

Corporate Brand Building at Shell-Mex Ltd in the Interwar Period

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of corporate brand building at Shell-Mex Ltd in the inter-war period in Britain. While there has been some historical analysis of product brand development in the UK, this has not been the case in corporate or institutional brand building which has remained neglected. This paper outlines this process at Shell-Mex, the distributive arm in Britain for the Shell Transport and Trading Company, part of the larger Royal Dutch Shell Group. The paper argues that Shell consistently and coherently built up its corporate brand in the inter-war period through a series of strategies which included publicity, sponsorship of record breaking flights, links with empire, use of prominent artists, documentaries, road guides and association with the British countryside. This development of its corporate brand had multiple benefits for the group, both internally within its organisation, and externally in relation to its product brands and overall competitiveness.

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It has been over twenty years now since T.A.B. Corley commented on the dearth of academic research and an overall framework for the history of consumer marketing in Britain (Corley, 1987). While there has been some progress in this area, Corley's comments are sadly still very relevant to the history of brands in the UK, particularly for the period 1880-1950 which is seen as a crucial period for the emergence of the modern brand (Nevett, 1982, Jones & Tedlow, 1993, Church, 1999, Church, 2000, Church & Clark, 2001, Church & Clark, 2003, Church & Godley, 2003). Most of the research that has been carried out is concerned with brand development in the United States, including the oft-quoted work of Mira Wilkins (Wilkins, 1992). Studies which have been done on brands in Britain are principally descriptive and fail to analyse the role of brands within the marketing process for both producers and consumers (Jones & Morgan, 1994). They tell us when brands appeared, they tell us their sales, their competitors performance, the amount of money spent on their advertising and product development, but they fail to tell us what they did. In the words of Paul Duguid, there is too much of the 'when' in them and not enough of the 'why'. The 'how' of how brands actually add value is usually never even considered, or referred to in passing reference (Duguid, 2003).

Two studies stand out from this critique, though unfortunately their brilliance emphasises the lacuna in the historiography of branding in modern British business history. The first is Robert Fitzgerald's history of marketing in the British confectionary firm Rowntree

(Fitzgerald, 1995). In his thoroughly researched and path-breaking work, Fitzgerald showed how the company resolved a crisis of stagnating sales, worsening economic conditions and vicious competition in the 1930s by changing from a product to a consumer focused model of marketing with an emphasis on consumer needs and modern advertising and publicity. Within this Fitzgerald showed how the development of key brands in the firm such as Aero and Kit-Kat reversed the ill-fortunes of the company by being market-focused, clearly positioned, highly differentiated from their competitors and possessing qualities which resonated with consumer needs and preferences. The second work is Vernon Ward's account of the marketing and branding of Horlicks during the interwar period (Ward, 1994). Vernon shows how Horlicks, with the assistance of the market-research and advertising consultants J.W. Thompson, re-positioned their product from an essentially malted-milk drink with medicinal properties to one which was promoted on its sleep-enhancing virtues, its healthiness and its taste. This was achieved through a sophisticated process of market research, segmentation, positioning and an integrated marketing-mix which emphasised all four P's. Its promotional element was highly innovative using campaign advertising, cognitive dissonance, original use of imagery, photography and storylines, professional endorsement and an integrated use of promotional channels including film and radio. As a consequence of this, Horlicks was able to charge a premium price, far in excess of its competitors Ovaltine and Cadbury's Bournvita, by an emphasis on its added values which successfully resonated with customer needs. What stands out in both studies is how successful branding was an integral part and result of a marketing process which incorporated market research, customer profiling, careful positioning, brand building, unique selling points and an integrated communication programme.

Yet beyond this there is an area of brand historiography which while burgeoning in the United States is virtually non-existent in Britain (Zunz, 1990, Marchand, 1998, Bird, 1999, Lipartito & Sicilia, 2004). This is the history of corporate branding and its contribution to the marketing process and product branding. Corporate branding relates to the process whereby the organisation is branded and its name then used to support its product brands. The process has many benefits. The corporate brand can endorse its product brands, giving them augmented benefits such as trust, reputation, recognition and powerful associations such as innovation, public service and national characteristics. They act as effective platforms for brand stretching and brand extensions and provide a sense of *gestalt* for those brands which operate in diverse and seemingly unassociated categories. In addition, corporate branding is important for its contribution to an organisation's reputation, image and its public acceptance. In this sense it is closely allied to public relations, corporate identity and stakeholder theory. Brands do not operate in a vacuum, subject simply to the vagaries of supply and demand in the market place. Brands and the organisations behind them exist in complex social, cultural, political, legal and media environments and have to garner trust and acceptance amongst the various publics with whom they interact to survive and thrive. The benefit that brands provide products through their enhanced recognition, trust and imputed characteristics is often dependent on that of public goodwill towards their parent, corporate brands.

In the U.S. important work has been done on corporate branding by Roland Marchand and William Bird. Marchand demonstrates how major American corporations such as AT&T, General Motors and Ford invested heavily between 1900 and 1950 in promoting their

corporate image to the American public in an attempt to obtain public acceptance and trust (Marchand, 1998). Marchand's starting point for this corporate exercise was the resistance and opposition to the rapid growth of American corporations at the end of the nineteenth century by disaffected publics such as liberals, journalists, regional businessmen and trade unionists. Such groups argued that the new corporate behemoths were monopolistic, bullying, uncaring and soulless. To counter such claims American big business developed corporate identities which emphasised their public service, their patriotism and their humanness. Key to this was an association of the American way of life with corporate America. Bird analysis follows a similar line of argument to Marchand's though focuses on the 1930s and 1950s and the opposition of American corporations, primarily in the guise of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, to what they saw as excessive government regulation and interference (Bird, 1999). Bird shows how American corporations harnessed the new mediums of radio, film and television to create a new dramatic language of big business which through entertainment emphasised how they and not government was responsible for 'better living' in the United States. Entertainment via corporate sponsored radio programmes, films and television shows became a powerful argument for corporate legitimacy and supremacy. Big business battled the U.S. government by switching their arguments from the political to the cultural. The key point in both authors arguments in relation to this chapter is that attempts at corporate identity building and branding became powerful supports for the products and services of big business.

In relation to Britain such research is sadly lacking. While there is an awareness that prominent major British concerns such as I.C.I., Boots, Lever Brothers, Pilkington and

Wills developed their corporate identities over this period, emphasising their public service to the nation, there have been no dedicated historical studies on this subject nor an analysis of how this assisted these firms' marketing operations (LeMahieu, 1988, Fitzgerald, 1995). While Michael Saler has carried out an important study of the use of avant-garde art by the London Undergrounds in the 1920s and 1930s, which this chapter draws on, its principle focus is on art rather than the organisation (Saler, 1999). In a previous study of the Prudential Assurance Company I have demonstrated how this major life insurance company attempted to do develop its corporate brand and identity through its contribution to public health in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century and through its role in the administration of the National Insurance Acts between 1911 and 1947 (Heller, 2007). By its association with health and the welfare of the British nation the Prudential was able to augment and distinguish its various insurance products through its corporate brand and develop important distribution channels which gave it competitive advantage. Such corporate branding was also important in developing an internal culture which assisted the company in attracting and retaining a dedicated workforce and in enhancing employee commitment which further assisted its brands.

