



  
**aldermans**  
*A Plymouth Story*

Chris Robinson





# aldermans

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A Plymouth Story

*William Leslie Alderman: 1 June 1944 aged 20 months.*



CHRIS ROBINSON

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DATED

1958

FITTERS (ENGINEERS) LIMITED

-and-

LESLIE ALDERMAN

-and-

WILLIAM LESLIE ALDERMAN

DEED OF APPRENTICESHIP

# Aldermans: A Plymouth Story

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**B**ill Alderman's parents moved to Plymouth in 1960. He was 17, going on 18 and part way through an apprenticeship with Fitters Engineers Ltd. They didn't want him to go. He had been working on lathes with a six foot face plate and was boring out cavities for a nine cavity mould for a rubber seal.

*"I was enjoying myself so much, having progressed so far in being able to action an engineer's design of these products."*

Bill was clearly a precocious talent. He'd been with the firm a few years already, and his precociousness had been apparent from the very beginning.

*"I was on day release to Carshalton Technical College and someone suggested that my rate of pay as an apprentice - £2.10s.0d a week – was not enough and I managed to persuade my fellow apprentices that we should do something about it. I was sixteen at the time, easily the youngest one there, but none of the others were prepared to say anything about it, so I went to see the manager who was also the owner's son-in-law, Jack. He said he'd have a word with one of the directors, Mr Heck.*

*"We didn't see the manager for three or four days. We were told that the matter was 'under review'.*

*"In the end everyone got a rise except me, because I was under eighteen!"*

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*Bill with his sister, 4 January 1947.*





*Florence and Leslie Alderman c. 1952 Pevensey Bay Castle.*

William Leslie Alderman, born 4 September 1942, was named after his paternal uncle, Willie, who had died over a decade earlier. His parents, Leslie and Florence Alderman, then both in their late twenties, had been married in 1938, and their first child, Gwen, had been born one year later, in 1939.

A bright boy who was good with his hands, Bill had long harboured ideas of making things: *“My uncle Len Gregory on my mother’s side, who lived in a nice, semi-detached house in Banstead, had told me about his career and as I was preparing to be leaving school in 1956 I told the youth employment officer that I wanted to be a toolmaker.*

*A couple of years earlier I had helped a guy who’d bought a wood frame canvas canoe. We put it together, I had to saw around the shape of the bulkheads. We covered it in canvas, painted it with dope and I built a trailer for it so that we could fix it to the back of his bicycle and take it places. We paddled it up the Thames, up past Hampton Court several times.*

Bill had also built himself a garden shed, at the back of the family home at 101 St Barnabas Road.

*“My dad had given me a Black and Decker with drill stand and saw for Christmas. He was always encouraging me to be practical.*

*“With his blessing I’d driven his Hillman Husky part way from London to Brighton when I was fourteen. I was a bit wild in those days.”*

Wild indeed – when Bill was seven he came into contact with a gang of older boys and they were always in trouble, running away from home hopping the wag from school. One day they were scrumping apples at the rear of some shops when someone stole a bunch of keys from an open door. The older boys blamed Bill, who was still just seven. Later that evening the police went to Bill’s house and arrested him and he was put on trial. He was sent to a remand home for three weeks (which he enjoyed) but this experience made him realise that crime wouldn’t pay and was morally wrong - an early lesson indeed and an excellent character builder.



**REPORT**  
for term ending 26th July 1957

Name WILLIAM ALDERMAN

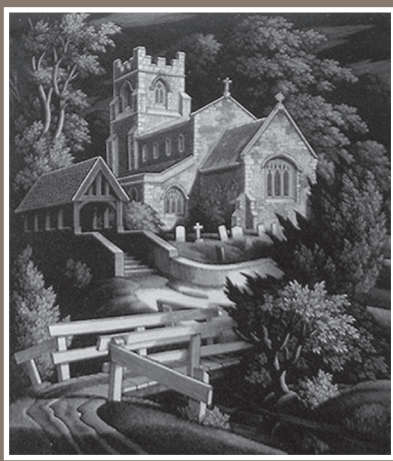
Form

It would not be an exaggeration to state that, not only is William the best boy in the class and one of the best boys in the school, but he is one of the best boys we have had here. He knows what school is for and makes the best possible use of all the facilities which it affords. He knows the meaning of the word "Work" & shirks no task assigned to him. In addition, his initiative and desire to be co-operative lead him to undertake many jobs which he has not been asked to do. His parents are, no doubt, proud of him. They have every reason to be so.

G. Mackley

Bill's praise from 57-year-old George Mackley was high praise indeed. George was a very fine artist himself and taught italic handwriting as well as art. On the school's presses he produced countless linocuts and wood engravings and encouraged his pupils to do the same. He died in Tonbridge, Kent, in 1983, aged 83, having established a reputation as one of Britain's finest wood engravers.

Top left: Bill's last school report. Top right: Headmaster's report. Below: wood cuts by George Mackley.



A naughty boy he wasn't however, and Bill breezed through school and impressed all and sundry with his work ethic and cheery disposition.

*"William's written work shows that he reads widely, for he writes interestingly and fluently,"* wrote his English teacher in his last school report from Sutton East County Secondary School in the summer of 1957. *"He is mindful of detail, and always works conscientiously."*

Good at history and geography, keen and studious in PE and music lessons, Bill was top of the class in mathematics and described as *"a most capable boy who knows how to work"*, by his Art teacher, who as an

aside added: *"Has given invaluable assistance with the school's recent Art Exhibition."* His form master described it as a report to be proud of: *"William is undoubtedly top of his form and liked by all members of staff."*

*"A most pleasant helpful boy who it has been a pleasure to have in my class,"* he added before wishing Bill *"Good luck in the future."*

The glowing report didn't end there, however, and how delighted Leslie and Florence must have been when they read the Headmaster George Mackley's concluding remarks:

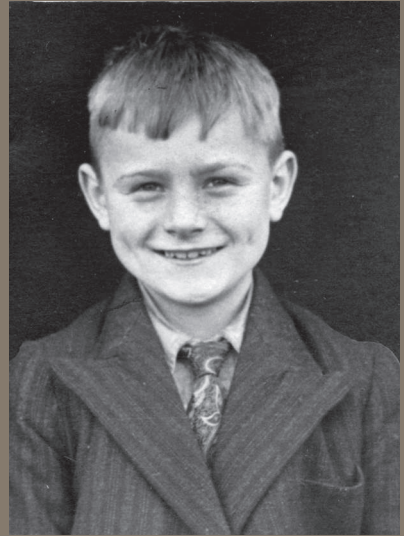
*"It would not be an exaggeration to state that, not only is William the best boy in the class and one of the best boys in the school, but he is one of the best boys we have had here."*

*"He knows what school is for and makes the best possible use of all the facilities which it affords. He knows the meaning of the word 'work' and shirks no task assigned to him. In addition, his initiative and desire to be co-operative lead him to undertake many jobs which he has not been asked to do."*

Mr Mackley was even moved to write a long and powerful reference for young master Alderman which ended thus:

*"He is loyal, honest, truthful and manly. He is friendly but respectful. We think very highly of him indeed. I feel certain that any employer who engages him will almost immediately find grounds for great satisfaction at having secured his services."*

It's hard to imagine any young man leaving school in the late 1950s with a better passport into the working world.





We hereby certify that the above Bond of Apprenticeship was transferred from Fitters (Engineers) Ltd., 111 Clifton to Tecalemit Ltd Plymouth on the twentythird of September one thousand nine hundred and sixty.

The common seal of Fitters (Engineers) Ltd was affixed in the presence of:-

*Henry John Deeds*  
*H. H. Mason* Directors



23/9/60  
Apprenticeship transferred to Tecalemit Limited as from 23rd September, 1960.

Signed *N. Palmer*  
Personnel Manager

Dated the...10th...day of Oct....1960..

## Agreement

between

William Leslie

.....  
Alderman.....

and

## TECALEMIT

LIMITED

Registered Office:-  
11 IRONMONGER LANE  
— LONDON, E.C.1 —

TERM ..... Three ..... YEARS

ENDING ..... 9th October ..... 1963..

Top: The Station, Sutton c. 1960.  
Above: Apprenticeship transfer.  
Right: Tecalemit Apprentice now.



# The Young Apprentice

As far as the future was concerned though, Bill had already declared his hand and on 4 September 1958 the deed of apprenticeship, with Fitters Engineers, signed by Bill and his father, became binding.

