahead and building work began on a new office block and research laboratories (designed by Wells Coates) facing onto Priory Crescent in front of the existing factory (these buildings still existed in 2008).

1934 also saw EKCO being at the forefront of the design and installation of Car Radio's, which were at that time were new phenomenon and very technically challenging. These were launched at [Radiolympia](#) that year and caused a sensation as well as quite a few headaches not the least of which was that the normal radio shops had no garage facilities and garages had no radio expertise so EKCO had to set up a chain of installer/dealers.

These sets while not popular with some car manufacturers (who saw them as an unnecessary technical nuisance) soon became an optional standard fit for Rolls Royce, which gave the company not only access to the R/R dealers and clients but the recognition from the worlds best car manufacturer, which was to be influential in more manufacturers slowly offering EKCO car radio's.



WS Verrells Rolls Royce fitted with EKCO radio c1935
(courtesy Southend Museum Service)

In 1935, to overcome import restrictions on the continent EKCO set up a manufacturing and distribution site in Belgium. This was only a small-scale operation but was to provide much experience of running an 'overseas' operation and working with foreign nationals.

Belgium manufacture initially used components shipped over from Southend but gradually began to use locally sourced components, which materially assisted sales. This manufacturing unit however was short lived due to an economic downturn in Belgium following the German occupation of the Rhineland in 1936, so in 1937 it was shut down with the exception of a sales and service department in Brussels, which continued up to the start of WW2.

In 1936, EKCO began experimenting with Television through a joint venture with a company called [Scophony Limited](#), where they attempted to negotiate a non-exclusive license for the manufacture, sale and distribution of Scophony television sets.

The first set to go on sale was the Ekco-Scophony model ES104. These mechanical large screen models would have been aimed more at clubs and other public premises rather than the home.

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In 1937, Ekco introduced [their own](#) conventional C.R.T.-based home model TC101, which had a built in radio and sold for the princely sum of £84 or without the radio (model TC102) which sold for £47-5 shillings. Sales of these sets were not large since Television (as we know it today) only began broadcasting in late 1936 (in 405 line) and only in the London area.

1937 also saw the formation of the '**Domestic Appliance Division**' following the adoption of a patent taken out by a Scottish engineer, George Burnside, who had designed for the builders of the **Queen Mary** a new type of electric heater for use in cabins, which met the stringent requirements of both the Board of Trade and the ship's architects. This system was called '**Thermovent**', which was soon widely adopted by ship builders especially Cunard. Following this success, Thermovent was launched into the UK housing market and was destined to remain in production for circa 30 years.

1937 also saw EKCO set up production of their own radio valves much to the annoyance of the established valve manufacturers, but it gave them the freedom and leverage to negotiate much better prices and while short lived - being sold the Mullards in 1939 did give EKCO a further leg-up in the league of radio manufacturers.

1938 saw the introduction of a low cost simple, efficient add on television unit for use with existing radio receivers for the reception of television programs, this unit being priced under 25 Guineas.

In 1939, the factory space vacated by the cessation of valve-manufacture was turned over to the manufacture of electric lamps since the equipment and machinery was very similar and the skilled labour which had been accumulated for valve-making was ideal for lamps - albeit a much less demanding technology.

1939 also saw the beginning of development work on 'Airborne Radar' in two forms, where EKCO because of their outstanding reputation for quality and innovation were asked by the Air Ministry to participate in the research and development of AI (Air Interception) and ASV (anti surface vessel) radars so as to bring the equipment up to a

production standard - then to manufacture it. Needless to say, this work was done in absolute 'top secret' conditions - on a strictly 'need to know basis'.

At the outbreak of war in September 1939 all work on domestic Radios and TV's stopped and following a plan laid out by the government, production was switched over to 'war work', which for EKCO meant manufacturing the WS.19 (Wireless set) for the Army, with the 'bakelite' presses turned over to munitions work (plastic practice bombs being one such item) and the lamp division returned to valve manufacture.

