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La Société Cockerill

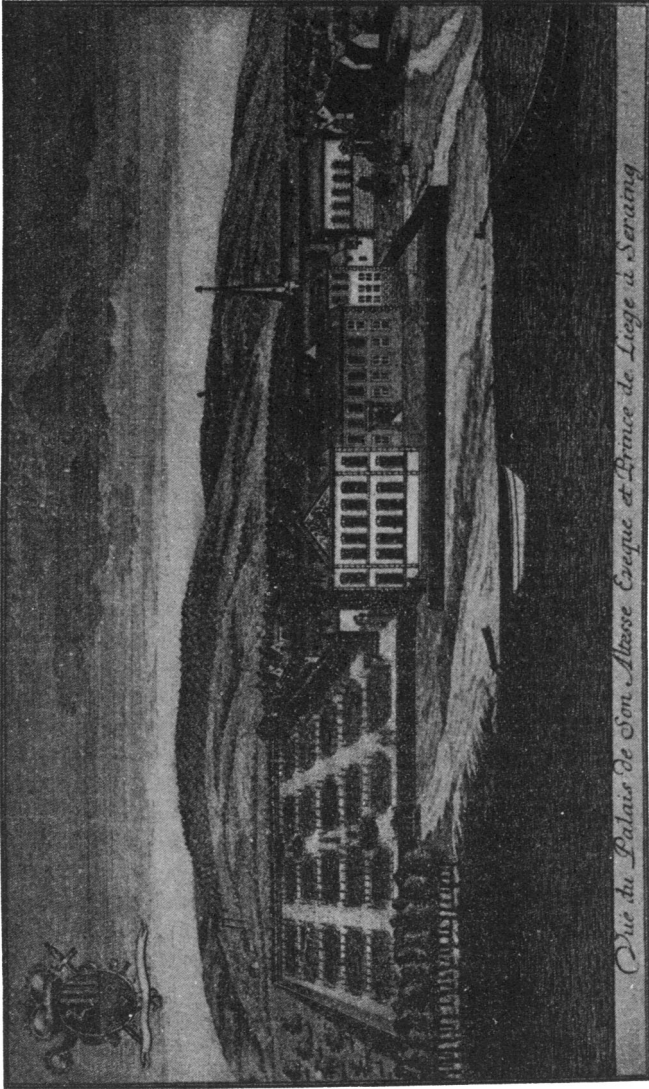
1817-1927

MENTION has already been made in the Bulletin of the unusual collection of material which has been coming to the Society in the form of anniversary publications which are being put out by various companies. One such publication of special interest was the history of a Belgian company, La Société Cockerill, noted particularly for the manufacture of locomotives and other machinery.

We learn from this company history that William Cockerill, an English wool worker, despairing of earning his living in England, went to Sweden in 1797 with the idea of introducing into that country the woollen weaving processes of his native land. He was disappointed by lack of success and in 1799 went to Belgium, where he secured the exclusive contract to make machinery for weaving wool for one of the leading wool manufacturers there. He made machines for this company with great success. His methods were so advanced that he was able to do this with a considerable saving in the number of men employed in the factory.

Later, Cockerill and his three sons set up a family workshop in Liège, at first on a small scale, but soon they were forced to enlarge the plant. When the shop passed into the sons' hands after the father's death, the establishment was employing 500 iron workers and 1500 carpenters.

Of the three Cockerill brothers, John, the youngest, proved to be the guiding spirit. When the use of steam as power brought about complete revolution in the kind of material used for machines he was quick to see the importance of the change. Consequently, he chose Seraing in Belgium as the best place for a factory, having



SITE CHOSEN BY JOHN COCKERILL IN 1817 FOR HIS FACTORY AT SERAING

coal, iron, easy transportation and a population used to working in coal and iron. On January 29, 1817, the Cockerill brothers purchased from King William I the château of Seraing, near Liège, and there built a factory for the manufacture of machines which could compete with the English machines then holding a monopoly of the market. It is from the establishment of the factory at Seraing that the Société Cockerill dates its beginning.

Cockerill took with him to his new factory some of his old workmen from Liège and imported a few specialists from England who were familiar with the building of machines to be run by steam power.

