

MANUFACTURING MATTERS

Innovation at heart of proud tradition of manufacturing

Will Rossiter, Associate Professor at Nottingham Business School on why manufacturing has played a such a pivotal role in the local economy and how, with a mixture of skilled staff and an ability to innovate, the tradition is continuing

THIS year the Nottingham Post has chosen to adopt a more sectoral approach to the Top 200 – introducing prizes for the biggest manufacturing and service-based companies in the county.

This provides an opportunity both to celebrate notable business success stories, but also to reflect on the changing sectoral mix of our local economy and why it matters for people living and working here.

The economic history of Nottingham tells us of a town that established itself as a manufacturing centre in the early 18th Century with the arrival of textiles (hosiery and lace).

By the middle of the 20th Century the City of Nottingham had become one of the great manufacturing centres of the Midlands.

In 1958 when Alan Sillitoe wrote about life on the production lines at Raleigh, then exporting more than a million Nottingham-made bicycles a year all over the world, more than half of all local jobs were in manufacturing and mining.

This mattered to local people because these companies provided plentiful well-paid work. Arthur Seaton, Sillitoe's anti-hero was famously able to earn £14 a week doing a repetitive job on the production line while he contemplated the weekend.

Manufacturing employment in Nottingham now stands at around four per cent of employee jobs in the city. That is about 9,000 jobs.

If we look at employment in the wider county, this proportion rises to around 13% of employment or 40,000 jobs.

These changes in the make-up of our local economy have led some commentators to talk about

deindustrialisation and the rise of the service economy. In this sense, Nottingham's experience is typical of a change that has affected many cities of the North and Midlands.

But this does not mean that manufacturing doesn't matter any more.

Manufacturing matters because those makers that remain are often high class, innovative firms that continue to demand a skilled workforce and provide well paid work for local people – and Nottingham needs more, not less, work of this kind.

Manufacturers also matter because they are far more likely to be active in export markets than other firms and to compete in these markets they must innovate and improve their productivity. They are often among our most competitive firms.

A number of these firms are represented in the Top 200 this year and it is important that we celebrate them. It's also important that we cherish the wider population of smaller

manufacturers still operating across the county.

Over the last 18 months my research has taken me into a number of small manufacturers – still operating in the UK – but competing in an industry that is now dominated by off-shore manufacturing.

I have been interested to learn what has enabled these firms to survive and thrive where others have not.

They all operate in an industry that has been present in



Albert Finney as Arthur Seaton in the film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. The character was famously able to earn £14 a week working on the Raleigh production line which exported more than a million Nottingham-made bikes a year all over the world.



Nottingham for around 130 years. They make cricket bats. Of these, Nottingham based Gunn and Moore is the largest and best known. With an output in excess of 30,000 bats a year, they are probably the biggest bat maker still manufacturing in the UK. Less well known, a lot newer but increasingly prominent are B3 Cricket in Hucknall. These two firms are very different. But what they have in common is an ability to innovate – both in terms of the products that they make, and the processes used in their manufacture.

And these are qualities that they have in common with pioneers associated with early manufacturing in Nottingham such as Richard Arkwright (spinning machines) and John Levers (machine made lace).

Nottingham-based Gunn and Moore is now battling for the county's economy, producing more than 30,000 bats a year.