In this chapter something similar will be attempted in relation to the Shell-Mex, the British arm of the oil and petroleum giant Royal Dutch Shell. The chapter will examine how Shell-Mex in the interwar period developed its organisational identity and image through a careful and systematic process of corporate brand building which had manifold benefits for its various product and service brands. Shell-Mex is famous during this period for its sponsoring of art and artists which it used for publicity purposes (LeMahieu, 1988, Hewitt, 1992). Much of the academic attention given to Shell, however, including John

Hewitt's article, focuses primarily, like Saler's work on the London Underground, on art and Shell's role as a sponsor of the arts, rather than on art's role within the company's overall marketing and branding strategy. As this chapter will argue, the role of art within Shell should be studied from a perspective of corporate brand building and also in relation to other components of this programme such as Shell's films, its publications including its road guides, its development of an internal culture and its self-acclaimed public service to motoring, international transport, the British Empire and the English countryside. This chapter will further demonstrate that through this corporate brand building Shell was able to effectively exert its brand equity through powerful exposure and the creation of unique associations which distinguished its product from its competitors and created strong links with customers. It did this not by simply emphasising the quality of its product and its functionality but also by creating powerful associations with its organization and brands in the minds of its customers such as the English countryside, modernity and aesthetic beauty which had no direct links with petrol and which operated as much on an emotional and representational level as they did on the functional. What is equally interesting is that it did this through the use of an integrated communication model, utilising several communication mediums. The press, posters, booklets, art, exhibitions, guides and films were all used under the guise of advertising, public relations, personal selling and in some cases even direct marketing programmes to build Shell's brand in the UK. Finally the chapter will also discuss how Shell's corporate brand building formed an important component of its public relations policy. Public relations, a corporate strategy very much in its infancy during the interwar period, was important for the company in its contribution to corporate identity, its legitimisation of the organisation and its activities and for its contribution to forging relations with Shell-Mex's publics.

Finally, before discussing the Shell brand, the topic of the brand and brand building needs to be briefly explored and discussed. A brand (when functioning positively) can be seen as an identifiable name, sign or symbol which through its associations with products, services and organisations provides added benefits for both producers and consumers. (Aaker, 1997, Chernatony, 2003, Keller, 2003). These benefits can be either functional, emotional or self-expressive. In addition, brands confer prestige to holders, offer security, guarantee quality and possess positive associations which both differentiate them from competing products and align them with consumers' needs. It is furthermore these unique benefits and qualities which develop long-term relationships between customers and providers which is highly beneficial to both. These benefits, qualities and associations are commonly referred to as brand equity. Brand equity represents the sum value of the qualities and associations of the brand and thus constitute its total value. David Aaker, whose model will be used in this chapter, divides brand equity into brand awareness, perceived brand qualities, brand loyalty and brand associations (Aaker, 1991, Aaker, 1997, Aaker & Joachimstahler, 2000). The model is effective because it shows that for brands to deliver value they must be well known, be perceived as being of high quality, have loyal customers and possess unique associations which are able to differentiate them from competitors. For the organisation, brands are able to create visibility, attract and retain customers and through their benefits and association provide identities for their products which create unique selling points. For consumers, they provide security, reduce risk, confer prestige, and establish meaningful relationships between themselves and products. In accordance with Aaker's definition, brand building can be seen as the process of making the brand highly visible and recognisable, developing long term relationships

with customers and communicating and demonstrating both functional quality and distinct and meaningful associations.

Shell-Mex Limited: an overview

The parent company of Shell-Mex, Royal Dutch Shell, was born out of the merger in 1907 of the Royal Dutch Petroleum Company of Holland and the Shell Transport and Trading Company of the UK (Howarth et al., 2007, Howarth, 1997). Both companies had been founded in the 1890s and had originally concentrated on the lucrative market for kerosene which was then a popular household fuel used in lighting, cooking and heating. By the inter-war period the organization had developed into a major vertically integrated multinational oil company with global interests in exploration, drilling, production, refining, shipping, distribution, marketing and related services. Its products included oil, kerosene, petrol, heating fuels and hydrocarbon chemicals with its principal markets in the transport sectors of motor vehicles, aviation and shipping. In Britain during the interwar period the public face of the company was Shell-Mex, a distribution and marketing company born out of the acquisition by Shell in 1921 of Mexican Eagle. In 1931, as a result of the economic crisis and overcapacity in the global oil industry, the company merged with BP, the marketing and distribution arm of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), to create the joint marketing venture Shell-Mex and BP Ltd. Within the concern Shell held 60 per cent of the shares and the APOC 40 per cent. It was this company, with its iconic headquarters, Shell-Mex House, on the foot of the Thames in central London which was responsible for the sustained, path-breaking and highly creative building up of the Shell brand in the UK in the 1920s and 1930s which will be the subject of this chapter.

In relation to the market for oil products in the UK, and particularly regarding the rapidly growing motor spirit sector, Shell-Mex was a member of a triumvirate which dominated the industry. The other two members were Anglo-American and associated companies who belonged to the American behemoth Standard Oil, the world's largest oil concern, and BP which, as seen above, belonged to APOC. Throughout the period these three companies controlled around 70% of the market for motor spirit in Britain (Ferrier, 1986).¹ The remainder of the market was divided between the National Benzole Company Ltd and smaller firms, including Russian Oil Products and 'pirate' suppliers, who competed on price rather than brand. Amongst the three (and later two) companies collusive marketing agreements were reached throughout the 1920s and 1930s in relation to market share quotas, distribution, prices and expenditure on advertising. The three parent companies reached a similar global pact in 1928 known as the Acnacarry Agreement after the castle in Scotland where it was signed. Such restrictive marketing arrangements were common in nearly all sectors in Britain amongst the major producers at the time.

It should be noted that Shell-Mex was a success in Britain during the interwar period. In the 1930s the company commanded around 26 per cent of total spirit sales in Britain. This compared to c. 13 per cent for BP and 29 per cent for Anglo-American. In 1939 Shell-Mex and BP Ltd had an allocation of 35,853 dealer pumps or 34.7% of the total in the UK (Ferrier, 1986: 48).² Shell-Mex and BP Ltd increased their total sales of motor spirit from

¹ BP Archive, BP plc., Ref. 77958, 'Marketing Agreements Between Anglo-American Oil Co. and SMBP'.

² Ibid.

