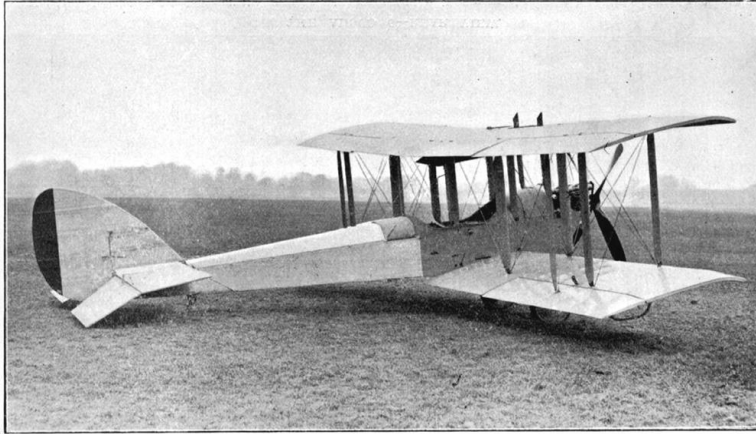


Kingsbury Works - Wings and Wheels

In 1915 Barningham Ltd began manufacturing equipment for the war effort in buildings behind Kingsbury House (where the dairy depot opposite Kingsbury Green now stands). A year later, the company bought the house's 109 acre estate, between Kingsbury Road and Church Lane, and turned it into Kingsbury Aerodrome. They soon had temporary licences for two large hangars (described as a "Machine Shop" and an "Erecting Shop"), as well as permission to build a woodworkers shop, a trimming shop and a dope room. The company became Kingsbury Aviation Co Ltd (with a share capital of £250,000 and Ernest Barningham and a local motor manufacturer, Warwick Wright, among its directors). By mid-1918 it employed 800 people and had built 150 DH6 aircraft (designed by Geoffrey

de Havilland of the Aircraft Manufacturing Co at nearby Grove Park) for the British forces.



**A de Havilland DH6 aircraft,
of the type built by
Kingsbury Aviation Co.
[Source: Brent Archives –
the "Airco Rag", June 1919.]**

When the First World War ended in November 1918, the company had orders to build 20 large Vickers Vimy bombers, but with peace came the cancellation of the Government's wartime contracts. As Kingsbury Engineering Co Ltd, the company brought out new products. Its "Kingsbury" motor scooter selling for £39 (at least one still exists, in the Glasgow Transport Museum) and £195 eight horsepower light car were not a success, and it went into liquidation in May 1921.

**A "Kingsbury" motor scooter on display
at the Glasgow Transport Museum.
[Source: Brent Archives –
on-line collection, No.2973.]**



The widening of Kingsbury Road by 1923 attracted the Fox Brothers of Edgware to the site. Their company, Vanden Plas (England) 1923 Ltd, had acquired a coach-building



**An aerial photograph
of Kingsbury Works,
taken in the mid-1920's.**

business, and rented the vacant hangars for £750 a year. With local jobless skilled workers from the wartime aircraft industry, Vanden Plas soon had 100 employees. They built car bodies, usually of metal panels on a wooden framework, for individual clients on the chassis of a variety of makes including Alfa Romeo, Armstrong Siddeley, Daimler, Delage, Invicta, Lagonda, Lanchester and Talbot. Their main customer was Bentley, the Cricklewood carmaker, which used parts of the factory as a service department and a special workshop for racing cars. The cars which won the Le Mans 24 hour race from 1927 to 1930 were prepared at Kingsbury Works.



The Vanden Plas coach-building works in full production, around 1930, showing the craftsmen, each with his own bench, carrying out the stages of building different car bodies on a variety of chassis.

By 1938 another war was looming, and Britain urgently needed to build more aircraft. Because of Vanden Plas's woodworking skills, de Havilland asked it to make wings for some of its Tiger Moth trainers. From 1940 the hangars at Kingsbury also made the wings for 2,000 of the new DH98 Mosquito aircraft. Nicknamed "the wooden wonder" because of its light wood and plywood construction, the Mosquito was the world's fastest combat plane from 1941 to 1944.



Constructing wings and wing spars for Mosquito aircraft in the Vanden Plas hangar during World War II.



Men and women working on smaller airframe parts at the Vanden Plas factory during the Second World War.

1946 saw the company become a subsidiary of Austin, a large scale car manufacturer, who wanted to use its expertise to produce a luxury model for their range. This was the Austin Princess, a stately and comfortable limousine. From 1958, when the company was part of the British Motor Corporation, the Kingsbury-built car was sold as the Vanden Plas Princess. After 1968 the Daimler DS420 model was also built at Kingsbury, using pressed steel body panels brought down from Coventry, but by then the British motor industry was losing market share to more efficient foreign competitors. Vanden Plas at Kingsbury Works closed in 1979, with the hangars soon demolished to build the Kingsbury Trading Estate, and their origin remembered by the road name, Barningham Way.



An Austin Princess III saloon car outside the Vanden Plas factory at Kingsbury Works in 1956.

Philip Grant, January 2008 (with minor revisions January 2011)

A shorter version of this piece was written as a "Secret History" article for the Brent Magazine.

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The photographs (apart from the first two) are from Brian Smith's book "Vanden Plas – Coachbuilders" (1979), by courtesy of its publishers, Dalton Watson Limited – www.daltonwatson.com. A copy of this book, which has many more excellent photographs in it, is available for reference at Brent Archives.