

Installation of a National Elliott 405 computer at

Reckitt & Sons, Dansom Lane, Hull in 1959

This film documents the installation of the first NE 405 computer in Hull. In March, 1959, it was installed at the firm Reckitt & Sons Ltd which, at the time, produced various cleaning products. The film features the arrival of the computer to the Dansom Lane facilities, installation, and initial testing of the system.

In 1939 it merged with the well known mustard producers, Colman, to form Reckitt & Colman, adopting this name in 1954. There must have been some resistance to the change in name though, as the factory is still named as Reckitt & Sons, as it is in the title of this film, even though all this post-dates it becoming Reckitt & Colman.

The NE 405 was a commercial computer produced in 1956 by Elliott Bros of London (merging with Associated Automation Ltd to become Elliott Automation in 1958). This brought out the more modern transistorised 802 in 1958 and 803 in 1959, both of which were process computers. Starting out as early as 1801, Elliott Brothers were the first British company to become seriously involved with digital computer technology. Elliott started its Borehamwood research laboratory in 1947.

As can be seen from the film, the 405 was a massive machine, requiring 10kW of power and an air draught to all the valve operated racks of cabinets containing 12 metres of the computer's processing circuits. The 'input/output' interface included an input compiler, paper tape reader, on-line punch, on-line tele printer, magnetic film output, a main control desk and so on. This enabled bulk storage on magnetic film. All put together this complex machine needed highly trained operators and a lot of maintenance.

According to one source the 405 sold somewhere between 16 and 50, although the Our Computer Heritage website puts the number built as 30. It would have cost something in the region of £125,000. The NRDC purchased an Elliott 405 for installation at Siemens Ltd telephone works at Woolwich and the National Cash Register also bought one in 1959, to be used in calculating its pay, pensions and statistics. The Powerhouse Museum in Australia has parts from a National Elliott 405 that arrived from England, also in 1959.

By the early 1960s there were two dozen models of computers available from eight manufacturers. These different companies were to gradually merge together during the 1960s to eventually form International Computers Ltd (ICL) in 1968, an initiative of the then Minister of Technology, Tony Benn, to compete with the likes of IBM. This was Britain's only mainframe computer manufacturer having a workforce of 34,000, the largest computer maker outside the US.