Fitters had their registered office at 10 Shirley Road, Wallington and under the terms of the apprenticeship agreement, Bill undertook, *'of his own free will' to 'bind himself apprentice to the Company to learn the art of a mould maker and tool maker ... for a term of five years.'*

Such agreements were typical of the time, and had been around for years. Under its terms young William had to acknowledge that he would *'keep the Company's secrets and obey all lawful commands of the Company,'* and *'at all times and in all things behave himself towards the Company as a good and faithful Apprentice ought.'*

Of course there was no indication that Bill would be anything but the model student and for his promise of service Fitters agreed to pay him two pounds and ten shillings per week for the first six months and *'thereafter an increase of five shillings per week after every six months during the term.'*

The document was signed by Henry John Heck and HG Mason, both directors of the Company. Heck had been in business in Wallington since before the war, when he had been running a firm of automobile engineers (the Automotive Company) on London Road, with a previous partner, Fred Christie, who he bought out in 1933. Unfortunately the Automotive Company was declared bankrupt in 1941, but clearly that did not spell the end of his career in engineering.

For three happy years Bill diligently learnt his craft at the small Surrey factory, but then Bill's father decided that it was time to make a move to Plymouth where he opened a transport cafe.

It was a tough move for the young apprentice but fortunately he made an almost seamless transition to a much bigger factory unit in Plymouth - Tecalemit.

The international lubrication and filtration giant had been persuaded to move to Plymouth in 1947 as part of the post-war regeneration of the City. Tecalemit could so easily have chosen somewhere in Wales or Scotland, but Plymouth City Council was very keen to lure the firm here and *'laid out a welcome mat over 62 acres at Marsh Mills'.*

By Christmas 1951 the first phase of the factory with its soft-orange Taunton brick walls and honey-toned, Ham Hill coping-stone, was complete, although it would be another couple of years before the massive canteen (soon a popular dance venue) would be built.



Left: *The Duke of Edinburgh speaks to Tecalemit engineering apprentices, including Dave Daley.* Below: *Aerial shot of the plant.* Bottom: *Sixties view of the Tecalemit entrance.*



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# Tecalemit Time

A major supplier to the motor industry, Tecalemit quickly became the largest factory in its field globally. Employing thousands of men and women, it had a total staff roll of over 3,000.

Bill's apprenticeship with Tecalemit commenced on 10 October 1960.

*"I really enjoyed it. I worked in all departments for six months at a time. In between I'd be working on the bench, putting tools together.*

*"George Becs was the foreman - strange guy - I think he was Dutch. Tecalemit was a good company to work for, they had a wide range of production facilities. It was a great insight into what could be done, good experience for me especially when it came to setting up my own business. I acquired very valuable experience and knowledge that I was able to put into practice later."*



George Becs



Above: 1964; The building on the left of the picture is the Heavy Fabrication Department. The building in the centre foreground accommodated the Tool Room Drawing Office, Tool Room Workshop, Garage Equipment Installation and Service Departments. The open yard on the far right of the photograph was part of the factory buildings and Works Maintenance Department.

Below: Not long after Bill arrived at Tecalemit, as a young apprentice, the factory had a visit from the BBC's popular touring radio variety programme, *Worker's Playtime*. Broadcast three times a week, at lunch time, from a 'factory canteen somewhere in England,' the show had started as a wartime morale-boosting endeavour in 1941, but, in the event, carried on going until 1964. The show was compered throughout by Bill Gates, who would conclude every broadcast with the cheery words 'Good luck, all workers.'

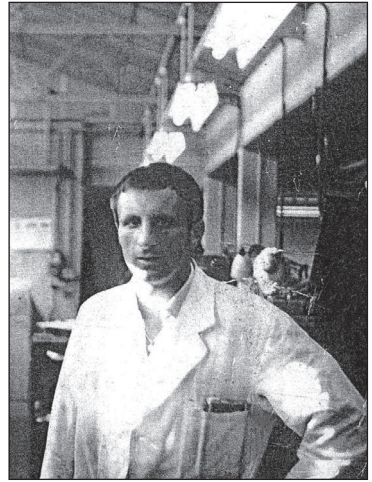




*F*rom the toolroom there was a path running up to the canteen. We used to play football on site during our lunch breaks.

*We'd have fun with the security boys. When we were on overtime they used to walk right through the workshop and we'd whistle the theme from 'Z-Cars' all the way up and back in time with their walking.*

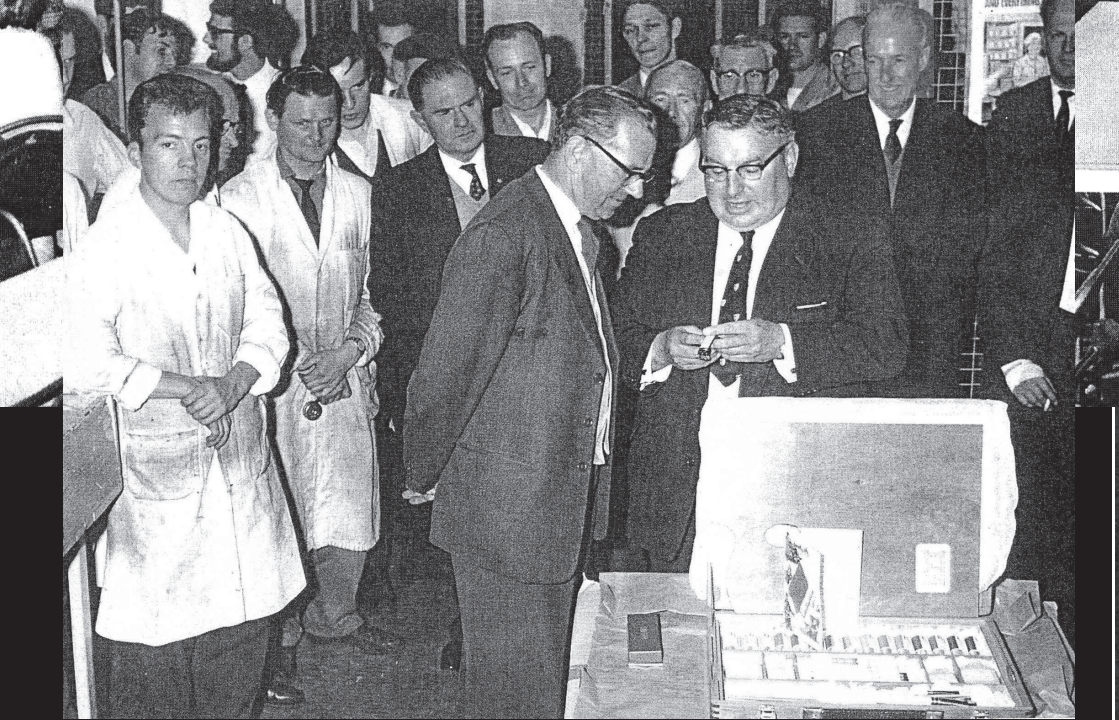
*'It was a nice humane factory to work in, but I left the week the first lot of redundancies were being made. Mind you they got rid of too many - they had to take some back almost straight away.'* Bill made many lasting friendships at Tecalemit and many of his fellow apprentices ended up working with him at Aldermans. Among his good mates then were Terry Kingdom and Dave Steer: *'I used to go to the Christmas Dinner with Terry, and Dave was the best man at our wedding.'*



*Above: Tony Haines pictured in 1961 in the Fitting Section of the Experimental Development Department.*

*Below: Barry Searle and his future wife Kathie, together with Alan Kingdom (Terry's brother) and Eleanor, and John Windsor and Susan.*



