

In 1872 a young man named James White started business in what was a newly recognised field – lubricants. It was a propitious time to begin, for petroleum oils were becoming readily available from new sources, mainly in the United States, and the technology was rapidly developing. Many names famous in oil commenced business in the same decade.

James was fortunate too, to be trading in Widnes, then a vibrant centre of the chemical and copper industries and for the first three decades these local factories provided ample demand for his products. In those early years, in common with typical competitors, these included many items allied to lubricants, such as rust-preventives and paints. The firm was incorporated as **Jas. White (Widnes) Ltd.**, clearly identifying with the locality. Setbacks doubtless occurred, notably the major fire at his works in 1888, but the business grew and was ready for the next opportunity.

This appeared around the turn of the century, in the shape of the motor car. White's were acknowledged to have been one of the first to recognise and exploit this new demand. The earliest significant trademark they used was "**Motovalvine**", but this evolved into "**Velvene**". Similar to, but neater than, competitors' *Valvoline*, *Velvalube* and *Velvatone*, this excellent trademark had connotations of luxury and smoothness, and retained sufficient difference as to be distinctive and widely recognised. It was supported by slogans such as "**Oiliest of All**", "**More Miles per Engine**" and "**Specialists in Motor Lubrication since 1898**".

By the 1930s the trademark crystallised into the company's subsidiary marketing enterprise as **Velvene Oils Ltd.**, and the logo and letterhead was a classic of the art-deco period, showing that the proprietors had a fine sense of style. At this period they could claim to be suppliers to such giant enterprises as **I.C.I.**, **Cunard-White Star Line**, and match manufacturer Bryant & May.

The second world war interrupted the rise of private motoring, which had already, of course, passed its glory days of chauffeur driven high oil-consumption cars with which Velvene was originally associated, but post-war determination led to taking out a patent on an improved spring and suspension lubricant, in the names of the management, M. Brooking and D.W. Forster. A further sign of wholehearted commitment to the motor trade was the formation of another subsidiary, **Velvene Motor Factors Ltd.**, which traded from separate premises in Openshaw, Manchester.

Mr. Brooking served on the committee of the Liverpool & District Lubricating Oil Manufacturers' Association for many years, until it merged with Manchester District around 1965. As well as being active members of the regional trade association (which fed through to the national Federation), White's participated in (i.e. paid towards scientific research at) the British Lubricating Oil and Grease Research Organisation (BLOGRO) during its rather brief and relatively expensive life from 1949-57.

The following decade was broadly prosperous for the whole industry, but by the later 1970s the rapid expansion of the national car fleet was slowing, and oil sump size was reduced. Self-service petrol stations and the growth of the majors damaged the over-the-forecourt market, which was important to the Velvene brand. The first 5 years of the next decade saw

a fall of one fifth in lubricant sales volumes in Britain, and, as local heavy industry was also in retreat, there was considerable impact on Velvene.

So it was that the company was acquired, in early 1985, by a Glasgow firm, J.O. Buchanan of Renfrew. They had embarked on expansion and hoped to expand their sales of electrical and other white oils through having an English base. Some in the trade thought they would use Velvene motor oils as an outlet for re-refined, recycled oils. Whatever their hopes, Buchanans too had to seek outside help and quickly became part of the small but integrated petroleum company, Carless. Almost immediately, in 1988, Carless was taken over by Kelt Energy – a “corporate raider” – who sold off all the lubricant interests to the Kuwait Oil Company.

While the company’s story was individual and unique, it was entirely characteristic of its industry and constitutes a near perfect exemplar of the course of lubricant company life through the period of its existence.

by Timothy J. Hill

Timothy J. Hill is the author, *A History of the British Lubricants Industry*, Merton Priory Press, ISBN 978-1-898937-81-4, a full scale scholarly history of the industry and its definitive work of reference.