

# HUMBROL



Douglas Barton learned about the oil business from his father, Richard, who was an oil merchant and broker in Hull and Bridlington. An advertisement of 1891 shows that Barton specialised in marine engine oils. Douglas, born in 1892 in Hull, decided to branch out on

his own and in 1919 set up the Humber Oil Company in a small workshop in Burton Street, Hull. It employed only four people to cater for the growing number of cyclists in the city. The firm produced cycle oil and calcium carbide for bike lamps. By the early 1930s the company had a 30-strong workforce and a new factory.

It specialised in cellulose lacquers and paints and, when war broke out, supplied these to munitions factories and defence establishments under government contract. The factory was destroyed by bombing in 1941 and after a spell in temporary premises Humbrol acquired the present site in Marfleet in 1947. Under Douglas's son, Gerald Barton, the company developed model paints in the 1950s and '60s. The Barton family ceased to play an active part in the company when it became part of the International Borden Group of Companies, based in America, in 1976. In 1981 Borden acquired a French company, Heller, which made plastic kits.

**Airfix** was founded in 1939 by Nicholas Kove, a Hungarian. Its first venture into model kits was in 1948, with the production of a model of a new Ferguson tractor. It was sold in kit form because Airfix couldn't assemble the model – and this form proved very popular. It was 4 years before another kit was produced, a model of Drake's Golden Hind. More ships followed, and then an aircraft, the Spitfire Mark 1. This became the best-selling model of all time, and Airfix became a household name. In 1986 Airfix was acquired by Humbrol.

Restructuring of the Humbrol firm came in 1994 when it was acquired by the Dublin-based investment company, Allen, McGuire and Partners Ltd. The firm diversified into the craft and science sector with the acquisition of Supercast in 1997 and a number of Bluebird Plc brands in 1998. Bluebird made the Young Scientist Anatomy Set, and it was this model which hit the headlines in 2000. The artist Damien Hirst produced a 20' bronze sculpture which "bore a remarkable resemblance" to the model, designed originally by Norman Emms. Humbrol was selling more than 10,000 of these sets annually. Charles Saatchi had paid £1m for the Hirst sculpture. Humbrol took Hirst to court for breach of copyright and settled for an undisclosed sum to be donated to charity.

Humbrol's Marfleet factory is a local landmark, with its full-size model aeroplane at the front of the building. The company exports to 80 countries and continues to expand its product range.

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