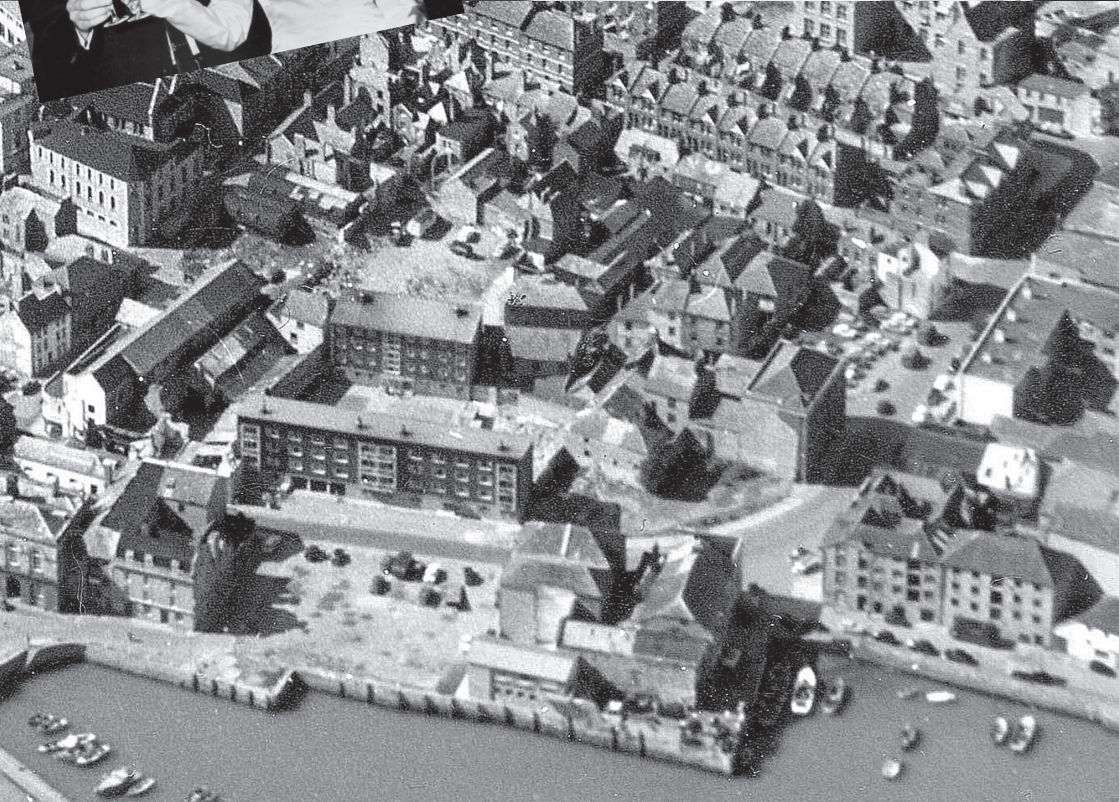




Above: The canteen at Tecalemit was the largest works canteen in Devon and Cornwall and regularly saw service as a dance hall, accommodating two or three thousand revellers at a time.

Left: Toolroom and SPM Staff (c.1966), picture includes Alan Kingdom, Ted Hendricks, Dave Daley, John Eccles, Norman Lyle, Frank Underhill, Roy Scanes (General Manager), Albert Dan, Bill Hill. Pictures courtesy of Barrie Henderson (who started his apprenticeship at Tecalemit in 1959).





Bill's apprenticeship officially ended on 9 October 1963, just a few weeks after Bill had celebrated his 21st birthday.

1963 was a big year for the Alderman Almanac for it was also when Bill and Lyn were married. The couple had met, on 5 October 1960, at the youth club at Efford Convent (Bill had only been in Plymouth a few weeks - neither of them had had a serious relationship before).

It was also the year that Bill's parents, Leslie and Florence, split up. Florence had been having psychiatric problems and wasn't well enough to attend her son's wedding. Meanwhile the newly weds came up with a plan to leave Plymouth altogether.

*'We were going to emigrate to Australia when we got married. Bill had a mate who'd already gone out there and we went up to Australia House to sort out all the details,'* recalls Lyn, adding, *'I didn't tell my mum, but inevitably she found out. She was very upset and we ended up not going.'*

Lyn found work with another of the big factories that had been attracted to Plymouth in the post-war period, Clarks Shoes.

Founded in Somerset in 1825, Clarks had opened its first factory at Crownhill in 1957 and in 1963 it added a second plant, making the Plymouth concern its largest production base. That same year Lyn became one of a thousand men and women to find employment there.

*'We were all on piece work, and I kept getting in trouble because I was always ahead of the line. In the end they asked me to leave and I went to work for Dent's Glove factory which was initially based at Cattedown but then moved to Southside Street.'*

Meanwhile, having made many valuable friends during the time he had been at Tecalemit, Bill - now that they weren't going to Australia - was in no hurry to leave his Plymouth employers. Indeed he carried on at Tecalemit until his father made another move that was to have a significant impact on Bill's destiny.

It was in 1965, Bill and Lyn were living in a house they'd bought in Bridwell Road and Alderman senior had carved out a thriving little business serving up cold snacks at six o'clock in the morning for the lorry drivers parked on North Quay. The operation was going so well that he had even opened a second café at Coxside - the East End Café.

But now his father decided that it was time to move on again (Leslie had already moved his residence to Calstock - having gone out there when Bill and Lyn were courting). He had sold the second café and now asked Bill if he and Lyn would like to buy the Vauxhall Street business from him.

Lyn had seen her father-in-law at work and knew there was good money to be made and coaxed her reluctant husband into taking up the offer. Thus it was that Bill reluctantly left his job at Tecalemit.



Barbican c.1960 . Inset left: Vauxhall Quay. Right: North Quay both c.1960.

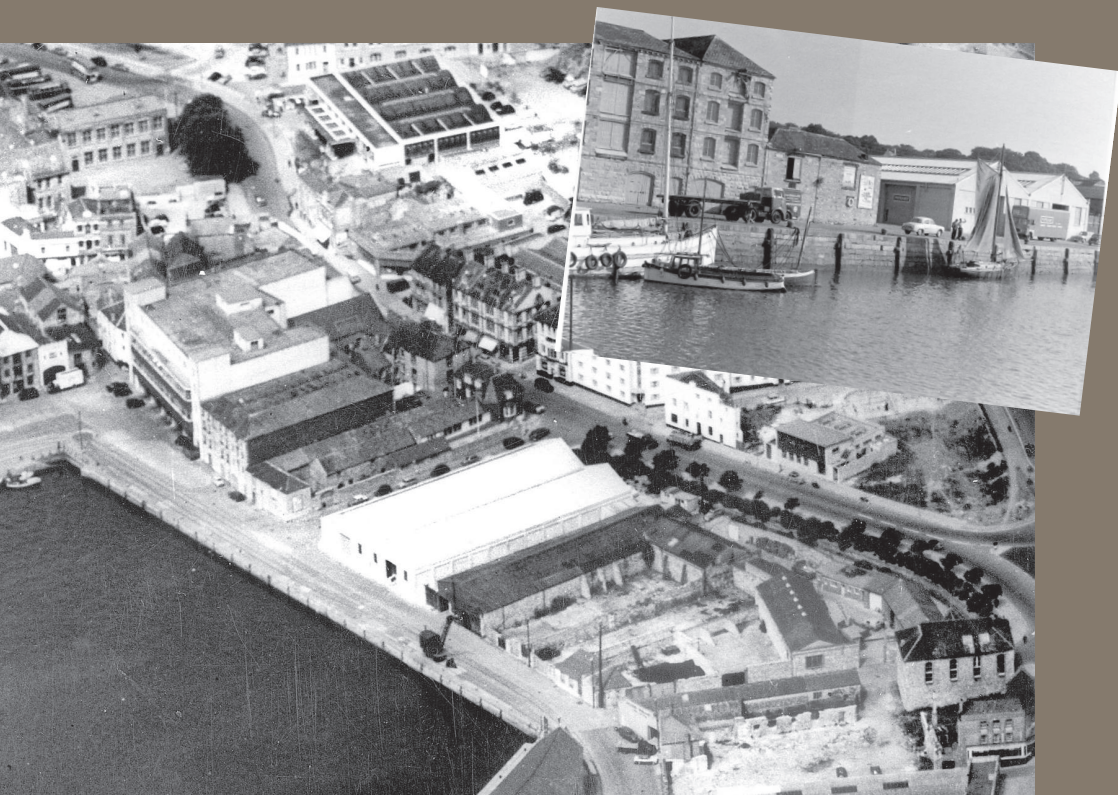
Bill and Lyn sold their property in Bridwell Road and moved into the apartment above the café. There had been another couple living there, not the most desirable of tenants, they were alcoholics, and the young Aldermans offered them money to get out. As it turned out the couple hadn't paid their rates and so the council came after them and the couple ran off anyway ...without paying their debts.

*“It was a big property and our solicitor said that we couldn't rent it out as two flats, and as we ended up spending quite a bit of money on it we decided to live there ourselves.”*

North Quay at that time, like most of the Barbican area, was a working environment, lined with small manufacturing units, wholesale stores, warehouses, timber yards, a coal yard and a busy fish market and there was a ready market for bacon baps, bacon sandwiches, bacon and eggs ...

The attendant aroma was all pervasive and to this day Bill still can't eat bacon.

The business thrived, Lyn was the life and soul of the café, but Bill was restless and anxious to get back to his tools: *“I didn't like the café business, it wasn't my cup of tea, Linda had kicked me into it. I was happy enough, but after a couple of years I really*



*wanted to be back in my trade, so Linda said why don't you start up a business on your own – working in the café in the morning and with your tools in the afternoon.”*

Among the many people Bill had worked with at Tecalemit was George Becs, who Bill had carried out some paid work for, and George had recently moved his own toolmaking company from Oreston to Bell Close at Plympton.