In 1940, at the time of Dunkirk and with invasion (seemingly) imminent, the order was given to disperse manufacture away from Southend, which was seen as being in the front line. Radar work went to a secret factory hidden inside a country house ([Cowbridge House](#)) just outside Malmesbury, the head office/administration went to [Aston Clinton](#), where they occupied the Green Park Hotel and radio production went to Aylesbury and Woking. In all cases, key workers were also relocated. A site was also opened in Rutherglen in Scotland for component manufacture especially transformers.

1941 saw AI mark IV and ASV Mark II radars being made at Malmesbury, while at Aylesbury work started on the TR-1154/1155 transmitter/ receiver set, which was to become the standard set for bomber command for the duration of the war.

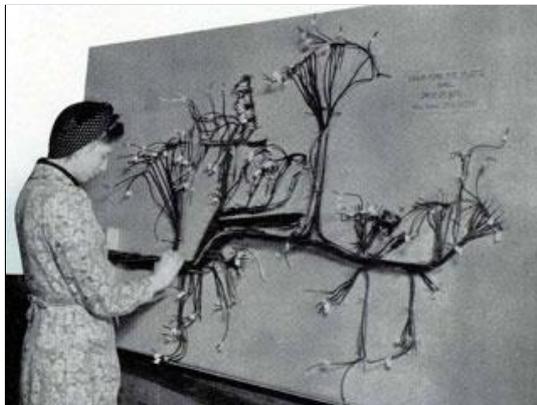
1942 saw 'centrimetric' AI Mark VII and Mark VIII radars being manufactured at Malmesbury.

In 1944, it is estimated that over 8,000 people were working for the company across the various sites.

In 1945, WS (Billy) Verrells the co-founder and chairman of the company decided that on both health and age grounds he could not carry the company through the post-war years and so he resigned at the end of the war. As a stopgap measure, Sir George Allen (an eminent solicitor of the day - he had been the kings solicitor at the time of the abdication) becomes chairman Peacetime production re-commenced at Southend with Aylesbury, Woking and Rutherglen shutting down, but Malmesbury was retained for military work. Domestic production initially concentrated on 'pre-war' designed radio sets until new designs could be developed.

In 1946 a subsidiary company, Egen Electric Ltd., was formed to manufacture radio components and premises were acquired on Canvey Island Essex. TV production re-commenced (TV broadcasting re-started June 1946). Malmesbury started work on Nucleonic equipment as well as CCWR (Cloud and Collision Warning Radar). Eric Cole becomes Chairman and Managing Director by the end of the year.

In 1947 an associate company Kelly & Shiel (EKCO Products) Ltd. was formed in the Republic of Ireland for the assembly and marketing of EKCO products. The Plastics Department was enlarged in the same year to incorporate injection-moulding plant. Weather radar made at Malmesbury flew with B.O.A.C. in the Hythe Flying Boats. **At the beginning of 1948**, the production and marketing of EKCO lamps was taken over by a newly formed subsidiary company EKCO-Ensign Electric Ltd. At Malmesbury '[Thermotube](#)' production begins.



Lancaster cockpit (pilots panel) wiring loom at Southend late 1943



Photograph courtesy of Ann MacGillivray Bitterne Park



Photograph courtesy of Ann MacGillivray Bitterne Park

In 1949 the Hadleigh - Essex plant started radio production. In 1949 also an association with the National Radio & Engineering Company of India (subsidiary of the vast [TATA](#) organisation) was announced, resulting in the formation of National EKCO Radio & Engineering Co. Ltd. for the development and production in India of radio receivers, components and electronic devices. At Malmesbury the Army WS88 set goes into production. **In 1950** Development work starts on successor to WS 88 numbered **WS A40** at Malmesbury and at Southend work commenced on a VHF radio system for Southend Waterworks Company.

In 1951 an associate company was formed in South Africa, Kruger-Wilson (Africa) Ltd., for the assembly and marketing of EKCO radio receivers and a new factory was built on Canvey Island for the production of Egen components.

At Malmesbury work was ongoing for [Radar Ranging](#) (for Hawker Hunters) and ASV Mark 19 for the Fleet Air Arm. At Southend work started on CE39 police radio destined for the London 'Met' Police.

In 1952 building work started on a further Southend factory, known as Kenway. Radiation meters start production at

Malmesbury.

