Bill Vinten... *remembers*

While researching Vinten's history for this issue of Zerb, Dudley Darby visited the Vinten factory at Bury St. Edmunds where, thanks to the efforts of Vinten Product Manager Peter Harman, he also had the pleasure of meeting up with Bill Vinten himself. Recently turned 90, Bill cut a dash turning up in his self-driven vintage red MGB.

DUDLEY DARBY

Bill Vinten

Bill Vinten is the youngest son of William Vinten, founder of the Vinten company. He studied at Northampton Engineering College, and, following a car accident which damaged his left eye, took on a number of engineering jobs before returning to the family business during World War II. With the offer of a clapper/loader job from a family friend, Claude Friese-Green, he embarked on a career as a film cameraman. Bill joined the Board of Vinten in 1952, taking responsibility for designing their range of film and television equipment. He has been a staunch supporter of the GTC from its inception in 1972, finding time to write articles for the fledgling Newsletter and taking part in a presentation to the Royal Television Society with Dick Hibberd. He retired from the company in 1994, aged 72, ending the family's direct involvement with the company, but he still takes an active interest in the company's products. Bill celebrated his 90th birthday in March 2010.

What were your first recollections of the company as a child?

I can just remember being taken by my father at weekends to the Wardour Street factory before it was moved out to Cricklewood. The factory moved in 1928/29 so I must have been seven or eight. I can remember toiling up the three flights of stairs and walking around. It smelt of machinery and cutting oil – I still remember that.

When it was moved to Cricklewood, money was very short in the family – and therefore the business. Mother had to sell the house to help to pay for the factory to be put up, and the family lived in a flat above it, which for me was fine, I enjoyed that. The only spooky thing was you had to park your bike round the back of the factory, then walk through this absolutely blacked out silent factory and through the stores. At ten, eleven, twelve I can remember feeling very spooky walking through the silent place before getting up into the family home. But it did give me the wonderful opportunity to learn all about machine tools. My father was a great machinist, and if I said "Can I have a new this or that for my bike?" he would say "Why don't you go down and make one rather than go to the shops and buy it?" He taught me to use lathes and milling machines in my teens. That's been very useful all my life.

The other recollection is when my elder sister got married in 1936 from the flat (we were all still living there). She was in her wedding dress and had to walk down beside the factory. Of course the news had got around because there were only thirty people in the company, it was very much a family company. They all grabbed bits of metal and a hammer, and lined the drive beside the factory. As she drove away they were making a lot of noise!

When you were working as a lighting cameraman, which cameras did you use?

Newells mainly. Arthur Rank had set up a tool company and he bought an NC Mitchell and literally copied it screw for screw – all the way through. It was just a dead copy made by the Newell Camera Company. It was a very good camera, a very good copy. Of course, they weren't camera manufacturers, and they would do silly things like leaving holes in film magazines. It didn't help when you used a new magazine on an important shoot and got a fogged roll of film!

I sometimes used Vintens. Doing a film called *The Silver Darlings* on location up in Wick in Scotland we used a Vinten, an old Model H. The film was the story of herring fishing.

Of course, there were Newmans as well. When we were out on location, we'd use Newmans. In the Royal Naval Film Unit they had Vintens but mainly Newmans. I used Newmans a lot.

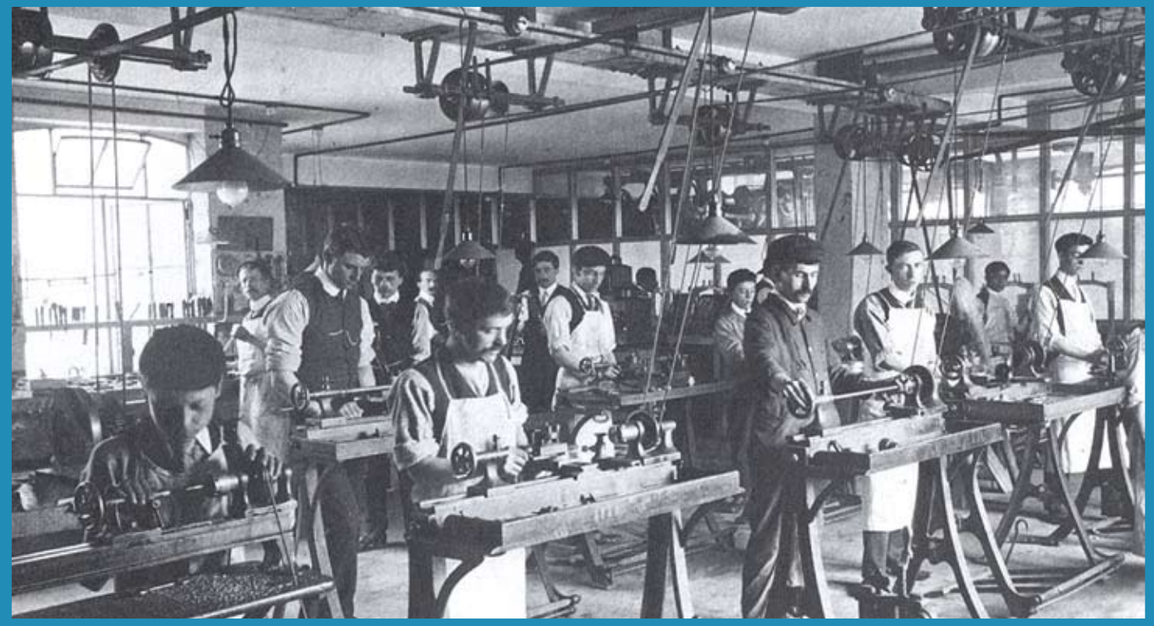
When did you first get involved in television?