497,063,049 gallons in 1931 to 651,460,790 gallons in 1938 (Ferrier, 1986: 48). Out of this total turnover sales of Shell's premier spirit were highest, increasing from 137 million gallons to 162 million gallons between 1932 and 1938 (Ferrier, 1986: 51). During the difficult economic conditions of the 1930s the company was actually able to increase profits marginally from £620,616 in 1932 to £709,023 in 1936.³ The contribution of advertising, publicity and marketing to this cannot be quantified and must remain uncertain. What is certain, however, is that it was regarded as central to market success by the major oil firms including Shell. As R.W. Ferrier has noted, retaining brand name before the consumer and maintaining customer loyalty was crucial in such a competitive market as motor spirit in the UK in the 1920s and 1930s where major brands competed both against each other and against much cheaper, unbranded products (Ferrier, 1986). In such a marketing environment advertising was perceived as important by oil companies operating in Britain. This is clearly seen in the multiple market agreements between the major oil firms in the interwar period where advertising and marketing was highlighted and great attention and detail went into its control.⁴ The formation of Shell-Mex and BP Ltd in 1931 is clear evidence of this. In the reminiscences of Vernon Nye, a senior member of the company's publicity department in the inter-war period and successor to Beddington as Publicity Manager at Shell-Mex in the 1940s, the role of publicity and marketing as a contributing factor to Shell-Mex's market success was emphasised. Nye made the important point that Shell-Mex was far more marketing orientated than BP which was more concerned with its product. Whilst the corporate branding and public

³ Ibid., Ref. 102388, 'Shell-Mex and BP Ltd Annual Reports 1932-1936'.

⁴ Ibid., Ref. 64905, 'Advertising – Continental General Racing Agreements', Ref. 77958, 'Marketing Agreements Between Anglo-American Oil Co. and SMBP', Ref. 64900, 'Advertising – Continental General'.

relations orientated publicity which Shell-Mex followed in the 1930s was a success for the company, he noted that such success was never achieved with BP.⁵ It is to this area that the remainder of this chapter will focus on. It will do so by examining how Shell-Mex built up its corporate brand by a process of internal marketing within the company, its sponsorship of road and air travel, its harnessing of art to promote the company and its development of *The Shell County Guides* in the 1930s.

Internal Marketing

Internal marketing is the process of marketing to employees within the organization (Varey & Lewis, 2000). The phenomenon can take several forms and have different aims. In relation to brand building it is the process of instilling the values of the brand within employees who it is hoped will then act as brand ambassadors to external publics. It is particularly important in service industries where the production and consumption of the brand is simultaneous and where uniformity of brand experience is difficult due to human behaviour. Employees must first imbue the values, benefits and associations of the brand before these can be passed onto the customer. At Shell the 'buying in' of corporate values and the possession of a knowledge of the activities and products of the organization on a global scale was felt by the company to be important and played a major role in the development of its corporate culture and organizational behaviour.

This 'buying in' of corporate values was evident in Shell's establishment and commitment to building up a strong internal organisational structure and concomitant organisational

⁵ Shell Art Collection, Beaulieu, 'Recollections of Shell and BP Advertising By Vernon Nye'.

culture. As Howard Gospel's and Robert Fitzgerald's work has noted, in the case of capital intensive firms such as Shell which had invested heavily in plant, machinery and industrial processes there was an organisational imperative to build up strong internal structures, bureaucracies and labour management processes (Gospel, 1992, Fitzgerald, 1995). Simultaneously to generate adequate returns market share had to be created and fiercely guarded. There was thus a vital link between the internal and the external, between its personnel and organisational policies and the company's marketing and sales strategies. In relation to this, Shell invested heavily in industrial welfare to maintain worker loyalty, attract and retain key workers and establish an organisational culture, or in the parlance of the time *esprit de corps*, to motivate employees and meld them into the beliefs, practices and values of the organisation. This was felt not simply to have internal benefits for the organisation but also external in that strong organisational commitment was hoped to benefit the company in the market place. In addition, company magazines were felt to act as important links between the internal organisation and important publics outside the organisation such as customers and shareholders. As Mr R Pugh, General Manager of Factory Services & Utilities Ltd, commented in 1932 at the eleventh conference of editors of works magazines organised by the Industrial Welfare Society (of which Shell was a member), 'the employee's magazine is passing through a stage in which it is becoming the organ of the internal and external relations of the firm.'⁶

The principal medium of internal marketing for Shell in the UK was its house journal. The company had originally started a company magazine in 1914 called the *St. Helen's Court*

⁶ *Industrial Welfare and Personnel Management*, November, 1932, 'Magazines for Staff, Shareholders and Customers', 529.

Bulletin, St Helen's Court being the then headquarters of the company in Britain. The original purpose of the magazine, as was clearly stated in its opening forward, was to enable staff in the organization to receive news of their colleagues and friends who had joined the military, and for the latter to obtain news of Shell.⁷ The magazine would continue until 1919. After a gap of two years a new magazine appeared in 1921 called *The Pipeline*, which in 1934 was renamed *The Shell Magazine*. The magazine was one of many in the sprawling Royal Dutch Shell company. In the United States, for example, there were several magazines for its east and west coast operations including *Sign of the Shell* and *The Shell Globe*.⁸ In the UK, the company under its chairman Sir Robert Waley Cohen, was an advocate of the multiple benefits of in-house journals. Shell-Mex was an active member of the Industrial Welfare Society which, as seen above, in the inter-war period held annual conferences for the chief editors of company magazines. At their twelfth conference in 1934, for example, Sir Robert stated that, 'the House Magazine was a valuable link between the leaders of commerce and industry and their employees, and served to maintain the human touch which, he thought, would otherwise perhaps be lost in the increasing momentum of modern progress'.⁹

Determining the actual popularity of the magazine within Shell is difficult and there is always the danger in any analysis of assuming that simply because the magazine existed and was supported by management that it was read by employees, was taken seriously and achieved its organisational goals. Yet while this must be considered, it should be guarded against with several qualifications. Sales of *The Pipeline* grew from 2,000 in 1921 to

⁷*St. Helen's Court Bulletin*, 21 November 1914, 1.

⁸*The Pipeline*, 18 March 1931, 'Shell Journalism', 99.

⁹*The Shell Magazine*, March, 1934, 95.