In 1953, EKCO Electronics was formed to handle the marketing of EKCO ground and airborne radar, VHF radio, nucleonic equipment and other electronic devices. CE39 sets used during [Canvey Island flood disaster](#).

Airport radar (ARAA) developed and installed at Southend.

In 1954 the American Tradair Corporation of New York became a subsidiary company, for the marketing of EKCO products in the United States. Flight trials commence on project '[Blue Sky](#)' (fire control radar for Fireflash Missile) developed at Malmesbury.

In 1955 the main Southend factory was extended to provide an additional 30,000 sq. ft. of floor space to cope with the increasing demand for EKCO television and radio receivers. At the same time, the Plastics Division, by now one of the largest organisations producing industrial mouldings and plastics domestic ware, installed vacuum sheet forming presses. [E120](#) weather radar system goes into production at Malmesbury (designed for the Bristol Britannia). Transistors (Germanium) first tested (cost £2.10s each). In 1955 also, a controlling interest was acquired in **Dynatron Radio Ltd.**, manufacturers of high-grade radio, radiograms, television and electronic equipment.



Aerial view of the main E. K. Cole site at Priory Crescent Southend on Sea in 1947

The assembly and marketing of EKCO radio in New Zealand was, in the same year, put into the hands of an associate company, Ultimate EKCO (N.Z.) Co. Ltd. of Auckland.

1956 saw EKCO Plastics Ltd. formed as a new, wholly owned subsidiary company. This company was responsible for the extensive range of industrial mouldings and 'Gold Seal' domestic ware formerly handled by the Plastics Division. Also in 1956 an Australian Company, jointly owned with Associated Electrical Industries Ltd., was formed to manufacture radio and television receivers. This Company, Ediswan-EKCO (Aust.) Pty. Ltd., had its factory at Yennora, near Sydney although this was to be a troubled and short-lived venture. At the same time an associate company was formed in Colombia, E.K. Cole (Colombia) Ltd. of Bogotá. This same year EKCO introduced the world's first mains/battery portable television receiver and at Malmesbury possibly the world's first automatic machine control system was developed for the precision engineering market.

1957 saw EKCO Electronics Ltd. make history by providing a complete nucleonic instrumentation system for the Australian nuclear reactor HIFAR, which was the first experimental reactor to be exported from the U.K. At the same time a new four-storey development and engineering department building providing a further 30,000 sq. ft. of floor space was opened at Southend. In this building nuclear instrumentation was developed for atomic reactors at Harwell, at Dounreay and at Risø in Denmark. In the meantime, the increasing application of radioisotopes in medical and industrial fields resulted in a continual output of new instrument designs appropriate to such uses of atomic energy.

Another important development in the domestic radio and television field took place in April 1957, when the Company launched **Ferranti Radio and Television Ltd.** as a wholly-owned subsidiary to market receivers under the Ferranti trademark. This new firm had its head office at Old Street, London.

In December of this same year, **the millionth television receiver left the EKCO factory**. Note: at that time TV production was running at in excess of 5,000 sets per week.

In 1958, the range of EKCO heating equipment, which had steadily expanded over the years, was further extended by the addition of a complete range of domestic reflector fires. This enabled the Heating Division to offer a complete, balanced heating system for almost every conceivable situation. These were built at Malmesbury.

The heating range was further supplemented by the addition of **EKCO 'Warmglow'** electric blankets as the result of the acquisition of the old established Warmglow Company Ltd. in Leigh on Sea.

During the same year, a completely new factory was built at Maidenhead to house the expanding Dynatron organisation. The Egen factory on Canvey Island was extended and modernised to provide a 50% increase in floor space, and the Kenway factory was extended to cover twice the previous floor area.

The major exhibitions of 1958 saw EKCO products surge ahead in every field. EKCO car radio was offered in most leading makes of cars and the 'Superbath' was selected from the range of EKCO 'Gold Seal' domestic ware for the 'Design of the Year' Award by the Council of Industrial Design. At Malmesbury, a new weather radar system known as E160 was produced for the Comet IV (although also sold successfully as an upgrade to the previous E120 system). Flight trials were also underway with 'tail warning radar' for the V bomber fleet.