*“George offered me £50 to modify a particular tool for him. I completed it in record time and he offered me a full-time job. I was keen to get back to using my hands and Lyn said that if George would have me as a partner we could sell the café. But George laughed, he didn't want me on that basis, so I sat down and asked myself 'how did George bloody well manage to start up?'*

*“He rented a garage and obtained a couple of machines from Tecalemit and started that way and so I thought, if he can do that, then I can do that!*

*“Lyn said she'd run the café if I helped in the morning and I could work with my tools in the afternoon ... and she would help me with my paperwork.*

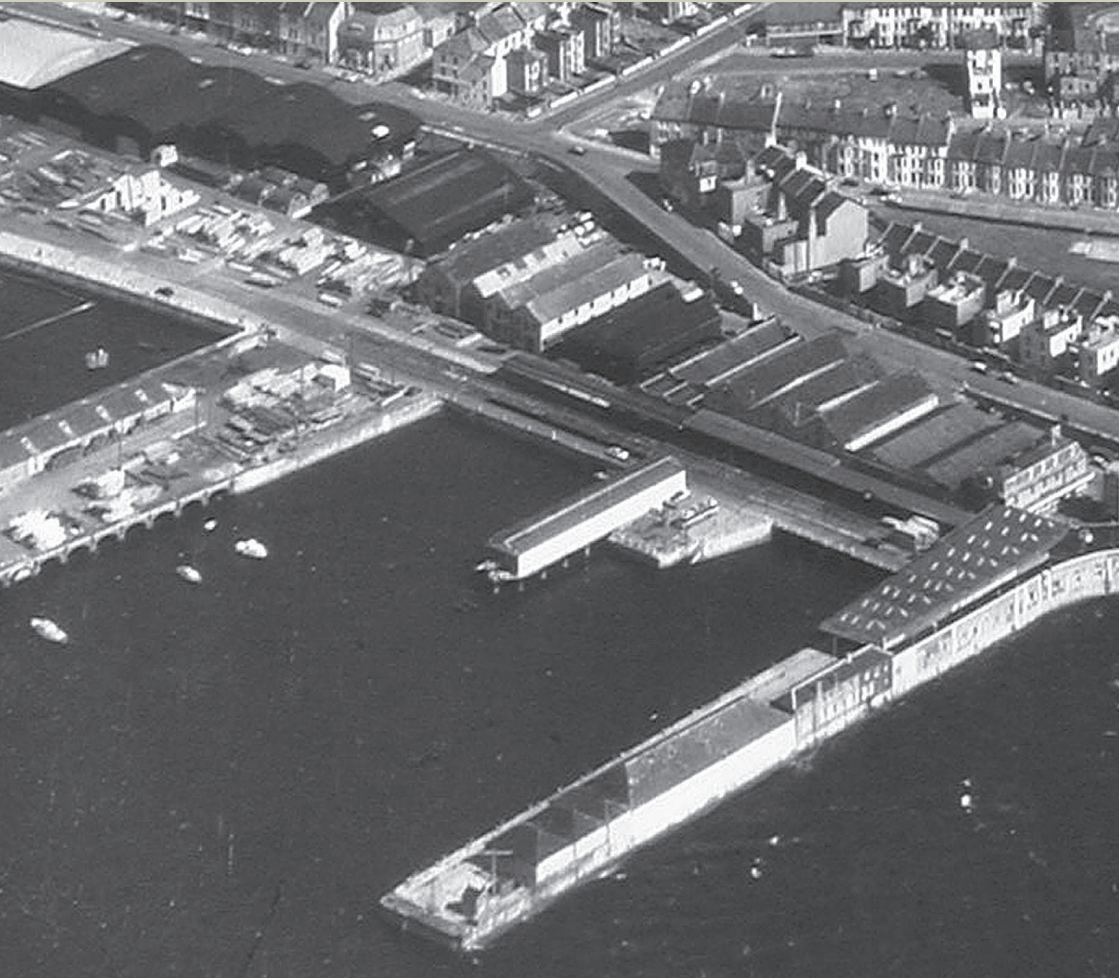
*“And that's what we did - we never took a day off - seven days a week for five years.”*

## Store No.65, Millbay Docks

And so it was that Bill came to take on Store No.65 in Millbay Docks: *“We purchased some second hand machinery from Bournemouth and went touting for business.*

*“It was an interesting place to work, overlooking Plymouth Sound. I used to park my Ford Corsair at the bottom of a ramp leading down from the road, close to the old Custom House building at West Hoe.*

*“There was one time when we were expecting a visit from a buyer from Ranco, Bob McKenzie. We were hoping to impress him and get some work from him. Fifteen minutes before he was due to arrive there was a really heavy downpour and our stone floor was flooded to a depth of about three inches!*

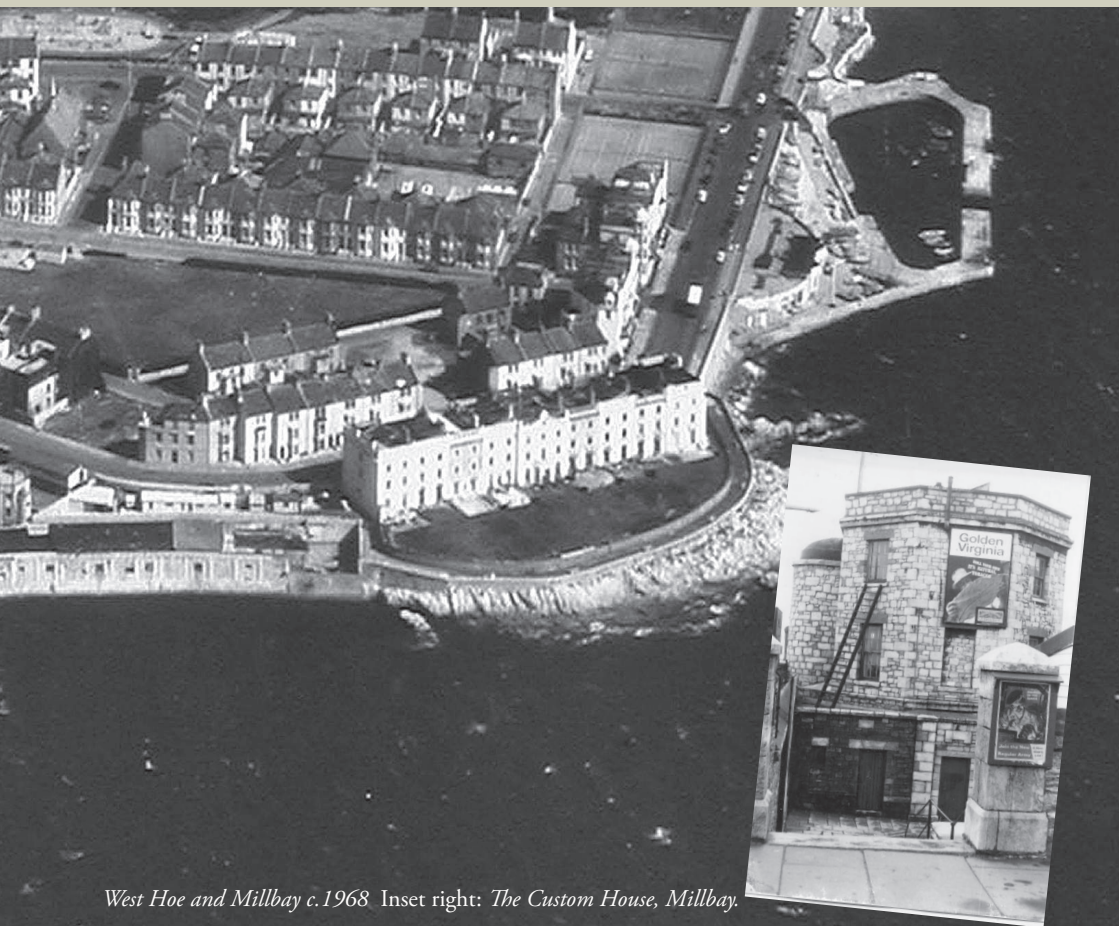




However, Bill still got the work. The firm was keen to encourage Bill and placed an order for 100 prototype parts, total value of £10.10s.00d (curiously it was the year that the 10 shilling note ceased to be legal tender, but to put it in context such a note would buy you at least five pints of best bitter today - you would struggle to buy three with £10.00 today).