12,000 in 1937 with subscribers reported in every country which Shell operated in.¹⁰ The problem here is establishing how many people actually worked for Shell and of these how many could speak English. While the first reliable figure in 1935 gave a total company employment of 180,400 people it must be emphasised that the majority of these would have been periphery workers in secondary and temporary positions (Howarth et al., 2007). Core workers (whom the magazine was aimed at) probably stood at something near a quarter of this, and if one considers that more than one individual was likely to have read the magazine then the above figures show a relatively wide readership. The fact that it was sold, at a price of 2d in 1934, rather than simply forced upon employees, also suggests that these figures are meaningful. That the magazine continued through the period, and was actually brought back in 1921 is further testament to its popularity. In addition, much of the content of the magazine was contributed by employees rather than management which accounts for the diverse range of subjects in the journal and gives it still today on reading a sense of spontaneity and relevancy. It also gives it a certain sense of pertinence. In particular, sport was a important component in the magazine which enjoyed widespread popularity within Shell. It is important to note here, as I have commented elsewhere, that physical recreation was seen as a key component of industrial welfare amongst large-scale organisations in the UK during this period and was promoted for its contribution to building up *esprit de corps* within the organisation (Heller, 2008). Much of the discourse around sport within Shell certainly confirms this.¹¹ Finally, one should be careful of projecting our distrustful, jaundiced and wary attitudes towards labour relations in large-scale employers, itself engendered by contemporary job insecurity, anomie and

¹⁰ Ibid., January, 1937, 4.

¹¹ Ibid., October, 1938, 235.

instrumentalism, onto the organisation of seventy or eighty years ago. Many of the employees who worked for Shell-Mex and the wider Royal Dutch Shell were, as William H. Whyte critically observed fifty years ago, ‘organisational men’ (Whyte, 1956). These were individuals who had life long careers at Shell and invested ontological and personal capital into the organisation. Many of them had personal connections with the company (including Jack Beddington whose uncle was Sir Robert Waley Cohen) and would send their own children into it. Employees at this time were more ‘corporate’ and in such a milieu corporate messages may have been more meaningful.

The Pipeline and its successor was a product of the late-Victorian journalistic construct of education, information and entertainment which in the 1920s and 1930s was symbolised by the BBC in Britain (Scannell & Cardiff, 1991). Serious articles on the crisis in the Gold Standard stood along company announcements and news of the organization which sat next to monthly features on films, books, music and radio programmes. As can be seen from Waley Cohen’s quote above, the magazine was seen by the company and its management as serving several important functions within the organization.¹² It was thought to create a sense of unity in a disparate organizational structure where units were spread out across the country and the globe. It acted as a means of communication in the company between management and employees and for employees themselves. In addition, as seen above, the magazine was claimed to be a key element in the construction of an organizational culture in Shell.¹³

¹² See article, ‘Staff Magazines’ in *The Pipeline*, July, 1933, 353.

¹³ *The Pipeline*, 21 December 1932, 534.

Amongst these various roles the magazine informed and promoted the manifold products and services of the company to its readers. On one level the magazine educated Shell's employees about the many product which the company provided. One full-page announcement in *The Pipeline* in 1931 asked its readers if they knew all of Shell's products. 'I hope', wrote F.L. Halford, the general manager of Shell-Mex, 'the members of the Shell organization besides always using our products will never lose an opportunity of recommending them to their friends'. Beneath this was a list of Shell's various products including 'Shelltox' for killing insects, and Mexpahlte, an asphalt used in road construction.¹⁴ Regular articles appeared in the magazine on Shell products and their multiple benefits and on Shell's activities in marketing, advertising and in trade exhibitions. In addition, the journal often ran articles on the oil industry in general and on production processes. From January to May, 1933, for example, a series of five-page articles appeared describing in minute detail the work of an oil refinery. In 1934 a series of articles appeared under the title 'Petroleum Products' which covered the entire process in the oil industry from exploration to drilling, refining and distribution and covering every product produced by the sector.¹⁵

Shell's house-journal did not only concern itself with the minutiae of informing its employees of what the company made and which services it provided. It informed its employees of Shell's advertising, publicity and marketing. There were frequent articles,

¹⁴ Ibid., 27 May 1931.

¹⁵ See, for example, *The Shell Magazine*, January, 1934, 'Petroleum Products 1. The Distribution of Petroleum Products By F.N. Harrap'.

for example, on the company's numerous exhibitions and publications.¹⁶ On a broader level it attempted to inculcate in its workers the values and vision of the organization, which played such an important role in transforming its goods from commodities into brands. Many of the corporate values and associations which were transferred to Shell's brands which will be dealt with later in the chapter were broadcast to Shell's staff via the magazine. Shell's role in developing air travel, for example, and its associated strengthening of Empire through these modern sinews of travel and communication were covered in the journal with excerpts from another of Shell's publications, *Shell Aviation News*, appearing regularly in its house magazine.¹⁷ The social benefits of Shell's products were a constant theme of the magazine which put heavy emphasis on the services which the organization provided to individual and society alike. One of the key associations of Shell's corporate brand – that the company did not simply produce petrol or oils but rather positive experiences such as travel, adventure and speed - was a theme which filled its pages. Internal marketing was a key component in Shell-Mex's corporate brand building. Without a core workforce who held and imbued the values and associations of the organisation it is difficult to see how the brand could have functioned or been taken seriously in its external markets.

Shell's Sponsorship of Travel and Speed

Stephen Harp has noted in his book, *Marketing Michelin*, that the French tyre maker did not so much market tyres as promote travel, destinations and an entire way of life (Harp,

¹⁶ *The Pipeline*, March 2nd, 1932, 'The British Industries Fair', 94-95, *The Pipeline*, October 12th, 1932, 'Shell-Mex and B.P. News The Charing Cross Exhibition', 415-416.

¹⁷ *The Shell Magazine*, October, 1934, 'Aviation and the Shell Company', 454-8.

2001). Much of this was due to the fact that their products were so new and unprecedented. Organizations such as Shell, Michelin, Dunlop and Imperial Airways had to first create the desire and need to travel whether on land or air via the new technology of combustion engines if they were to create a demand for their products. As Harp has noted, to generate demand for these new industries, production, advertising and distribution were often inseparable (Harp: 16). It is this market situation which partially explains why so many of these 'new' industries were so creative in their publicity and marketing. In connection with this, many of these organizations associated their products with modernity and speed. Within this trope the sponsorship of races and record breaking journeys became a major marketing tool. Not only did this embellish and reinforce the powerful associations connected with these products, but also it demonstrated their quality and reliability and earned valuable marketing exposure for their brands.

Shell was at the forefront of such marketing tactics in Britain. From its beginnings much of the company's publicity focused on car racing and land speed records.¹⁸ In the inter-war period the company also moved into aviation and sponsored record breaking global flights. In the 1925, for example, it sponsored the Chief of the Italian Air Staff, Marchese de Pinedo, in a record flight from Rome to Australia and back via among other countries India, Japan, the Philippines, Siam and Egypt (See figures 1& 2). Pinedo flew a record-breaking 34,000 miles. On his homeward trip from Bangkok to Taran he flew 6,400 miles in ten consecutive days, a long-distance speed record. It was noted in the promotional literature that, 'The aviator and his engineer attribute their success in large measure to the

¹⁸ See *The Pipeline*, 16 March 1932, 'Shell Shots by G.F.H. Nearly Thirty Years Ago', 113. See also the magazine, *The Motor*, 7 October 1924 for the close association between Malcolm Campbell's land speed record and Shell Motor Oil.

fact that they were able to obtain Shell spirit at every stop. They had no engine trouble'.¹⁹ In a signed testimony Pinedo promised his fellow aviators that if they used Shell motor spirit their engines would run smoothly and they could too go round the world many times. He had travelled 55,000 kilometres on it without a hitch.²⁰ This was celebrity endorsement at its very best.