In November 1958, Eric Cole received the C.B.E. from Her Majesty the Queen at an investiture at Buckingham Palace.

In 1959, the extension of EKCO Plastics injection moulding shop was completed to include the largest injection press in Great Britain and history was made with the production for Frigidaire of the first moulded refrigerator liners and the 1959 Radio Show saw the introduction of the slimmest ever television - an Ekcovision Portable Model. At Malmesbury development work started on a 'ground-breaking' transistorised Airborne Weather Radar system (E190), which was the first such system and only half the weight of previous systems. [Red Steer](#) (the code name for the tail warning radar for the V bombers) went into front line service with the RAF.



Rochford factory nearing completion early 1960

(courtesy Southend Museum Service)

In late 1959, plans were made to re-locate and consolidate the Electronics business sector (radar, telecommunications and Nuclear) in a new factory to be built at Rochford, Essex leaving Malmesbury to concentrate in heating products. By 1960, domestic manufacture encompassed mains and portable TV's, Mains and portable radios, radiograms, tape recorders, car radios, electric heaters, thermotube and thermovent heaters, electric blankets, plastic toilet seats, various plastic utensils, plastic bathroom fittings and 'Superbath' baby-baths.

In November/December 1960, Radar manufacture re-located from Malmesbury to Southend and Rochford (the Electronics production site) leaving Malmesbury as the site doing the 'heating products'.

The following information was released internally in January 1960, which lists the size and scope of the company. Listed below are the directors, the subsidiary companies, the associate companies, the market sectors the business was operating in, the premises and the number of personnel employed at each site.

Management structure as at January 1960

Board of Directors

E.R. Pring	
E.B. Willcocks	Director and Secretary
J. Corbishley	Director and Finance Controller
A.W. Martin M.B.E.	Technical Director
W.M. York	Commercial Director
G.W. Godfrey	Executive Director – Radio Sales
D. Radford	Director & General Manager – EKCO Plastics Ltd
A.J. Bruncker	Executive Director & Chief Engineer
S.A. Clodd	Executive Director & Works Manager

Subsidiary Companies

American Tradair Corporation – New York
Dynatron Radio Ltd.
Egen Electric Ltd.
EKCO Electronics Ltd.
EKCO Plastics Ltd.
Ferranti Radio & Television Ltd.
The Warmglow Co. Ltd.

Associate Companies

E.K. Cole (Columbia) Ltda. – Bogotá
Ediswan-EKCO (Aust.) Pty. Ltd.
EKCO-Ensign Electric Ltd.
Kelly & Shiel (EKCO Products) Ltd. – Dublin
Kruger-Wilson Africa Ltd. – Johannesburg
The National EKCO Radio & Engineering Co. Ltd. – Bombay
The Ultimate-EKCO (N.Z.) Co. Ltd. – Auckland

UK Principal Market Sectors (January 1960)

E.K. Cole Ltd (EKCO)
Ekcovision
EKCO Radio and Car Radio EKCO Domestic and Industrial Heating Equipment
EKCO Plastics Ltd.
Injection, Compression and Vacuum formed Mouldings for Industry, EKCO 'Gold Seal' Domestic Ware
EKCO Electronics Ltd. Electronic, Nucleonic, Radar and V.H.F. Equipment Ferranti Radio and Television Ltd. Television and Radio
Dynatron Radio Ltd.
Television, Radio, Radiograms, Electronic and Nucleonic Equipment

Egen Electronic Ltd.
Television, Electronic and Radio Components.
The Warmglow Co. Ltd.
Electric Blankets and Electrical Equipment.
Main Premises of E.K. Cole Ltd. And subsidiary companies (January 1960)
E.K. Cole Ltd . EKCO Works, Priory Crescent, Southend on Sea, Essex – head office.
Dynatron Radio Ltd . St. Peters Road, Furze Platt, Maidenhead, Berks.
Egen Electric Ltd . Charfleet Industrial Estate, Canvey Island, Essex.
Ferranti Radio & Television Ltd . 41-47 Old Street, London EC1
The Warmglow Co. Ltd . Progress Road, Leigh on Sea, Essex

