

The Perkins Outboard Motors

PERKINS OUTBOARD MOTORS

It was in about 1957 that the directors of Perkins decided to look for potential alternative products to supplement the mainstream diesel business, in case the market began to slow down or turn against them. For the Company struggling with the problems experienced with the R6 engine, and the resulting loss of profitability, this was an understandable decision.

A visit by Monty Prichard to the Oliver Corporation in the USA, following up a chance remark to the Perkins North American subsidiary, resulted in him returning to Peterborough with a signed agreement to purchase their Outboard Motor Division, somewhat to the surprise of his fellow Board members. Thus this business became the first foray into new products and markets.

After the commitment had been made, the initial testing by Perkins revealed that there were shortcomings in both design and quality. Oliver had been struggling for a share in the sophisticated North America market where the established leaders, Evinrude and Johnson, had already set very high standards. A new Company was formed - Perkins Outboard Motors Limited – with a separate manufacturing plant at Sages Lane, close to the Peter Brotherhoods plant in Walton. Other departments were found space at Eastfield and Peterscourt, and key personnel were recruited – notable amongst these was Horace Rainbow as Chief Engineer. Although the products were handled by a separate company, advantage was taken of the existing infrastructure wherever possible, since sales, spare parts and service were especially important in a mainly leisure market where private buyers bought a significant volume of engines.

Production started in 1959, with most design and quality problems resolved and a level of confidence established. The first range consisted of 6, 16 and 35 horsepower units – all

twin cylinder two-stroke engines running on petrol. The engines were restyled and branded 'Perkins', with heavy advertising in the marine press, especially in Europe.



The Perkins Outboard on display at the London Boat Show

Later

developments in the early 1960s saw a smaller engine put into production at 4.5 horsepower (based upon the 6 horsepower but redesigned to reduce weight and complexity). Range uprating to 6.5, 18 and 40 horsepower, plus a derated engine at 30 horsepower for workboat applications, followed as experience and confidence grew. Trials were carried out by the Armed Services who were attracted by the low weight and transportability of modern outboards. A limited amount of 'badge engineering' was also carried out, with engines being sold through the Rootes Group under their name.

Unfortunately the take-over by Massey Ferguson demanded more focus on the mainstream products. Forward plans to develop diesel outboards, and to explore the potential for the new rotary Wankel engine in the marine field, were destined for cancellation. There had been serious work done with the Wankel engine, since its inherent compactness could put 40 horsepower into the space of the 18 horsepower two stroke. Under their licence agreement Perkins overcame many of the early sealing difficulties of the design, even testing a water-cooled rotor in place of the oil-cooled original. Bench and field testing showed promise, but it did not proceed beyond trials.

In 1964 the whole outboard business was sold to British Anzani, but the products soon disappeared from production. The Wankel version was also sold off but was effectively killed as a potential competitor to the existing designs. Today a few outboards still exist in the hands of enthusiasts,