Sponsorship of flights within the Empire were a favourite for Shell. Such marketing activities gave the organization imperial and patriotic endorsement, something important for a company which was only 40% British. Flights from far flung corners of the Empire such as Australia, Canada and Africa were valued as much for their strengthening the bonds of empire as they were for furthering the cause of aviation. A good example of this sponsorship was the flights of H.F. Broadbent from Australia to England and H.L. Brook from South Africa to England, both in the first week of May in 1937. Both were record breaking flights flown using Shell Aviation Spirit. Broadbent reached London within 6 days and 11 hours, taking 26 hours off the previous record, and Brook flew to England in 4 days and 18 minutes, 15 hours 59 minutes faster than the previous record holder. He also broke the unofficial record for the 'out and back' trip. Both records gained large exposure in the national press and were used by Shell for publicity purposes.²¹

What is particularly interesting with these two records was the degree of skill and control in which Shell controlled this media event and provides marketing historians with one of the earliest examples of commercial PR in Britain through the use of press releases. In

¹⁹ Shell Group Archives, London, Photograph Albums, Marchese de Pinedo, 1925.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *Shell Aviation News*, May, 1937, 7.

1931 Shell had brought out a journal called *Shell Aviation News*. The magazine grew out of the circular flight letter of the Aviation Department and was originally a typed document. By 1933 it had gained print status and was produced monthly. The journal was for internal purpose though could be subscribed to privately – a technique Shell regularly used in its publicity. The journal had several functions. It provided important information in aviation for Shell employees, it aimed to develop ‘airmindedness’ within the Shell organization (a good example of internal marketing) and it was used for press releases with the intention of supporting sales and promoting aviation.²² It is in this last role that the magazine was used in relation to Broadbent and Brooks’ records. News and information appeared for both individuals in the May 1937 edition of the magazine.²³ This information was principally factual with routes and times of the journey taken included, and comparisons with previous records given. In addition, some of the difficulties Brook’s encountered in his flight were briefly summarised. Reports in the *Telegraph* and the *Times* were clearly based on these press releases with all the above information included in both.²⁴ While reports in the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail*, the two most widely read newspapers in Britain, focused more on the human-interest stories of the flight such as how the pilots stayed awake or the activities of their wives, they too contained the above information from the *Shell Aviation News*.²⁵ In all newspapers a large customised advert for Brook endorsing Shell appeared and in the *Telegraph* and *Aeroplane* magazine a similar advert appeared for Broadbent (See Figures 3 & 4). All newspapers had similar adverts for Castrol for both pilots. Here one sees extremely sophisticated marketing and

²² Ibid, July, 1931 (First Edition), 1. See also *The Shell Magazine*, January, 1934, ‘Shell Aviation News’, 7-8.

²³ *Shell Aviation News*, May, 1937, 7.

²⁴ *The Times*, 4 May 1937, 16 & 6 May 1937, 16. *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 May 1937, 14 & 6 May 1937, 18.

²⁵ *The Daily Mail*, 4 May 1937, 13-14 & 6 May 1937, 13. *The Daily Express*, 4 May 1937, 13 & 6 May 1937, 13.

PR for the period. Shell partially sponsored the flights, helped create the news stories in national daily press through press releases from its own aviation journal and then placed carefully tailored adverts of the pilots endorsing their products in the same newspaper. Shell and Castrol were thus not merely passively benefiting from the publicity generated from these records but were active in the creation of these news events. Through such activities, which also included motor racing, Shell was able to build its brand by a clear association of its organization and product with the achievement, speed, endurance and path-breaking accomplishments of these record holders.

Shell In The Air

While Shell has been traditionally associated with road transport, aviation (as seen in the previous section) was an important sector for the organization and one in which the company played a major role in building up the infrastructure of this new industry. International air travel was impossible without logistical facilities such as fuelling depots, service stations and information on routes and local environs. Shell was active in developing all of these. The company was one of the fifteen founding members, for example, of the International Air Traffic Association in 1919, a date associated with the birth of commercial aviation in Britain and the Empire. In 1934 the company noted, 'Shell has played its part together with the operating companies which form the I.A.T.A and has borne its share of the pioneering work involved. The Group has invested a large amount of

capital to provide an efficient ground organization to supply aviation products for a world-wide transport service'.²⁶

The extent of Shell's 'pioneering' work in civil aviation can be seen in the article, 'Aviation And The Shell Company' which appeared in 1934.²⁷ In this piece Shell outlined its activities in laying the foundation of an international aviation fuel distribution system, which by 1934 served 2,500 aerodromes and seaplane stations worldwide. Noting that 'the delivery of gasoline and oil to an aircraft does not depend solely on stocks being available at aerodromes', the article outlined in detail how Shell had developed an infrastructure which distilled, distributed and stored aviation fuel and developed a ground organization to serve the needs of pilots.²⁸ The organization had developed electrically powered refuelling trucks which could fill planes quickly and efficiently thus making journey times shorter. For sea-planes, which were commonly used in civil aviation in the 1930s, it had developed tank boats and motor launches equipped with fuel pumps. The company had also a network of Shell Aircraft Service Stations where pilots could buy supplies, have maintenance work performed and find facilities for writing up log books, plotting courses, eating, washing and even sleeping. The stations also assisted in bureaucratic work involved in visas and passports. Finally, Shell also assisted international civil aviation by developing what it called, 'a wealth of information on aerodromes, routes, flying and meteorological conditions, etc., which has been collected over a number of years and is at the disposal of any pilot'.²⁹ Just as Shell was doing for roads in Britain with its *County*

²⁶ *The Shell Magazine*, September, 1934, 'Shell Aviation News', 399.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, October, 1934, 'Aviation and the Shell Company', 454-58.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 457.

Guides, the company was making aviation possible not simply by its supply of fuel but also by its facilitation of information which was essential for safe and speedy travel.