UK Manufacturing site Data as at January 1960

Factory	Site Area	Cover Floor Area	Number of Employee's
Southend	19 Acres	506,000 sq.ft.	5,512**
Malmesbury	10 Acres	80,000 sq.ft.	742
Kenway	3¼ Acres	30,700 sq.ft.	679**
Maidenhead	3 Acres	40,000 sq.ft.	390
Canvey	1½ Acres	19,300 sq.ft.	344
Progress Rd.	1 Acre	13,800 sq.ft.	74
Somerton	½ Acre	16,600 sq.ft.	145
Hadleigh	1/7 th Acre	5,400 sq.ft.	83

Other Sites

Branch Offices: London Office and Showrooms 5 Vigo Street, London W1
Service Headquarters Somerton Works, Arterial Rd. Westcliff on Sea, Essex
Service Depots & Showrooms 115 Jersey Street, Ancoats, Manchester 4
230/2 Highgate Road, Birmingham 12
17 Cadogan Street, Glasgow C2

Despite (or maybe because of) the above, at the end of the year Eric Cole without reference to the board of directors entered into a merger with Pye Ltd. of Cambridge, then under the control of C.O. Stanley, and his son John, thus effectively ending 35 years of independent trading. A joint board of directors was formed to manage the merger although for day to day running of both companies, separate boards were maintained. With hindsight this was the worst business decision ever made by Eric Cole and certainly did not have the support of the EKCO board.

1961 saw sales slump due to over capacity of both radios and TV's while transistor portable sales remained good. Uneasy with the way the merger was working to the detriment of EKCO, **Eric Cole** (and his son 'Derek') resigned from both the joint and the separate EKCO board thus severing his association with the company, which bore his name and which he co-founded with WS Verrells in 1926. Reporting a large drop in profits of the group, C.O. Stanley in his annual report laid the blame squarely on the EKCO acquisition.

1962 saw both EKCO and PYE still trading as separate entities with their own products, however from the EKCO perspective, many of the engineers who had been instrumental in the development and growth of the business were approaching retirement age and as these retired, by and large they were not replaced. Development work commenced on UHF TV's with 625 lines following the government decision that this will be the future-broadcasting standard -- this encompassed both black and white as well as colour Television. E190 weather radar enters service with B.E.A. as launch customer and first prototype '[helicopter radar](#)' begins testing. Also this year, the Nucleonics group begins installing control room instrumentation at the Magnox nuclear stations.

1963 Colour television's in NTSC, PAL and SECAM formats were developed since no decision had been made as to which format would be adopted and EKCO like all the other TV manufacturer's had to be ready for production once the decision was taken. As a result of the soon to be announced beginning of 625 line transmission, Black and White 405 line standard TV sales remained flat, with the result that stockpiles began to build up compounded by the loss of a 'schools TV' contract and the hoped for sale of sets to South Africa fell through due to the government embargo of goods to that country, however dual standard 405/625 line sets began to be produced.

1964 625 line standard TV sets enter production in anticipation of launch of BBC 2. E290 weather radar system enters production; flight trials begin on helicopter radar, medical counting labs develop colour-imaging scanner for Thyroid conditions. Development work begins on [MDI](#) (miss distance indicating system) for RAE Farnborough.

1965 Eric Cole's wife Muriel (born 1904) dies on the 26th July 1965 and cremated at Southend on the 30th July 1965. In the early years of the business Muriel was responsible for all the accounts and administration thus allowing Eric to concentrate on developing products. Also in this year, EKCO won the contract to develop the [weather radar for](#)

[Concorde](#) and an Environmental test laboratory was built at Southend for the testing of radar and electronics equipment. Television sales however remain depressed but portable transistor radio sales remained good partly as a result of 'pirate radio'.

1966 The end of an era. In February 1966, [PYE](#) in their interim report stated that sales had dropped by 1/3rd and profits for the group would be £478k against the previous years (1964) value of £2.27 million. PYE issued an announcement that despite poor sales, the 3 Essex factories were safe from closure, however on the 20th May in a shock announcement, a press release stated that with immediate effect **800 workers at Priory Crescent** would lose their jobs and that television and radio manufacture would move away from Southend. As a result of this, Television production moved to a little used PYE factory in Lowestoft and radio production moved to a PYE factory in Cambridge. In addition TV development and radio development also moved to Lowestoft by the end of the year, leaving the assembly hall empty and silent for the first time since 1930 (excepting a short time during the war). Of the staff remaining, most were re-allocated to either Plastics or Electronics both of whom were now 'stand alone businesses'.

