

Bell Equipment: from SA to the world

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COMMENT



I recently had the privilege of visiting Bell Equipment's manufacturing facility in Richards Bay, which has lately allocated some of its fabrication space to a new entity, BHI: Bell Heavy Industries.

The story behind Bell's success is a remarkable one. It began when Irvine Bell, a fitter and turner who spent the second world war serving in the Engineering Corp, returned to the Richards Bay area with his wife, Eunice. His first invention was a water boring machine powered by a Jeep engine, which he built and used in a business sinking boreholes for the local farmers. In 1954 he went on to start a successful farm machinery repair service on a sugar estate near Empangeni; and in 1958 he founded 'IA Bell and Company' with his brother, his brother-in-law and his wife, who took care of the finances.

Irvine Bell's company continued to invent and manufacture new machines for the local farming community, such as his self-loading sugar cane trailer; and an overhead transfer crane for local farmers. In the early 1960s, he used hydraulic motors to build a prototype three wheeled cane loader, the Bell Tri-Wheeler, which was able to control each drive wheel independently to turn on its own axis. The patented machine was licensed for manufacture to a Johannesburg-based locomotive company.

Back then, the Richard's Bay lagoon was a game sanctuary, which by 1943 had been expanded into Richards Bay Park. The town on the shores of the lagoon was proclaimed only in 1969. The deep water harbour that we know today, along with a railway link and an oil/gas pipeline to Johannesburg was completed in 1976. By that time, Irvine Bell had already been serving the agricultural needs in the area for over 25 years.

Irvine's sons Peter and Gary Bell, followed in their father's footsteps. While still at school, they built a go-kart that could pull a small tip trailer. They then fitted a blade onto the front of it and used it to spread gravel and repair the local dirt roads on the smallholding.

Both Peter and Gary joined the business and, with Irvine, developed and patented a cane cutting attachment that enabled the Tri-wheeler to further mechanise cane harvesting. The sons were determined to take on the production of these attachment units, though, producing 50 units in their first year. Then, when the manufacturing licence for the Tri-Wheeler expired, Peter Bell redesigned the machine to incorporate more modern hydraulics. So, in 1975, with the expiry of the licence to manufacture in Johannesburg, Bell began on its

journey to produce complete machines, conceived, designed, prototyped and tested in-house.

Different Tri-Wheeler applications emerged: a rough terrain forklift version; and a log handling version called the Bell Logger. The Bell Haulage Tractor was designed, which was found to be ideal for earthmoving applications. This led to the 'Built-for-Africa' mid-size range of wheeled loaders, which became a market leader.

Bell Equipment's first articulated dump truck (ADT), was launched in 1985, and in 1989 the flagship and globally renowned 40-ton ADT was launched. Today's Bell ADTs offer keyless entry, Hill Stop, Bin Tip Prevention, Turbo Spin Protection, On Board Weighing and an Auto Park Application as standard features, while the Bell-designed fleet monitoring system, Fleetm@tic® offers advanced solutions for project scheduling, machine health monitoring and reduced fleet running costs.

The innovative traditions have now extended into the third generation of the Bell Family, with the appointment of Ashley Jon Bell, Irvine Bell's grandson, as the new Group CEO. So the story of innovation continues.

A long-held Bell Equipment commitment is that "through listening, we are able to produce innovative equipment that matches our customers' needs". The huge number of effective and industry changing solutions the company has created is testament to the success of this approach.

Over the 70 years since Irvine Bell first began to service the needs of local farmers, the Bell Equipment family has been continuously changing, creating and innovating. This has led to global success, with Bell Equipment able to compete with any of the top offroad equipment manufacturers in the world – and up to 70% of the ADTs it now manufactures are destined for markets in Europe or the USA.

Manufacturing of these ADTs is relocating to the company's expanded plant in Germany. But in Bell's case, it is the manufacturing principles and IP developed at its Richards Bay plant in South Africa that will be applied in Germany, rather than the other way around.

The levels of professionalism, enthusiasm and innovation on display at all levels during my visit were heartwarming, making me feel that, in spite of all our problems, South Africa has highly competent people, skills and resources to enable us to compete on the global stage.

Thanks to the vision of the likes of Irvine Bell, his descendants and his workforce.



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