Shell was keen to publicise this work to the public. Such publicity had the double benefit of raising the profile of air travel and making it more popular, and of boosting the reputation of the company by its association with and services to aviation which had caught the public imagination in Britain in the interwar period. In the 1930s the company did this primarily through the medium of film.³⁰ Shell under its head of publicity in the late 1920s and 1930s, Jack Beddington, had established a film unit in 1934 which proceeded to make documentary films covering oil products and the services of the organization (Artmonsky, 2006). These films such as *Power Unit* (1937) and *Seven Point Service* (1935) were documentaries which were usually shown in cinemas across the nation as the short film before the main showing. They succeeded in broadcasting not only Shell's products and services, but perhaps more importantly, the Shell company to millions across the UK. In relation to aviation, Shell made two major documentaries in the 1930s, *Contact*, (1933) and *Airport*, (1935).³¹

Contact perfectly exemplifies the attempts of Shell to promote air travel amongst the British public and to demonstrate its associations with the company. In the words of its maker and producer, Paul Rotha, the twenty minute documentary, 'spoke of Man's new conquest of space and time with emphasis laid on the closer communication between peoples made possible by air travel, especially by airmail' (Rotha, 1973: 72). The film was

³⁰ For a history of Shell involvement in film over this period see Shell Group Archives London, Norman Vigers, March, 1984, 'A Short History of the Shell Film Unit, 1934-1984'.

³¹ Both films are available at The British Film Institute Library, London.

funded entirely by Shell-Mex but was a collaborative project of the oil company with Imperial Airways, something that would be repeated in *Airport*. One of the most interesting features of the film is that Beddington insisted that there would be no direct reference to Shell, whether through the use of logos or insignia. The company was not even mentioned in the film titles. As Rotha recalls, Beddington emphasised that the film was not meant to be considered as a piece of advertisement and in the film maker's opinion, 'This was public relations at its best and most imaginative'(Rotha, 1973: 72). *Contact* stands out as one of the most remarkable British documentaries of the interwar period along works such as *Drifters* and *Night Mail* (Rotha, 1973, Aitken, 1990, LeMahieu, 1988). It begins with the bold announcement that along side sea, road and rail travel, air had now established itself as a new form of communication. Following the genesis of the aeroplane portrayed by its physical construction from materials, to craft work, to assembly and testing, it appears at Croydon Airport (the principal British airport at the time) where passengers embark and the post is loaded. The plane then takes off, flies over ancient civilisations and monuments across Asia, then Africa and then back home where it arrives in England at dusk. The film is heavily impregnated with symbolism and direct associations with Britain, the Empire and national identity. The plane is called Hengist, one of the founders of Anglo-Saxon England, and thus a metonym for the nation. Throughout the film images of classical civilisation, Empire, the exotic, modernity, different cultures, trade, industry, exchange, seas and wildlife bombard the viewer. Through this collage of imagery and symbolism the message of the film was clear; through the miraculous invention of the modern aeroplane and the communication which it facilitated, all of the above would come more securely under the grasp of Britain and its people.

As a film *Contact* was a success. It premiered at the Dorchester Hotel in July 1933 to the Prince of Wales, the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, prominent economists and newspapermen, and was met by them with repeated applause (Rotha, 1973: 91). It played in West End cinemas in London for nine weeks and was then shown in more than 1,500 film houses in Britain. The film received good reviews in the national press and was even entered in the Venice Film Festival (Rotha, 1973: 94). Shell did not receive a penny from its investments but Rotha notes that Beddington was more than satisfied by the prestige gained by the film. He also recalled that despite the latter's insistence, it soon became widely known following *Contact's* release that Shell had backed the documentary (Rotha, 1973: 95).

In a narrow marketing sense Shell had little to gain from its public proclamation of its work in international civil aviation. All but the very richest were precluded from this novel form of transportation, and would be until long after the Second World War. Yet the benefits to Shell were not directly monetary but rather organizational and more particularly in terms of brand. By associating itself with aviation through its investment and sponsorship, as seen in the previous section, Shell received many benefits. It gained wide public exposure which kept its corporate brand constantly in the public eye. It was able to portray itself as a responsible corporate body which augmented its reputation not simply amongst customers but also among important stakeholder such as the media, politicians, its workforce and the general public. Finally, the organization through its association with aviation was able to reap highly positive associations which operated on both a rational and emotive level. By its embrace and support of aviation Shell corporate

brand was able to imbue traits such as service, progress, modernity and the exotic which it was then able to promulgate over its entirety of brands whether these were on land, sea or air.

Shell and Modern Art

Perhaps the most discussed and well-known of Shell's brand building efforts in the interwar period was its sponsorship of modern art in Britain. It has received academic attention and its art is still popular amongst the public today (Hewitt, 1992, LeMahieu, 1988: 267-68). In relation to the latter point, exhibitions of Shell Art are still shown across Britain, and prints and catalogues of its posters are still purchased, particularly from Beaulieu Motor Museum in Hampshire, the home of the Shell art collection (Shell U.K. Limited, 1998). Shell's sponsorship of modern art commenced under its director of publicity Jack Beddington. Leading British modern and avant garde artists such as Paul Nash, Mcknight Kauffer, Rex Whistler, Duncan Grant, Graham Sutherland and others were commissioned by Shell to produce paintings which figured in national campaigns over the period such as 'See Britain First on Shell' and its long running series, 'You can be sure of Shell'. These paintings were primarily depictions of the British countryside and famous landmarks such as Stonehenge and Bodiam Castle (see figures 5-8). Another series was 'These Men Use Shell' which figured, again using modern and often abstract art, a diverse range of professions from architects to farmers to racing car drivers (figure 9). In addition, it should be noted that these campaigns did not publicise a particular product or service but rather promoted the company as a whole and its corporate brand. The total affect of this, as seen through the popularity of the company's exhibitions and

discussion in the press and journals, was a strong association over the period between modern art and Shell. This was a distinct use of corporate publicity which distinguished the company from its rivals.

The use of modern art to publicise a corporation in Britain had been originated by the London Underground under its publicity director Frank Pick (Saler, 1999). Beddington and other prominent figures associated with Shell Art openly acknowledged this.³² In Beddington's obituary in *The Times* in 1959 the paper stated, 'He [Beddington] was as determined as was that contrasting figure of an earlier generation, Frank Pick, to use advertising in the widest sense as a servant of worthwhile aesthetic values'.³³ Pick began a revolution in corporate advertising in the inter-war period not simply by his use and patronage of modern, serious art but by his insistence that corporations had a duty in their advertising to treat the public both responsibly and seriously in their use of publicity, and also to educate them in appreciating modern painting and design.

In its use of modern art, in the tradition of Frank Pick, Shell was thus behaving responsibly in its advertising and publicity, and its treatment of the public. As the architect and public figure Clough William Ellis commented in his opening of the first Shell exhibition of its press and pictorial advertising at the New Burlington Gardens in 1931,

³² In an essay written in 1938 entitled, 'Patronage in Art To-day', for example, Beddington stated, 'The most important pioneer of commercial art patronage in this country was the old Underground Railway under Mr Frank Pick. All sorts of people were talking about Underground posters seriously a long time before other posters were taken seriously at all', Jack Beddington, 'Patronage in Art Today' in R.S. Lambert (ed.) *Art in England*, London: Architectural Press, 1938, 85-6.