At the same time, a financial scandal was threatening to engulf PYE caused by a disagreement over the take-over of a rental company in which C.O. Stanley and his son had some interest. This on top of very poor sales figures caused a boardroom row and an accountant's investigation was ordered. C.O. Stanley and his son both resigned and, quite suddenly, the whole PYE/EKCO set-up was up for sale.

1966 also saw the death of Eric Cole aged 65. Following the death of Muriel, Eric retired to live in St. Fitts Village Barbados. There he died 'while swimming' on the 18th November 1966 and his body was returned to the UK for cremation at Southend.

In the funeral service, which took place on the 29th November 1966, taken by Canon Stanley, he said that Eric Cole was essentially a humble man, who when asked about his business success commented 'you know I've never been particularly good at anything but I've succeeded by having around me able men'.

Eric Cole was cremated at Southend Crematorium and both a plaque and a rose planted to his memory. Unfortunately both of these were removed in 2000, therefore, apart from a portrait painting of him in the [ESSC](#) clubhouse, there is no tangible memorial to him except the buildings, which were once E.K. Cole Limited employing over 5,000 people in and around Southend over a 30 year period.

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The story of Eric Cole and the business ends here although in 1967 Philips Electrical Industries emerged as the new owner of the business and following a business review, the electronics division was split into three parts and merged with the equivalent section of PYE, thus the radar team joined with the communications team of PYE to become EKCO Avionics, the second part was EKCO Instruments and the third part was EKCO Nucleonic.

After the TV & radio production vacated the main assembly hall, work commenced on refurbishing the hall, which when completed by the end of 1967 had a 'clean room' for the assembly of the optical system for the helicopter radar system as well as production of all the other product lines from Rochford. In addition a lab was set up for 'thick/thin' film devices (the forerunner to IC's Integrated Circuits), which had started at Rochford as pioneering work. These were originally developed for the Concorde radar but they also found a home in the Crane Safe Load Indicating system, which had been developed by EKCO Instruments.

At this time Kenway was still manufacturing car radios, Egan on Canvey Island were still doing electrical components and Plastic's both domestic and industrial plastic mouldings. At Malmesbury the heating division was still intact as was the Warmglow 'electric blanket' site in the 'Somerton' works in Westcliff on Sea.

In February 1968, the move began to relocate the 550 'electronics production staff' from Rochford to the refurbished assembly hall at Priory crescent thus joining the research and development already on site however it was evident that despite promises and investment from Philips, areas of the refurbished factory remained empty although the 'PYE Westminster taxi radio' was brought in to provide extra work. This was not a success since the staff -- used to the high grade quality and precision work of military projects -- could not easily adapt to the much lower 'commercial' standard of this radio. According the Southend Standard of February 1968, the total number of EKCO employee's in the Southend area was approximately 3100. Following the opening of the refurbished hall, the Rochford site was closed, offered for sale and bought by 'Lesney Brothers' -- the makers of Matchbox toys.

At Malmesbury, the business becomes PYE TMC (telephone manufacturing company) specialising in the design and manufacture of small company switchboards and exchanges.

In 1969, the only part of the Priory crescent site looking healthy was 'plastics' with the rest of the site limping along although there were 2 projects of interest, these being 'MDI and SLI. MDI was selling well and work was well ahead through the use of 'thin film' and later microchips to miniaturise SLI, which became 'microgard'. The E390 weather radar designed for Concorde was delivered to both Toulouse and Filton in time for the first test flights of Concorde 001 and 002.

In 1970, there was a sharp downturn in aviation sales both civil and military and the result of this was that Philips began to lay plans to relocate 'avionics' work to another Philips company (MEL) and move 'instruments' into the Dev/Eng block. During the year a program of redundancies began resulting in the business being trimmed down to a skeleton number.