*“We also won an order for prototype rubber grommets and because of increasing volumes I made a shearing tool that, with Lyn’s support as an operator, managed to reduce the cost and produce one month’s requirement in one week.”*

In 1970 Interlube had had problems getting a couple of parts made as the tooling expertise wasn’t available. Bill rebuilt the tools and purchased a 30-ton tower press and the problem was solved. *“Many thanks Interlube for introducing us to presswork - they are still a valued client today.”*



*West Hoe and Millbay c.1968 Inset right: The Custom House, Millbay.*

All in all, business was looking good - every year Alderman Tooling turned a profit and invariably that profit was invested straight back into the company. The 1970-71 year end accounts were particularly impressive: turnover had tripled and profit had doubled. Exuding confidence, the café was sold and, a bit before Christmas 1970, Bill and Lyn bought a house in Moorland View, Derriford.

Not long afterwards, the couple also bought a generator. Lyn had seen it advertised, it was an ex-fairground generator and they bought it so that the firm could continue to work through the 'Three-day working week' that was introduced by Edward Heath's government. It was designed to deal with the difficulties of getting oil during the Arab-Israeli War, and the domestic unrest that had led to power workers, miners and railwaymen working to rule and not doing overtime. Coal supplies to power stations were down 40% and Aldermans had no desire to fall behind on any of its production schedules.

As it happened Aldermans actually became even more productive. Because the generator would run at 60 cycles per minute instead of 50 it made the presses work at a faster rate, so they could make more money on a job. It fitted Bill's philosophy perfectly: *"I liked to use my imagination, to make things more economic, better, faster - clients would come to us for a specific product and we'd make it."*

By this time Bill had had a number of young engineers working with him, including Roger Morris, who, after a couple of spells with Aldermans, would go on to set up Morris Engineering in Bell Close, and Terry Kingdom, who, in January 1972, was brought on board with a 25% interest in the company.

Terry was a good toolmaker and had been working for Bill part time, and before that alongside him at Tecalemit. They were quite different characters but had very complementary skills. Terry was firm whilst Bill was more trusting and easygoing, but in 30 years they never fell out and it was a great partnership. Meanwhile Lyn was now doing all the office work and running the canteen.

There followed a short spell working out of the back of No.1a College Avenue. A large single room standing at the top of a long lane, measuring about 40 sq ft, the place had a distinctive fish odour as there was a wet fish shop directly above.

Before long, however, having bought another job lot of machinery, Bill had moved the business out to 27-29 Market Road, Plympton where they had two-thirds of a large development, with SGD Hydraulics at the other end, who they did some work for. The tool room was in the middle and the press shop the other end and there were about 10 on the staff: *"There was a lot of work around and thanks to a number of personal recommendations I managed to get a lot of repeat work ... which was good as it was generally less expensive and less time-consuming to keep an existing customer than it was to find a new one!"*



Terry Kingdom

Bill first met Terry Kingdom in the Toolroom at Tecaletit, it was in 1960, Bill was 18, Terry was 19.

*'There were about ten of us apprentices in that Toolroom,' recalls Terry, 'all under the watchful eye of George Becs.'* As it transpired George Becs left Tecaletit in the 1965 exodus and the genial Dutchman went on to set up his own factory in Plympton.

In the event George offered Terry the opportunity to follow him. *'He asked me if I'd run his company for him and offered me a lot more than I was then on.'*

*'It was quite odd at the time. I was having a pint in the Unicorn one day when a bloke I'd never seen before came across to me and said I understand we might be losing you. It turned out that he was the personnel manager, but I had no idea that he knew who I was, after all there were three thousand people working at Tecaletit.'*

*'Anyway he asked if there was anything the company could do to keep me at Marsh Mills. I said I didn't think so, and he said that the company had been planning to make me the next in charge of the Toolroom. I was just 22 and they wanted me to look after about 40 people. I told him I didn't think they could match what George was offering me and it turned out that they couldn't - their best offer was about two-thirds of the figure George had put on the table.'*

*'As it was I never really enjoyed working for George all that much and although I stuck it out for eight years I left over a silly disagreement in the end and went to work for Ranco. I never regretted the decision, it all worked out well, although the spell at Ranco was even worse than working for George. He'd come in to Ranco from time to time and he'd always say, in his heavy Dutch accent, "Why don't you come back latt?"'*

*'We were all latts (lads) to him.'*

*'I was quite a good draughtsman, but always a poor speller - even worse than Bill!'*

Unhappy and feeling somewhat undervalued Terry had been instrumental in getting quite a bit of work for Bill: *'I used to draw up the jobs and I'd always have an idea of what sort of price Billy would need to quote to get the job.'*

Before long Terry had taken up an invitation to join Bill and one of the first jobs they did was making millions of grease nipples for their old employers Tecaletit. *'Bill and I worked together for 30 years and never fell out. In the beginning we worked long days 8am-6pm ... 7 days a week, sometimes 6am-10pm for days on end to get a job done. And we were both so enthusiastic about what we were doing that we re-invested everything.'*

*'Back in the 1970s we had a go at branching off into new markets. We manufactured a lightweight aluminium boat with a lock seaming - it was Bill's idea. You could easily get it up onto a car roof-rack.*

*'It was a cold day in January that we decided to test it. We took it down to the Plym and launched the thing. Dave Plunkett took it into the middle of the river, and in no time at all ... it sank.*

*'Billy and I were watching from the shore. As soon as Dave made it back to dry land we whisked poor Mr Plunkett back to his home. He was absolutely freezing, he couldn't wait to get into a hot bath.'*

Another former George Bees protégé who came to work for Bill in those early days was Roger Morris.

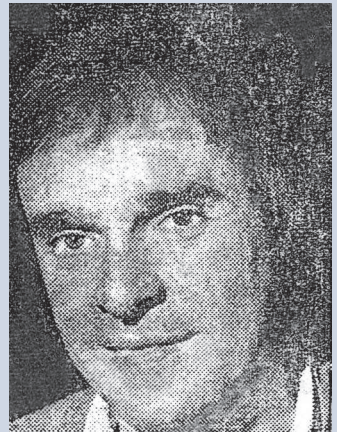
This was back when Bill and Lyn were still running the café on the Barbican.

*'The engineering work was done in a cellar under a fish shop at Mutley,' recalls Roger who also had a spell at Ranco. 'Bill and Lyn always worked hard, and I worked a six-day week for them, sometimes on my own. After a while I left, and went to work for Wrigley's but, after a year or so, I came back to Aldermans until I went off on my own to set up Morris Engineering in the early seventies. I was always grateful for the opportunity I got with Bill.'*

Roger Morris is a genuine contemporary of Bill's - he's actually older by a month - and the two clearly have a lot in common, indeed they still play golf together. However the hole left by his departure was widened when two of Bill's other engineers, Chris Davey and John Eccles, both left Bill to work with Roger, and form a new company, Davey, Eccles and Morris (later known as REMEC).

In that particular incarnation the company ran for a decade or so and then, in 1983, Chris Davey and John Eccles left and Roger was joined by the man who has been with him ever since, MD Tim Winzer. Roger's two daughters and both sons-in-law are also all directors of Morris Engineering.

John was subsequently involved with a number of firms including RCS (Plymouth), Thornbury and Delco - he now lives in Spain.



*John Eccles*



*Sarah and Karen Alderman (now Managing Director) at the site of the newly built factory at Lister Close c.1976.*

In January 1976 Alderman Tooling moved again, this time to Lister Close, Plympton (opposite Plessey). Meanwhile another move saw Bill and Lyn move house, from Moorland View to Powisland Drive.

By this time Bill had twelve staff working for him. The new premises in Lister Close - their dream location from foundation - was designed and built for Bill and saw the firm expand further as work continued to flow.

For the most part everything went pretty smoothly. However, like any business, it was not without its hiccoughs.



# Lister Close, Plympton



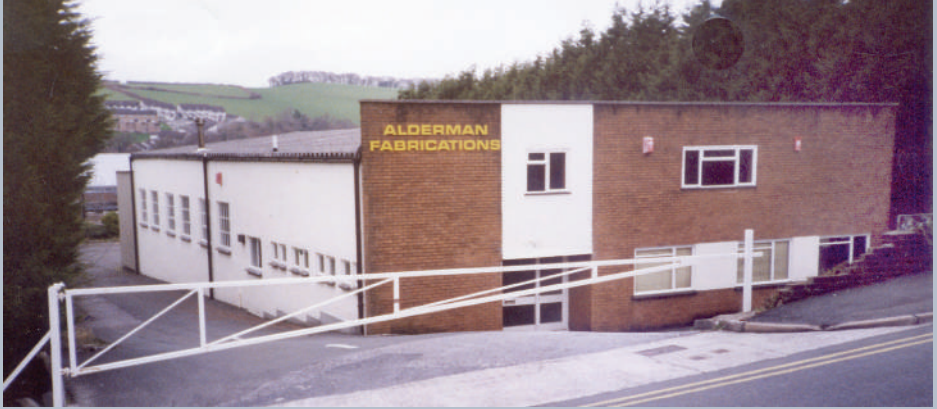
“We won a contract to make parts for a garden rotavator - the Mighty Mole it was called. Unfortunately something went wrong and the company selling the machines went bust. Fortunately we were tipped off and were able to get the VAT back, however, they owed us about £90,000 - a lot of money in 1980 - and we were told that we were unlikely to even get a penny in the pound for what we were owed.