³³ *The Times*, 14 April 1959.

There is advertising and advertising – the Shell sort and the other. The intelligent, the discreet and the witty way which is Shell's, the blatant, the unmannerly method which is the method of the anti-social numskulls who quaintly imagine that to arrest attention is the same as to attract.

Too much of our publicity is Mad Dog publicity – it startles and offends us instead of winning our goodwill by its ingratiating tact.³⁴

The use of Clough William Ellis is highly relevant to Shell's efforts in marrying modern art and publicity, and its attempt to portray itself as responsible and caring organization. Ellis was an active public campaigner and founding member of Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE), a movement which Shell sponsored (Ellis, 1928). A major campaign of the CPRE during this period was against advertising along rural roads and in villages (a common practice at the time) which was argued to be leading to the spoiling of the natural beauty of the British countryside and damaging to the environment. In an ingenious stroke, Shell removed its publicity from country areas and instead placed its artistic advertisements (which themselves depicted rural Britain) on its three thousand petrol tankers which daily traversed the nation. Shell was thus able to strengthen its image as a responsible organization by its support of CPRE, and in the process enhance its strong associations with nature and rural Britain. This is clearly demonstrated in the introduction to Shell's catalogue for its 1931 exhibition by Robert Byron (Shell-Mex Ltd, 1931: Introduction). Entitled, 'Responsible Publicity', Byron argued that Shell's use of advertising was salutary to the general public in the tastefulness

³⁴ *The Pipeline*, 24 June 1931, 248.

of its content, its respect for and efforts to improve its audience, its care for the countryside and its depiction of rural England in a genuine and aesthetic manner.

Shell's use of modern art in its publicity and its depiction of rural Britain won it widespread acclaim and gave its corporate brand massive exposure. Its exhibitions, first at New Burlington Gardens and latter at Shell-Mex House, became regular public events which attracted thousands of visitors and were widely reported and favourably commented upon in the press.³⁵ They were opened by important public figures such as Clough Williams Ellis, Sir Kenneth Clark, the Director of the National Gallery and the poet T.S. Elliot, who praised the corporation in their introductory speeches.³⁶ Exhibitions of Shell Art and Advertising were regularly held in regional galleries across Britain and its posters rapidly became collectors items, available by subscription from Shell or through its popular published catalogue collections.³⁷ The company also gave gifts to the Victorian and Albert Museum Department of Circulation which lent art to colleges and schools and which was very popular with the latter (Artmonsky, 2006: 35). Such patronage of the arts, and the cultural partnerships which this engendered, gave the company a distinct identity and fostered strong associations of the corporate brand in the popular mind with taste, nature, authenticity and Britain.

The techniques which Shell used in its publicity such as association were intentional. D.L. LeMahieu has argued that during the interwar period American advertising methods were

³⁵ See *The Times*, 15 June 1931, 'Art Exhibition Shell Advertising', 12, and *The Pipeline*, 3 February 1932, 'High Praise', 56, for Paul Nash's article in *The Listener* published 20 January 1932 entitled, 'The Artist and The Community'.

³⁶ For Sir Kenneth Clark see *The Shell Magazine*, July, 1934, 'Art and Advertising in Alliance', 313-14.

³⁷ *The Pipeline*, 20 January 1932, 'Shell-Mex and B.P. News Publicity Department', 35.

introduced and disseminated in Britain. Amongst these was the use of behavioural psychology and in particular the cultivation by advertisers of associations between ideas and products in the minds of the public. LeMahieu quotes, for example, Thomas Russel who argued in his work *Commercial Advertising* that, 'If the announcements of a firm are habitually artistic and beautiful the firm becomes cumulatively associated in the public mind with ideas of refinement and good taste'(LeMahieu, 1988: 162). These arguments were openly expressed in Shell's publicity campaigns. Robert Byron, for example, argued in the opening lines of his introduction for the 1931 Shell Exhibition that, 'The principle of successful advertising are as numerous as those of psychology. Each advertisement must caress some instinct, sentimental, logical, or otherwise, which is shared by a large body of persons'(Shell-Mex Ltd, 1931: 2). Similarly Cyril Connolly in his article on Shell's 1934 exhibition, 'The New Medici', observed, 'The advertising by association of ideas is particularly apparent in the series 'Artists, archaeologists, architects, etc., prefer Shell,' where the emblems of distinction, the insignia of specialization in each art suggest a corresponding excellence, just as intricate as the product'(Connolly, 1934: 2). Shell's brand building was intentional and systemic, its techniques as modern as those of the art it utilised.

The Shell County Guides

In 1934 Shell-Mex brought out the first of its *Shell County Guides* for Cornwall published by The Architectural Press (Betjeman, 1934). By 1939 thirteen Guides had been printed. The series were overseen by the future poet laureate John Betjeman who Beddington had first met while working at the Architectural Review (Green, 1994). Betjeman wrote the

first guides for Cornwall and Devon and then edited and chose the authors for subsequent counties. These tended to be individuals in the artistic and literary fields such as John Nash and Robert Byron who were friends of Betjeman and Beddington and often produced work for Shell. The guides were around fifty pages long and aimed primarily at the motoring public. While they served a practical purpose for motorists and were promoted by the company, the Guides, like so much of Shell's publications and films, were meant primarily as marketing tools rather than as profitable enterprises. Betjeman reflected latter on that,

The Guides in those days were not expected to pay. They were prestige advertising subsidized by Shell. There were no publishers' contracts and the whole thing was done on a personal basis because Beddoleman [Beddington] and subsequently William Scuddamore Mitchell and I and the printers all knew each other (Artmonsky, 2006: 50).

By 1934 the road guide was already an established genre. Shell, however, brought to the guides a creative novelty and individuality which distinguished them from what was then available. The Guides were as much pieces of artwork as they were practical tools for motorists. Each one was richly decorated with photographs, artwork, poetry and even music. While each guide had a certain uniform structure which contained sections on areas such as history, maps, a Gazetteer (a brief guide to towns and important features of the county) and sections on sport, they were also highly idiosyncratic according to the whims of the individual author. Betjeman's guide to Devon, for example, was filled with amusing excerpts on popular customs, superstitions, local dialects and etymologies giving the guide

a very personal and local feel. Thomas Sharp's guide to Northumberland and Durham had sheet music throughout of local folk songs, and John Nash's work on Buckinghamshire contained many landscape paintings of the county by various artists (Betjeman, 1936, Sharp, 1937, Nash, 1937). Shell tried to distinguish the guides from other contemporary offerings much more by focusing on the beauty and character of Britain's counties rather than channelling its readers towards popular recreation and tourist areas. As Betjeman wrote in 1937,

The Shell Road Guides had at once to be critical and selective. They had to illustrate places other than the well-known beauty spots and to mention the disregarded and past disappearing Georgian landscape of England; churches with box pews and West Galleries, handsome provincial streets of the late Georgian era; impressive mills in industrial towns; horrifying villas in overrated 'resorts' had to be touched upon. These things, for various reasons left out by other guides, are featured in the Shell Guides (Green, 1994: 139).