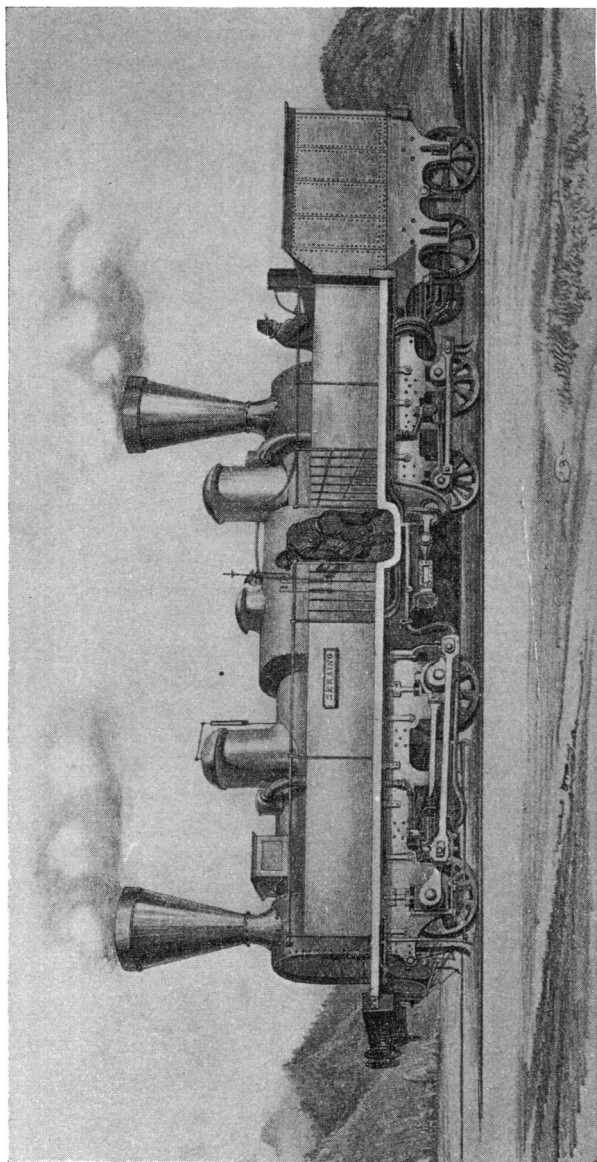
In 1823 John became the sole proprietor of the works. He installed the first coke blast furnace in the district. He had his own iron, coal, and coke, made his own charcoal, and carried on all the processes of machinery making in one plant. In 1825 the Belgian government acquired a large interest in the company. After this, the Seraing factory manufactured ammunition as well as machinery.

In 1834, the introduction of railroads into Belgium increased the importance of the Cockerill establishment. Cockerill made the first rails and constructed the first locomotive in Belgium. This first locomotive was not so very different from those of today in principle. It was supplied with a tubular boiler for steam, below which was constructed a rectangular firebox. The boiler was heated by a coke fire and was protected against cooling by a cover made of wooden hoops. A steam pressure of four atmospheres was achieved. The wheels were fastened on axles which turned in grease boxes. The entire weight of this early locomotive was 8,700 kilos.

With the introduction of the production of locomotives at Seraing a further enlarging of the factory took place. A second blast furnace was installed as well as a boiler factory. The Cockerill factory had become not only the leading industrial establishment in Belgium, but had secured a place for itself in world industry as well.

The Seraing factory, however, was not the only activity carried on by Cockerill. At Sclessin he ran a boiler factory; at Tilleur a cast iron forge; at Andenne a cotton print works; and at Aix-la-Chapelle a woolen mill. Besides these he had workshops in Germany and Spain as well. He received royal decorations from Leopold of Belgium and many honors were bestowed upon him by other rulers.

Unfortunately the financial crisis of 1837 and the years following, which affected the entire world, paralyzing industrial operations,



LOCOMOTIVE BUILT IN 1850 BY LA SOCIÉTÉ COCKERILL TO OVERCOME THE STEEP GRADES OF THE SEMMERING PASS

almost ruined Cockerill. This came just at a time when he was undertaking the tremendous job of building a railroad from Paris to the Belgian frontier. He died at the age of fifty while in Russia, where he was seeking a market for his goods.

After his death the affairs of the company were taken over by a group of directors; Gustave Pastor, nephew of John Cockerill, was made chairman. The plant was again enlarged and new machinery added. In 1844 a third and then a fourth large blast furnace was erected. The plant was producing both locomotives and steam boats as well as other machinery. But the Belgian iron industry was having a difficult time holding its own against the combined rivalry of German and English production, and 1848 brought another period of depression due to political revolution.

In 1850 the board of directors of the company planned the construction of a locomotive to participate in the contest organized by the Austrian government for building a locomotive capable of overcoming the steep grades and successfully traversing the route through the pass of Semmering, situated between Austria and Styria on the railroad from Vienna to Trieste. In this project the Seraing factory was successful.

In 1851 the factory at Seraing set up a new foundry for the manufacture of smelted steel into machinery. The company was the first to contract the English engineer Bessemer, with a view to introducing his process for the manufacture of steel into Belgium. Experiments in this connection covered a period of ten years and finally La Société Cockerill was forced to make enormous sacrifices in producing Bessemer steel at a loss, in order to introduce it to the market.

The Cockerill organization has always followed the forward looking policy which characterized its beginnings. It continues to be one of the foremost companies of Belgium and recognized throughout the world as a strong industrial organization.