

Simon Harwood looks at the impli

Hope for the John Brown jobless

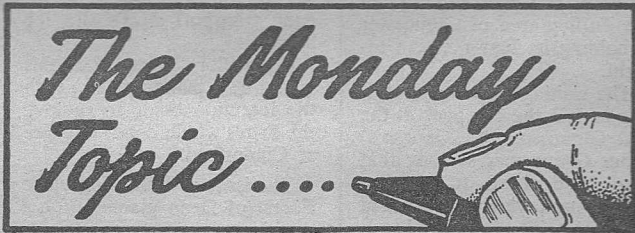
THERE was a twist of irony to last week's announcement of the impending closure of John Brown's plastics machinery factory at Lightpill, one of the historic centres of engineering in the Stroud Valleys.

Six dozen workers find themselves facing unemployment at a time when their industry is apparently enjoying a major revival and when memories of the early 1980s which almost spelled disaster for the company had faded.

Now Stroud's engineering industry has another crisis to cope with, and it could extend beyond the doors of John Brown's factory which has been condensed into two buildings of the once cavernous and rambling T. H. and J. Daniels Victorian factory site — now partly converted into an industrial park.

There are legacies of the engineering company throughout Stroud — small enterprises, either set up independently to serve the giant or companies that have had long-term relationships with it as suppliers.

Two of the questions closure of the factory poses are: How will these firms fare following



the loss of a major local customer, and will job losses in Stroud as a result of the shutdown exceed the 70 people currently employed in the works?"

Another question concerns the future of John Brown employees, generally highly-

skilled people in their late forties and fifties, who have spent almost all their lifetime in the Stroud area. Will their skills work for them, or will their age count against them?

Mr. Howard Bailey of the family firm of entrepreneurs who bought the site from John

The end of an era . . .

The closure will bring to an end an era dating back to 1840 when the local Daniels family opened its factory.

Recent upheavals can be traced back to the time when the Daniels lost control of the firm in 1968 after a boardroom battle.

Since then the factory has taken several different forms as part of larger groups and in the ownership of different holdings companies.

Brown back in the mid-1980s leasing part of it back to company, is optimistic most local people made redundant will find more work.

"They certainly retain some very skilled people from the waves of redundancy and Stroud looks as though is on the mend in engineering terms these days," he said.

Rumours suggest that should John Brown's operation fold, parts of the work carried out could be acquired by some of the other tenants that now occupy the site.

That would prove an extraordinary situation for many employees off-loaded in 1986, who have since set up shop in other parts of the area carrying out work to a decreasing extent for their former employers.

They have varying views about the policies of the John Brown Group as it has passed through the influence of various holdings companies during the 1980's.

Mr. Ian Kibblewhite of Dibone Engineering, believed that it "made sense" to continue to manufacture and to be

ations of a factory closure



● The John Brown factory at Stroud. An historic centre of engineering in the district.



● These employees of the family firm of T. H. and J. Daniels Ltd. were members of the company's '25 Club' in 1956, but many eventually served much longer than that. Second left in the third row from the front is Mr. J. Lionel Daniels, the managing director. His brother, Mr. Fred Daniels, is fifth from right, wearing a trilby hat.

that it "made sense" to cease to manufacture and to buy in more cheaply finished machine items. John Brown was one of his company's main customers.

Roy Turner (30) of C and T fabrications welcomed the opportunity created when he and partner Colin Chivers were let go by John Brown on a Friday afternoon, to return to their old workbench the following morning in charge of their own company and doing work for their former employers.

"I could not make head or tail of the decisions they took in the past. Now, with two years management experience behind me, I still do not understand them. To my mind the path that they were taking was taking them headlong towards closure," he says.

"Fortunately now we do little work for John Brown; nothing but emergency jobs for the past couple of months. We should be okay."

C and T employ six people. Mr. Kibblewhite and his partner Terry Light, at Dibone, employ seven. Springfield Engineering on the Daniels site employing 46, was set up by Eric Reed, a former

Daniels employee some 12 years ago.

He said: "I was able to expand when they closed their machine shop, but I was up and running already. I am concerned after the future of some of the companies on the site and also for the people who are about to lose their jobs.

"I just say thank goodness that it happened now and not two years ago when it would have proved catastrophic."

● Towards the end of last week any hopes of saving the factory from closure appeared to be fading fast.

On Thursday Group personnel director Mr. Ed Wood, said he could not add to the closure statement issued early in the week and the engineering union seems resigned to it.

While John Brown's manufacturing centre at Stroud knows its fate, some doubt exists over the future of the company's sales, marketing, technical engineering and administration headquarters at Poyle in London. "Developments affect both sites," says Mr. Wood.



● Roy Turner and Colin Chivers: "We should be okay."

Everything stems from the decision to restructure its European operations "as part of a new global marketing strategy." In effect it transfers control over plastics machinery production to John

Brown Inc at Sommerville, New Jersey, U.S.A.

Mr. Wood could not comment either upon the future of the Stroud site or upon the historical Daniels line of products still made there.