Our history

In the beginning was the altimeter

We started with an altimeter aboard an 1860s hot-air balloon. Today our products continue to buoy the group through their leading-edge technologies designed to operate in extreme conditions.

Meggitt has come a long way since its first constituent company, founded by two immigrant Italian craftsmen in London, began making aeronautical instruments.

Through the decades we have developed inventions that have transformed our industry sectors. Along the way we have made acquisitions that, in turn, have transformed our company.

Inventions by companies that are now part of the Meggitt brand included spark plugs and pneumatic tyres to help tame the new-fangled automobiles of the first decade of the 20th century. Specially-developed alloys made possible the engines of the new generation of Second World War fighter aircraft. Post-war Meggitt equipment went into the stratosphere with Concorde and to the moon with the Apollo programme.

Traditionally, conflicts accelerate technical progress and bring ingenuity to the fore. The Second World War, for example, saw tyre specialists Dunlop branching out into exotica such as inflatable dummy vehicles, while sparking plug manufacturer Lodge won the accolade of a public endorsement of its products by President Roosevelt in an address to Congress.
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Peacetime progress

If the 1940s brought products born of dire necessity, the 1950s saw the creation of several companies that operated at the frontiers of science and which eventually became part of the Meggitt family—such as Denmark’s Ferroperm (piezoceramics), Switzerland’s Vibro-Meter (precision measuring) and Spain’s Piher (controls and sensors).

The 1960s also brought contracts for machines that pushed the envelope, such as the world’s fastest aircraft, Lockheed’s SR-71 Blackbird reconnaissance aircraft and the largest valve ever produced for aerospace purposes, capable of handling 35,000 gallons of liquid oxygen per minute on NASA’s Saturn V rocket that launched the Apollo moon missions. The Bestobell group of engineering companies that became part of Meggitt had no fewer than 3000 components on Concorde.

Ironically, given the age of many of Meggitt’s constituent companies, that name did not appear until 1964, when Yorkshire-based Willson Lathes bought Meggitt Engineering of Dorset but ended up taking the latter’s identity.

Our history has not been one of untrammelled expansion. A potentially terminal dip in fortunes was averted by a 1984 management buy-in. Just two years later, however, Meggitt daringly bought the Bestobell group, three times our size. Similarly, in 1999 we acquired the much larger California-based Whittaker Controls, which brought a much-increased presence in the aftermarket business and significantly grew our business with major aircraft manufacturers and their customers.

Just as wars proved the spur for technological advances, major deals such as Bestobell and Whittaker proved to be transformative acquisitions, allowing us to rise to new heights.

Buying new companies has filled gaps in our capabilities or extended those capabilities into adjacent sectors as varied as simulation products for firearms training or engine condition monitoring and diagnostics.
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Across the Atlantic

From the mid-1980s an increasing amount of our business was either sourced or located in the US, with acquisitions being just as varied and exotic as in the UK. Endevco’s ultra-rugged accelerometers were capable of measuring the massive loads generated by explosions. Engineered Fabrics brought crashworthy aircraft fuel cells to the table.

This ability to push the technological envelope continues to bring profits, as does the company’s mix of military and civil aircraft products, as well as high-end technology and everyday spares. A similar balance between the UK and US sides of the business adds further stability.

This poise between geographic regions and different industry sectors gives us the ability to ride out dips in workload. Military and civil aviation markets are seldom in the doldrums simultaneously.

Geographically, we are well-positioned for the future. Our businesses in the US and five European countries are complemented by plants and offices in Mexico, Brazil, China, Vietnam and Singapore, tapping into the planet’s surging new economies.

Major acquisitions have boosted our core capabilities and corporate growth to the point where we are now a FTSE 100 company, with our market capitalisation having leapt from £345 million to £1.86 billion in 20 years.
Our history

The horizon beckons

New sectors are constantly opening up. We have an emerging capability in the energy industry. Our traditional areas of expertise, such as monitoring, sensing and smart controls, are of great interest to power generators. Climate change will increasingly demand clean energy technology. Integrating fluid control valves with sensors could provide control solutions for the industrial gas turbines that provide rapid output boosts to cope, for example, with demand spikes in power stations.

Innovations? Almost too many to mention:

- Our new electro-thermal systems to keep aircraft wings free of ice use up to 50% less power but deliver 100% more control than traditional hot air systems.
- Modern airliner turbfans operate at 900°C to optimise efficiency. So do our sensors, allowing them to be placed at the heart of the engine and alert maintainers to incipient wear-and-tear—or potentially disastrous failures.
- We were the first to put carbon brakes on a commercial airliner – Concorde, no less—and continuous development is creating lighter, longer-lasting, higher performance successors.
- When things go wrong in flight (or on the ground) we are at the front of the field in developing fire-extinguishing agents that not only knock down flames but are also environmentally friendly. (Current industry standard Halon is fantastic, but ozone-depleting.)
- And next-generation digital fuel gauges can measure echoes lasting one millionth of a millionth of a second as they bounce off the fluid surface in an aircraft fuel tank.
- We supply the piezo-ceramics that form the basis for one of the most exciting emerging medical technologies, high-intensity focused ultrasound, whose qualities include the ability to stop glaucoma in its tracks.

In the pipeline is a plethora of new products and techniques, currently being honed in collaboration with some 30 of the world’s leading universities and research institutes.

It’s a long way since altimeters in balloons.