“Someone recommended that we go in and claim a certain amount of stock, so we did. We took around 100 Mighty Moles which then had a price tag of around £100 a piece. “Potentially that meant we could have recouped about £10,000, but although we managed to sell a few, we ended up giving quite a few away and a whole lot of them were left and went rusty.”



Opposite page: Purpose-built premises in Lister Close before and after occupation. Top: External view Bottom: The Mighty Mole.

## Lister Close, Building 2



*Lister Close, Plympton - Bill's second premises, purchased two doors down from the current factory.*

Overall though business boomed and after ten years in their first purpose-built premises it was time to expand again. Bill tried to buy a site in Bell Close, but the Council representative, Peter Burroughs, said it was too big a site for them, and so a more simple solution was contrived and Aldermans purchased a building just two doors down the road.

It was 1985: by this time Lyn had stepped down from running the office, motherhood had seen her ease back on duties in the mid-seventies and the couple's two daughters were by now old enough to allow Lyn to consider a new venture of her own. A desire to be independent for a while had seen her purchase Chic, a fashion boutique in Southside Street, back on the Barbican, just a few hundred yards from the café in Vauxhall Street.

However, what seemed like a good idea soon turned into a nightmare.

*"I was relying on my mother to look after the girls. I was young enough, but I didn't have time to do everything. The children were neglected, the house was neglected, I had no time to go shopping, even for food, and Bill was working 12-14 hours a day. Then my mother died suddenly and I realised it wasn't going to work.*

*"Then one day Joe Evans, who owned other properties on the Barbican, came into the shop. 'I don't think you're very happy,' he said to me. 'I'll buy it from you, but I'm not haggling.' We shook hands on the deal. It was less than what I'd paid for it, but I was glad to be escaping the nightmare.*

*"The next day someone else came in and offered me more. But I'd shaken hands on the deal. It ended up costing Bill about £10,000. But as he said it wasn't about the money. It lasted about nine months, and it was an episode I'd rather forget!"*



# dorothy perkins

## BURTON MENSWEAR



Coincidentally, around the same time Aldermans had started doing some significant shop fitting work, producing high-end, stainless steel, bespoke racks, rails, hangers and all manner of other things for in-store retailers.

*“Paul Deacon got us into that market, we produced shop fittings for Dorothy Perkins, the Burton Group, then Arcadia.”*

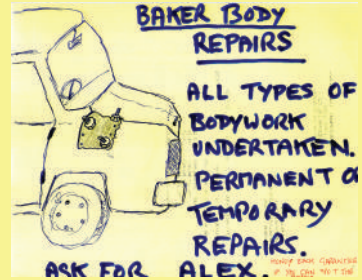
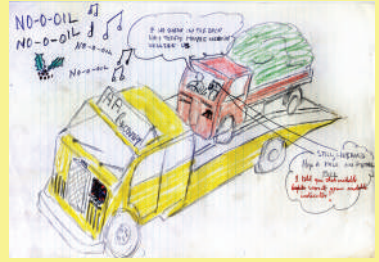
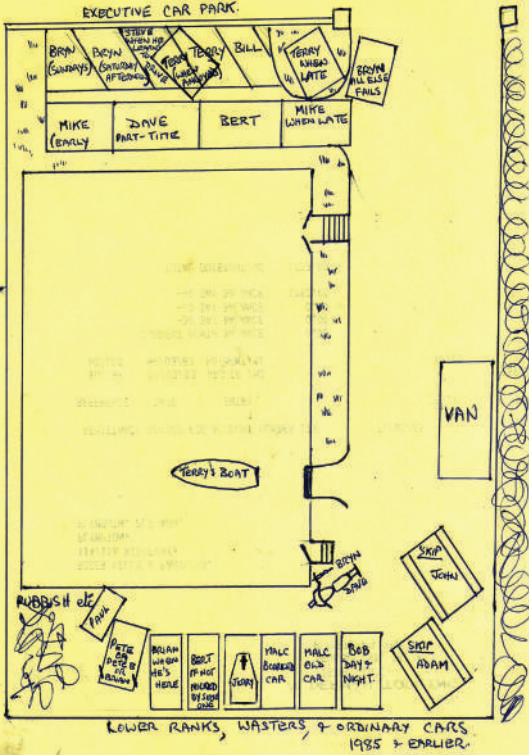
Paul’s father had designed a metal post slitting machine for the production of perimeter systems as the way it was being made wasn’t very efficient. Bill was the only one prepared to prototype it and take a risk. Paul was first introduced to Bill in early 1980. Paul came from the retail world and got on very well with Bill. At one point he got Bill to quote for some prongs for Dorothy Perkins: Bill quoted for 100,000 of them, and Paul said, ‘No, it’s 1,000,000!’

*‘In the end what had cost a couple of pounds became a couple of pence as Bill made a machine to make the prongs. We supplied Dorothy Perkins for about 20 years after that.’*

Among the others in their growing client list in this particular field were Debenhams, Principles, Kurt Geiger, Whistles and Polo Ralph Lauren.

*“Sadly” recalls Lyn, “a lot of the work went to China when Philip and Tina Green took over the group in 2002. We were invited to act as ‘middle man’, receiving the Asian imports and supplying the British stores, but we would have been working for peanuts and as Bill would have had to have signed the work off, we would have been left with many problems. As we weren’t all that keen on the quality of what was being produced in China we decided it wasn’t worth it.”*

ALLOCATED PARKING SPACES.  
ALDERMAN TOOLING



A few of Brian Phillips' many cartoons.

There was a happy working environment at Lister Close, most clearly evidenced by the cartoon work of Brian Phillips, who would regularly put his artistic skills to work while monitoring machines. His simple pictogram of the parking arrangements provided far more information than at first appears. The 'lower ranks, wasters and ordinary cars' were all consigned to the bottom area while Bill, naturally enough, had the prime spot in the 'executive' area. But it's the little asides that tell the bigger stories: Brian 'when he's here'; Mike 'when late'; Steve 'when he learns to drive'; Terry 'when late' (on the grass) and Terry 'when annoyed' (across two spaces).

Opposite page: 1994 full page newspaper feature celebrating 25 years of Aldermans. Note the various advertisements from happy clients and customers ... and the one for Aldermans itself which reads 'Due to Expansion ...' etc.

# Alderman Tooling - 25 years of success

ONE company that has survived 25 years, several recessions, booms and governments is a local manufacturing company, Alderman Tooling Limited.

The company has recently moved to larger premises at Bell Close, Newnham Industrial Estate, Plymouth, and hopes to further extend these within the next year.

Alderman are tool-makers with a vast experience of press tool design and with the latest CNC wire eroding technology manufacture tools that produce up to 1.5 million parts a month with their 20 power presses which range from 12 ton to 100 ton capacity.

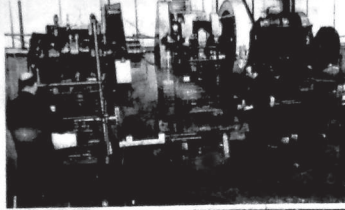
Sheet metalwork is also undertaken with the plant capable of shearing and folding up to 4mm plate. Manufacture of ducting and welding of mild steel, stainless

steel and aluminium is also carried out.

Their most impressive machine is an Amada Pega 244 CNC turret punch press which is used for prototype parts, short production runs and enables large complicated items to be produced with a minimum of tooling cost.

One of the reasons they have been able to survive the recession of the last few years when a lot of their competitors have ceased trading is their very broad customer base. Regular customers include large corporate organisations such as British Aerospace, British Airways, Burtons and Sebe Engineering, as well as smaller local and national companies which encompasses the DIY trade, the marine trade, electronic components, automotive parts, shop fitting parts and food

processing equipment. In addition to repeat production work they get involved in design and development of prototypes and new products. They also have a large number of small local traders whom they supply on a regular basis who are an essential part of the overall customer base.