By the end of 1971, these moves had taken place, thus leaving the factory, the offices and the Wells Coates R&D block empty, which was then put on the market.

The Nuclear and Medical parts of EKCO Instruments were sold off to a company called 'Nuclear Enterprises' based in

Edinburgh with elements of the medical also going to either Baldwin Instruments or EMI (Wells).

The Industrial division became CEI - Cambridge Electronic Industries under the Philips banner but after a short while, this in turn was sold to the Morgan Crucible Company becoming Morganite Electronic Instruments.

In 1972, these empty building were bought by the Joint Credit Card Company and following refurbishment and alteration became the 'ACCESS' credit card centre.

The site was sectioned off so that EKCO plastics could operate as a 'stand alone business' and another Philips company called London Carriers moved onto the Plastics site.

One new unexpected success on the early 1970's however was the 'Hostess heated trolley' and tray, which became a 'must have' household accessory and sold widely. These were made by the Hawkins electrical business of Pye who traded as **EKCO Hawkins Ltd.**

The name EKCO remained in the market place until **1982** due to Philips having transistor radios made in Hong Kong and the far east and with the TV's coming out of Lowestoft still having an EKCO badge although these were essentially 'PYE' designed sets.

Of the rest of the former EKCO sites, Kenway closed in xxxx when car radio production ceased, the Somerton works, which had become the home for 'electric blankets closed in xxxx when electric blankets fell out of fashion due to adverse publicity about the safety of electric blankets nationally and the rise of continental 'duvets'. Egan Electrical continued trading up to 1982 when it was sold to Belling-Leigh.

EKCO Plastics also continued trading until the early 1980's when 'Linpac' bought it out. It was subsequently sold on a couple of times and the current owners are a company called 'Eco-mold' who are still on the original site.

The Malmesbury PYE-TMC site trading under the Philips umbrella remained until 1984 when Philips entered a joint venture with AT&T to create AT&T and Philips Telecommunications, known as APT. Philips gradually transferred its stake in the joint venture to AT&T with the result that by 1990 AT&T wholly owned the company.

In 1996 AT&T split itself into 3 parts and as part of the manufacturing organisation, the company in Cowbridge found itself part of Lucent Technologies. A period of rapid expansion followed with Lucent Technologies growing to occupy numerous sites in Wiltshire and its UK headquarters moving to Swindon. Following a decline in telecommunications industry the Cowbridge site finally closed in 2002 leaving the once 'Country House' to fall into disrepair resulting in it being demolished at the beginning of 2007 with the site being redeveloped for housing and small businesses.

At Priory Crescent, the main site (by now known as 'Prittlebrook' trading estate) was vacated in 2003 when RBS (Royal Bank of Scotland) relocated to a purpose built office block and FDR (First Data Resources) who manufactured the cards relocated to Basildon. Since then, the site has been empty and somewhat like Cowbridge slowly decaying away



Cowbridge House Demolition 2007



Former EKCO office block January 2008

(Photo courtesy Peter Brown)

In 2008 the sole remaining site bearing the name EKCO is the Ekco Sports and Social Club (ESSC) who still occupy the original clubhouse donated by Eric Cole at the time of the companies silver jubilee in 1952. The clubhouse and sports ground were assigned to the ESSC in 'perpetuity' and while few in numbers, ex employee's can still be found there discussing times gone by. This is particularly true for the Ekco Plastics toolroom veterans who still endeavour to meet monthly.

Postscript

In researching and compiling this timeline it has become evident that Eric Kirkham Cole and his company was a major (if not the major) employer in Southend, Malmesbury and Canvey Island for over 30 years and during the heyday of the company in each town, it was an odds on bet that if you walked down the high street of each town you would meet somebody who either worked at EKCO or was related to somebody who did YET today (2008) not only has the name vanished but anybody under 40 would never know the company existed.

In Southend (his birthplace) the only reminder of Eric Kirkham Cole is a portrait painting of him hanging in the ESSC clubhouse (which he apparently disliked) since in 2000 the remembrance rose and plaque to his and Muriel's memory

in Southend Crematorium was removed.

[Chris Poole - April 2008](#)

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