Well, the Gate Studios in Elstree was the smallest and therefore cheapest to run Rank studio, so we used to get a lot of experimental projects coming in. We did all the work for the Independent Frame there. The idea was that you'd have very little furniture – no sets, just back projection screens – and you would back project all the sets. David Rawnsley[1] was chief of it. We did all the research there for the back projection machines, getting a completely flat back projection, and being able to shoot it at various angles at the same speed.

Then they had the idea of putting television cameras on the studio floor for the very first time and recording the image remotely in a separate room. It was Cintel – Cinema Television – who got this idea going. We had three American Du Mont cameras (I think they were 3" image orthicons) on the floor, and they modified an old projector as a recorder. We made a film called *Mister Marionette* with that system. I'd love to see a copy of it but nobody seems to know where the negative went.

Then I found myself lighting for television, which was a bit of a shock as it was an entirely different technique. Those 3" image orthicons needed light everywhere. Any deep shadow and it all went grainy and grey and horrible. I had to relearn all my lighting technique. I went down to the BBC now and again to see what they did; they just poured light on from every direction. So I tried to refine it and make a film-type look for television cameras.

After that, when Marconi were developing their 4½" image orthicon and trying to make a far better



VINTEN BROADCAST COLLECTION

▲ *The Wardour Street workshop*

image, someone said, "Bill Vinten's an ex-film cameraman who's started lighting for television, why don't we get him along?" I used to go down to the research labs at Chelmsford with Leslie Jesty, and do lighting work when they were testing their 4½" image orthicons. I did the same for Pye when they were developing their Pesticon, I think it was. I became the one ex-film cameraman, or perhaps the first ex-film cameraman, who jumped over the wall, so to speak, to light for television – much to the disgust of all the fellow film cameramen who thought I was helping the opposition. But to me it was obvious that if you could really see – get instant feedback from – the effect of different lighting, that must be the way for the future.

This was the time when they were trying to convince the Government that we ought to have commercial television in England. High Definition Films was set up to make very nice-looking advertisements and I used to go and light things for them. That's how it all happened.

> "once you have a cameraman behind a camera looking at a viewfinder, you're restricted to a height of some six foot down to two foot ... so you have to detach the cameraman from the camera and operate it remotely"

In your time with the company, what do you consider was your finest achievement in equipment terms?

Oh, I think the Mk III head must come out on top, because that was an entirely different approach to a very old problem that had been bedevilling the film industry all its life – trying to make a spring compensate for a rotating mass. My solution was cams – keep the centre of gravity level then the camera would be in balance. Yes, I think that was my biggest achievement. It took them another 15 years, but Dick Lindsay[2] did beat the problem with a spring. He had the idea of how to get a spring to balance a camera through 180°. Very clever.

And, of course, I suppose the old pedestal, the 419 ped, that was alright too. Nobody had made a three-stage balanced pedestal before then.

Funnily enough, you're often remembered for your failures. When you mention Bill Vinten, people sometimes say "Oh yes, he tried to get that thing the Peregrine going. Didn't work, did it?"

How did the bird names come about?