8 SHEET METAL



Alderman Tooling Limited's workforce of nearly 50 celebrates the company's 25th anniversary this year.

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Managing Director  
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## Bell Close, Plympton

*The new building in Bell Close.*

In the overall scheme of things it wasn't long before the expanding business had outgrown its split site premises in Lister Close and in 1993 Bill once again went back to the drawing board and purchased a 25,000 sq.ft. building on a one and a quarter acre site on the junction of Bell Close and Newnham Road, close to where they had wanted to go eight years earlier. Incredibly, though, even that wasn't big enough and the following year the plant was extended. Alderman Tooling was by now a highly successful business and had taken on yet more staff. *"In 1997 Terry wanted to retire and Lyn and I purchased his 25% of the shares."* As it happened, the following year they invited their daughter Karen (who was then working as a civil engineer for Devon County Council) to join the firm, but it hadn't been part of any great plan for that to happen. Karen had always known that her father had been a toolmaker, but, she says *"As a child I thought he made garden spades and forks."*

Of the two girls it was Sarah, the eldest who was more like her father in terms of personality, shy and a little introverted, but Bill, who always wanted a son, encouraged Karen to go into engineering.



*Bell Close basking in the sun.*

Ever something of a maverick, having been one of the first girls to be a full part of the sixth form at Plymouth College, Karen went on to Bristol University in 1992, to study civil engineering - a course that was over 90% male dominated.

*“Being part of such a minority only drove me forward to succeed.”*

Clearly an impressive student, Karen gained sponsorship from Devon County Council and managed to get work with them during the holidays and breaks from studying. On completion of her studies she was offered a full-time position with the Local Authority in the County’s Highways department.

Before long Karen had moved into the bridge office, where she carried out bridge inspections and this led to her being given an on-site post as an assistant resident engineer.

It was a significant move and Karen ended up overseeing the construction of a major new, £1-2m road project in the middle of Devon.

Just prior to the invitation from her father to join Aldermans, Karen had been working in Newton Abbot, with the Local Service Department. But although she enjoyed her work, having taken two weeks to give Aldermans a trial she relished the opportunity to enter the firm her parents had founded almost thirty years earlier.

# Karen Joins the Business



*M Giles painting of Bell Close.*

Entering the business as an account manager, Karen soon found herself looking after some of Aldermans' biggest clients. She also used the experience she had already gained at Devon County Council to introduce employment health and safety policies, as well as a number of human resources initiatives.

She was also keen to promote the role of women within the engineering industry.

In this regard, her mother, Lyn, had been a huge inspiration:

*"She started work on the factory floor, among the male workers and helped to build up the company. She has been a shining light for me."*

Lyn had become fully re-engaged with the company when Terry Kingdom left - she became a director of Alderman Tooling on 19 December 1997.

Three years after joining the firm, Karen too became a director, and two years after that, in May 2006, Karen became Company Secretary - and Managing Director.

Aldermans at that time was going through an interesting period. In early 2000 the firm had had over 100 staff on their books, but as the global market with China started to open up around 2002 so they started to find it difficult to compete on price. Further inroads made by the Chinese in the following years *"started to hit our pockets with the outsourcing of volume production parts,"* commented Karen.

*"There was no way we could compete on price, so we had to refocus and come up with a new strategy for the business because we had major selling points."*

# Weekly woman

with Louise Thomas



## PLYMOUTH'S WOMEN OF ACHIEVEMENT



**THE BOSS:** Karen Friendship, a woman in a male-dominated world, is managing director of Alderman Tooling in Plymouth

Picture: Lurey Douai ER43429

Lean manufacturing principles were adopted to make the production process as efficient as possible. The upshot of this was to reduce lead times from six weeks to two, which although didn't make them any cheaper, meant that dealing with Alderman Tooling was a much swifter process than dealing with China where export production could take up to 12 weeks.

The number employed at Bell Close had dropped to around 50, but the faster turn around times started to yield dividends and things started to look up again.

In 2005 the company rebranded and in the early part of 2007, in line with the way the increasingly image-conscious industry was going, all of Aldermans workforce were issued with new uniforms.

Later that same year the Plympton-based unit won a £900,000 contract with another local concern, Rittal CSM of Roborough. Already longstanding Alderman clients, the new contract marked a step up in the relationship and provided a platform for Karen to take on another seven members of staff.



*Workforce at Aldermans (from the Herald 31 October 2007): Paul McEwen, Brett Annetts, Bill Clapp, Ryan Candy, Matt Dove, Richard Anstey and Stephanie Hurrell.*





Rittal had been founded in Germany in 1961. Specialising in IT housing and enclosures they opened their first European subsidiary ten years later, while their Plymouth manufacturing base was opened in 1984.

Aldermans' new contract with them enabled the Plympton-based firm to invest in new equipment as well as new staff.

*“Rittal CSM helped us to develop, they contributed to the supply chain and because we listened to them, they saw us progressing. There was large initial investment, but it added to our portfolio of products and skills.”*

So too did the move in 2010 which saw the company swap a punch press and laser cutter for an all-in-one punch laser combination - an Amada LC2012 (and nicknamed ‘Cheryl’ on the shop floor).

*“There’s no doubt that we’ve won additional contracts since it was installed,”* says Karen.

One undoubted advantage of the new machine is that it can be set running overnight, thanks to an integrated part remover that automatically picks and stacks finished components. The company also bought into an automatic load/unload system that can work in the dark on sheets up to 2.5m by 1.25m and 6mm thick.

*“Automation has definitely been the key for us,”* adds Karen. *“To run unmanned provides significant competitive gain, as we can operate beyond the normal boundaries of a single shift.”*

*“In our business, quality and delivery are assumed - it is the price that wins orders and the best way to drive prices down is through automation.”*

It’s all a far cry from the world that Bill was apprenticed into more than half a century ago. Mind you, so is the world of apprenticeship itself.

*“I had six years’ training,”* recalls Bill, *“now they think they know it all after six months ... we’re a third-rate nation now.”*

Although he understands the new world, particularly with its Health and Safety regulations, it doesn’t stop him venting his frustrations with it every now and then.

For all its automation, Aldermans remains a people-based enterprise.

*“Our people are vital components in the business, the skills of whom we nurture in order to develop the wealth of knowledge that continues to infuse this company,”* says Karen. *“We recognise that if our people shine, so does our business, making it a great deal easier to fulfil our mission of satisfying our customers each and every day.”*



*Aerial view of the factory in the 1990s.*



*Left: Karen wins Business Woman of the Year.  
Above: Karen with husband James Friendship.*

Although the company is always looking for new markets, four key sectors provide the main revenue streams at Aldermans: transport, specialist furniture, industrial and retail. This brings a huge variety of projects through Aldermans' doors - everything from airport seating to data enclosures, automotive parts to clothing rails.

Ever seeking to improve their value for money offer, Aldermans also strives to ensure they can accommodate any aspect of a customer's needs - from stockholding and sampling, through to full in-house design capability, including pressure analysis, and prototyping.

*"Over the years," noted Karen Friendship, "we have nurtured a strong prototype arm to our business and today we are able to quickly transform customer ideas and concepts into value engineered products, from single prototypes to volume supply."*

In essence it is that ability to make new things - parts, pieces and machines - that inspired Bill Alderman to set up the business in the first place and now, despite being in his seventies, and having 'retired' in 2007, he still keeps his hand in and pops in to work once or twice a week, but, of course, he no longer runs the show - Karen does that.

*"She doesn't always do it the right way, she does it her way, but it works!"* says Bill. *"She's done a couple of things that I was dead against, but it's still a damned good company and a good business."*

Notwithstanding Bill's reservations, the early signs have been very encouraging and in 2008 Karen was named Business Woman of the Year in Plymouth's Women of Achievement Awards.

Graham Stirling, who at the time was Managing Director of Bardens and Chair of Plymouth Employment and Skills Board said *"We are so pleased for Karen and Alderman Tooling who are a family firm dedicated to excellence. Karen exemplifies the vision we have for the future of engineering in Plymouth and we hope that her success will attract more women to the industry."*

*"Engineering is a priority sector, identified as an area Plymouth can and does excel in, and one through which more jobs, investment and funding can be brought into the city."*

*"With Karen and Aldermans' commitment to promoting the industry and investment in training, we are sending out exactly the right message. Plymouth is a centre of engineering excellence with a bright future."*

Certainly Plymouth does have a substantial engineering base. With firms like Bardens, Babcock and Princess Yachts, the sector employs around 11.5% of the city's workforce. Indeed the city just sneaks into the top twenty engineering based employers in the country and all those above Plymouth are either in the North of England or in Wales. But it's becoming increasingly tough.