I was always interested in bird life and I was talking to a friend of mine, Philip Grimes. His knowledge of birds was

VINTEN BROADCAST COLLECTION

▲ *Vinten 419 pedestal with Mk III pan and tilt head supporting a CPS Emitron camera. This is the 419 in its classic form after a ringsteer had been added*

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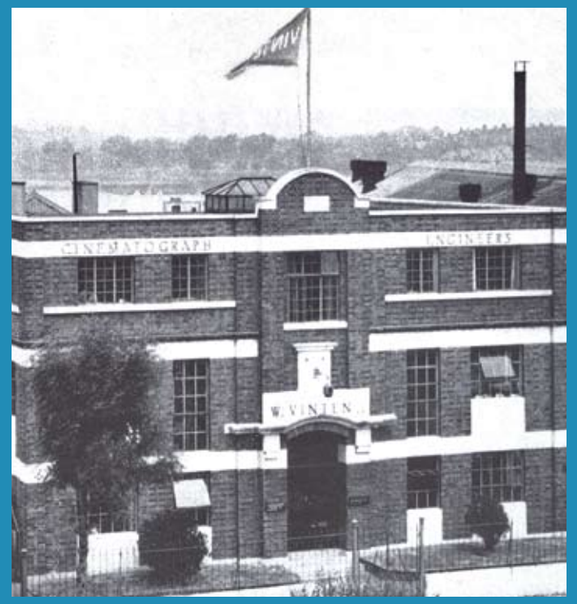
▲ *Bill Vinten filming on location in Scotland*



▲ *Cricklewood Factory with the family flat above the entrance*

incredible and, like so many people who are knowledgeable about birds, they also shoot them! I used to go shooting with him – wildfowling – and one day, I said to him "We don't just want to put Mk 2 and Mk 3 on our pieces of equipment, it would be nice to give them names." He said "Why don't you give them bird names?" It started just like that.

How did you first become involved with the GTC?
I knew Dick Hibberd and I met and talked to him. I liked the idea because, as I've already said, I rather resented the film cameramen and their attitude, looking down their noses at television and thinking that all 'real art' was in the film world. I thought this wasn't necessarily true; they are two entirely different skills. You couldn't put a film cameraman on a television pedestal, he'd be absolutely lost, and so I was all for starting a television Guild. The antagonism spurred me on, so yes I was very much for it. I'd also met the very quietly spoken lovely Laurie Duley at about that time. He was head of cameras at the BBC. So it started from that.

What was the most difficult design problem you came across?
I think the thing they never really got onto the studio floor – the extensible arm which Richard Lindsay started. It wasn't the mechanical design which was the problem, but the interface between the cameraman and the machine. And that was a horrific problem, because you've got pan and tilt, focus, zoom, elevation, swing and tracking. I think there is one other you can cook up too. So you've got seven or eight movements, all of which have to be very delicately adjusted, all of them interlinked, one with the other. To expect an operator to control eight functions at the same time is asking an awful lot; and it is asking even more to think how you design something that will allow him to do this. I think it's soluble, I think it can be done – but we haven't cracked it yet.

Was there one particular project which nearly made it but not quite?
I think there is one that could have made it but didn't for a very peculiar reason. The old 419, as you know, was a bit of a brute to elevate up and down quickly, so I said "Why don't we have one fixed pan bar and one fixed from the point of view it still pans but doesn't tilt?" When you have this, it's very easy to lift the pedestal up and down with the pan bar which doesn't tilt. So I made one up, tried it, and I thought it worked extremely well. I thought it was a very clever idea, so I set up a meeting at the BBC with, I think, Laurie Duley, plus two or three senior cameramen and some of the senior engineers.

We took it down the night before and got it ready but the next morning there was a really thick fog, and in Wood Lane there was an enormous accident, police cars came from all directions. I was stuck there for an hour and a half. I said I'd leave the car but the police said I couldn't, so by the time I got down to Lime Grove they'd given up on me. Fair enough, they'd had a go, but because it was very strange, I'm sure, to them, they'd all agreed it wasn't on. I think if only I could have been there and demonstrated it properly, it was a very, very good idea. In fact, I was so insistent that it was a good idea that you'll find all the early Mk 3 heads have a system on the sides for clamping on a pan bar which doesn't tilt. So yes, that's one. I suppose the Peregrine also falls in this category, but the other one was so simple. And just to complete that, I did try again still with no success. When we made the Dolphin Arm, where you controlled the elevation of the arm, I thought, "I'll put my two pan bars back on, and..." Silly idea!

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Where do you see the future of television going?
Keeping on the subject of camera mountings, I think detaching the cameraman from the camera is going to be here in the future. Once you have a cameraman behind a camera looking at a viewfinder, you're restricted to a height of some six foot down to two foot perhaps, and, it doesn't matter how clever a device you make, that is the operational range, you're never going outside it. So you have, by force, to detach the cameraman from the camera and operate it remotely, whether that is by a scissors system, or an arm, or anything else. I think you could finish up with cameras weighing a kilo. Yes, that is what I think the future could hold.

[1] *David Rawnsley (1909–1977), Art Dirctor involved in development of the Independent Frame as part of Rank's research group, Production Facilities (Film) Ltd. 'The Independent Frame' was a method of preparing and shooting a film to plan. This theory was first developed by Lars Mohen in 1926.*

[2] *Richard Lindsay was Vinten's chief designer until his retirement in May 2010.*