Five years ago the industry went through a very trying period. Gleasons, which had been based at its site at Estover for over 40 years, and which had been employing around 240 just a few years earlier, announced its closure after running for some time at a loss of £250,000 a month. The recession was sited as the principal cause of the downturn in trade, but it was interesting to note that Gleasons' GMB trade union rep, Kevin Norman, thought that the work would be transferred to plants in China and India, as well as America, where the parent company was based. Around the same time - 2009 - the Barden Corporation (UK), itself shed 35 workers from its ball bearing factory at Estover; Kawasaki Precision Machinery at Ernesettle axed 50 jobs; Princess Yachts cut over 300 posts and the electronics firm X-Fab UK, out at Roborough, announced 65 redundancies. Meanwhile another well-known local manufacturing base at Ernesettle - Toshiba - like Gleasons shut their Plymouth branch altogether, opting to focus their production in Poland. Some 270 jobs were lost locally as a result.

As current Chairman of the Plymouth Manufacturers' Group (PMG) Network Karen Friendship is all too familiar with difficulties local firms are facing.

*“When I joined PMG about ten years ago, we had over 100 employees ourselves, but bigger isn't always better. As your turnover increases so do your employment costs and sometimes that means your profit can actually decrease.*



*Welding and Manufacturing Assembly.*



*Karen, Lyn, Bill and Sarah.*

*“Aldermans are much leaner and more streamlined these days, it’s much harder now than it was in Bill’s day, the world is a different place, and there’s more red tape around than ever.*

*“Bill still offers opinions but less and less he’s breathing over my shoulder. The relationship works very well, we have no family screaming matches. We have different ideas, he doesn’t always like my ideas but he’s let me go with them. We’ve gone to lower volume production, offering even better quality, and better flexibility - things that China can’t offer.”*

It’s a work ethic that Karen has taken into the PMG Network and it has been successful. As the Chairman of PMG, Steve Cardew noted in November 2013:

*“Under the Chairmanship of Karen Friendship, the Network (the name we’ve given to our collection of smaller member firms, each of which employ between 10 and 99 employees) has grown from nothing to over 30 members in the space of just a few years. Between them they represent an amazing array of what is best about the manufacturing and engineering sectors across the Plymouth travel-to-work-area. Several are national award winners.”*

Karen’s philosophy is paying dividends for the family firm too. *“We provide a bespoke, one-stop metal engineering service. We can make anything in metal. If it’s made with a flat sheet, or folded; with punched holes, or curved tubes; laser cut, or turned on the lathe – we can do it. And even if the client only has a concept of what they would like us to create.”*



*“We don’t have a product as such to photograph - unless we design a widget with wings that will make us millions, but we haven’t done that yet - but we make parts that go into assemblies for white goods, doors, shutters, shop fittings.”*

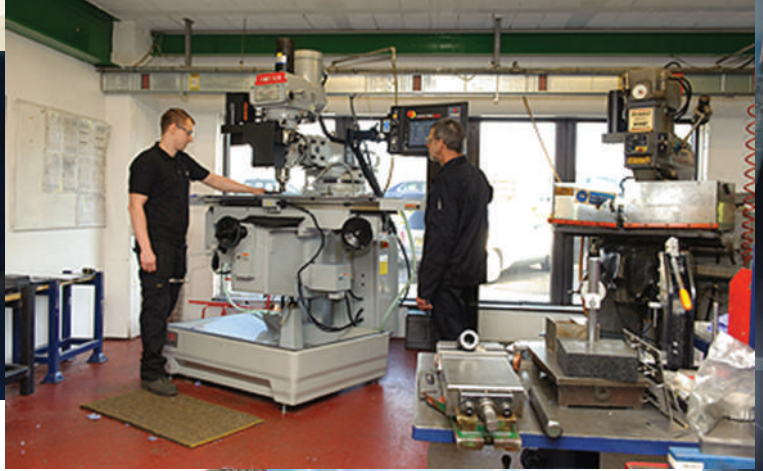
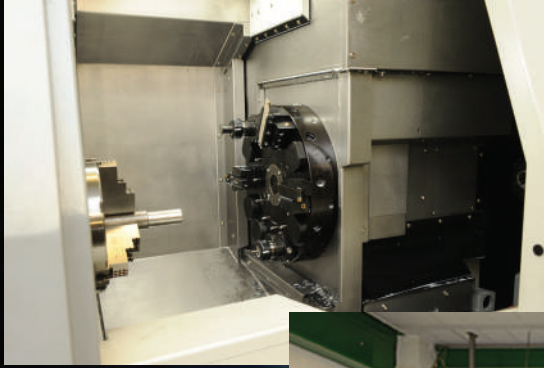
Traditionally Aldermans has not been famous for blowing its own trumpet: Bill always eschewed advertising, indeed the feature acknowledging the firm’s 25th anniversary back in 1994 was the first foray into that world.

*“We’d never gone in for promotional leaflets or other such materials, but gradually we’ve started to market ourselves a little more effectively. We’ve had a web presence since 2003 and we’ve produced a glossy brochure or two in the last few years.”*

More recently still, in January 2014, Aldermans purchased an 52 LTY CNC (Computer Numerically Controlled) lathe, a substantial piece of equipment that means that the firm can now manufacture items that previously they had to manufacture manually or buy in.

*“You feed solid tube or bar in one end and you can make more or less whatever you want. With the new mills we’ve bought from XYZ as well we have a much greater degree of flexibility, and accuracy.”*

The two new mills meant that four older machines could be moved on and now Aldermans has the means by which solid bits of metal can be sculpted into any shape.



Clockwise from top:  
The new 52 LTY CNC  
Lathe; XYZ's mill; Main-  
tenance dept. with Gary  
Thomas, Louis McMe-  
namin and Mark Rugier;  
John Dixon in the forklift  
and Steve Joll loading.





**alder**  
Engineered Metalwork S



The world has truly moved on considerably since Bill set the company up all those years ago. However, Karen is still sensitive to the need to foster young talent, hence Alderman Tooling has signed up to the Skills Pledge, determined to encourage employers across the city to invest in training their employees in order to increase the competitiveness of their business. Just as Bill had been encouraged and instructed at Fitters and Tecalemit.

Not that this was a particularly new initiative for the firm: Aldermans has had a long track record of providing training and opportunities for young people as well as adults and, today, the firm that Bill Alderman set up in 1969 has three apprentices and is every bit as mindful of its future as it is of its past.





# The Aldermans Management Team



**Karen Friendship**  
Managing Director



**Bill Alderman**  
Director &  
Company Founder



**Shane Heaney**  
Production  
Supervisor



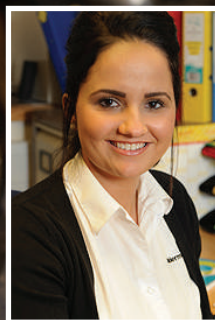
**Tony McEwen**  
Quality Supervisor



**Paul Weeks**  
Estimating &  
Design



**Barry McGough**  
Estimating &  
Design



**Gemma Preece**  
Sales & Strategic  
Purchasing



**Greg Underwood**  
Production, Purchasing  
& Planning



**Ros Payne**  
Accounts Administrator



Every story starts somewhere and the story of one of Plymouth's most enduring, locally rooted engineering companies starts, like a handful of others, with a young man who finished his apprenticeship at Tecalemit in the early 1960s.

Bill Alderman was born in London during the Second World War and he came to Plymouth when his parents relocated and his father opened a transport café on the Barbican.

Within weeks of his arrival in the city, Bill met Lyn - destined to be the love of his life - at a youth club in Efford and in 1963 the couple were married. That same year Bill completed his apprenticeship.

As the sixties progressed both Bill and Lyn took on the café, but Bill's natural creative flair was nowhere near satisfied making bacon butties and in 1969 he started using his tools in earnest, opening a small factory at Millbay.

His ability to make almost anything he set his mind to, and his facility for improving the tools he had to work with, attracted plenty of work and Alderman Tooling outgrew a number of bases in quick succession.

Within seven years Bill was generating enough work to take on 12 employees and to commission his own factory in Plympton. Before long Aldermans had outgrown that property too and had moved into bigger, more substantial premises nearby.

Currently celebrating 45 years of successful trading Bill Alderman is now in that happy position of seeing his creation continue to prosper in the hands of his daughter, Karen Friendship, who took over the reins in 2006. Specialising in being able to fabricate prototypes and parts, Aldermans' recent investments in high-tech equipment should see them through to the next generation.