In all of the guides there was no advertising for Shell except in the final page which featured one of the company's *jeu de mot* topographical adverts for the relevant county (See figure 10). In doing so Shell was replicating the marketing of its artistic posters discussed in the previous section. The company was not advertising petrol itself but rather Britain with a heavy focus on the rural. As David Bernstein argued in his introduction to the 1992 *Shell Poster Book*, Shell advertised destination rather than product, it promoted motoring rather than oil, and promised the joy and freedom of motoring rather than quality or technical distinction (Shell UK Limited, 1992: 2). Yet in so doing the company accrued

these qualities listed by Bernstein to itself, and thus embellished its corporate identity which guaranteed its products and services. As in its posters, it brought taste and finesse to its brand which served to distinguish Shell from its competitors. In its county guides it further reinforced its strong association, as seen by its work with the CPRE and in its publicity, with the British countryside (Hewitt, 1992).

During the period older concepts of civilisation, liberties, progress and even empire gave way to a more parochial and insular definition of the nation (Mandler, 2006: Ch. 5). Discussions of national identity and national character began to centre on a country of darts players and pigeon fanciers rather than explorers and statesmen, more comfortable in smoky towns and winding roads than in the palace of Westminster or the fields of the Veldt (Orwell, 1953: 194 & 196). Within this introspective national turn of mind the British countryside took on renewed importance. Already evident in the pre-war years in the works of William Morris and G.K Chesterton and the growing suburbanisation of the British middle-classes, the inter-war period saw a resurgence in the romantic belief that the countryside was the authentic repository of all that was good and true in Britain (Mandler, 2006: 148). Particularly strong amongst the middle classes, this 'ruralisation' of British national identity, seen in the craze in the period for rambling, camping, touring and other escapades into the countryside, had a powerful behavioural and attitudinal impact. In politics, for example, the Conservative party under Stanley Baldwin used this organic connection between the countryside and the nation to boost its popular support and to marginalise the Labour party and its overtly urban and industrial constituency (Jarvis, 1996, Mandler, 1997, McKibbin, 1990: Ch. 9). In appropriating these powerful conceptual and ontological national sentiments to its own brand through its depictions of the British

country side and its *County Road Guides*, Shell, as evidenced in its sales, was doing something very similar.

Conclusion

Between 1918 and 1939 Shell-Mex systematically and comprehensively built up its brand in the UK. While it certainly developed individual product brands, as this chapter has argued, it is in its corporate brand that efforts were most sustained and most creative. Shell-Mex's basic strategy was to build up a strong corporate brand which then exerted powerful marketing externalities on its individual products and services. In doing this Shell was highly innovative in Britain in its techniques, strategies and market communications. The company was among only a handful in the U.K. such as the London Underground and the London Midland and Southern Railway which used art to build up and embellish its corporate image (Hewitt, 1992, Marchand, 1998, Saler, 1999).³⁸ While the advertising of its competitor BP focused on its product, Shell-Mex emphasised its brand image. As Richard Nye remarked, Shell's publicity was much more focused on marketing and public relations.³⁹ Many so-called modern marketing stratagems can be seen in its brand building. The company internally marketed to its staff, it developed programmes of corporate social responsibility and cause related marketing in its alliances with the CPRE, it developed powerful associations which distinguished its brand from rival offerings and through its sponsorship of pilots, explorers, drivers, artists and critics it received powerful endorsement for the brand. The company was also highly

³⁸ *The Pipeline*, February 3rd, 1932, 'High Praise', 56.

³⁹ Shell Art Collection, Beaulieu, 'Recollections of Shell and BP Advertising By Vernon Nye'.

creative in its use of media – print, film and visual - which were used in an integrated manner to maximise its brand benefits. Since the company emphasised its corporate image in its publicity it made active use of public relations which supported the reputation and image of the organization (LeMahieu, 1988: 155-58, Marchand, 1998).

Most creative was the nature of the brand that Shell-Mex built up over these two decades. Shell's brand was not concerned with petrol, oil and other hydrocarbon products. Rather it promulgated an image of the benefits that accrued from these. Individual freedom, self-actualisation, speed, modernity, progress, authenticity and exploration were but some of the many benefits that Shell offered to purveyors of its products and services. Shell was not about product *per se* but rather about a way of life that this product facilitated. Equally important was the way in which it wrapped this in an image of both nation and empire. Stephen L. Harp has shown how Michelin in France was doing something very similar at the time. The company's marketing efforts did not revolve around pneumatic tyres but rather, like Shell, concentrated on destination, travel and modernity. The company sponsored aviation, developed road guides, promoted French tourism and gastronomy and initiated the famous Michelin restaurant star guides (Harp, 2001). Harp makes the important point that in doing this the company both reflected and also helped to construct concepts of French identity and ideas about the French way of life (Harp, 2001: 2). This process can be clearly seen at work in Shell's brand building. From a certain perspective many of its associations appear contradictory. It was both traditional and modern, local and global, introspective and outward looking. Yet these antimonies reflected contemporary discourses in British society, and in mixing its brand in these cultural and ideological currents it made it both relevant and contemporary which

contributed to the way in which these discourses were negotiated and perceived. In the modernity of the inter-war period corporations exerted powerful influences on not only economic, but also cultural and discursive exchange.

One must further ask the important question here of why did Shell-Mex and the wider group to which it belonged invest so much energy in its corporate brand? Was it simply to sell more oil and petrol? While this was partially the case, there was a wider corporate issue which was addressed, that of the legitimacy of the organisation in relation to its wider publics. The position of Shell-Mex and the wider oil industry's position in Britain was not uncontested and immune from criticism during this period. A speech by a Mr Adrian Corbett of the American Department of the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company to the members of the Oil Industries Club in 1935 is highly illustrative of this point.⁴⁰ Corbett argued that the oil industry had become a reviled sector which attracted unfair and undue criticism from authors and journalists alike. He pointed to fourteen books which over the last ten years which had attacked the sector. These criticisms, not unlike those today, argued that the industry was global, gigantic, secretive, sinister and dangerous. It interfered with governments, created wars for its own gain, corrupted money markets and ruthlessly pursued its own interest. In Britain, since its oil and operations were chiefly concentrated abroad, it was attacked as being alien and foreign. Its success hurt home grown industries such as coal mining and the railways. Corbett laid much of this criticism to the success of the oil industry and the fact that its growth coincided with the rise of the popular press. In order to deal with such a threat he argued that the industry as a whole should aim to stand well in public estimation, it had to pay attention to public opinion. To

⁴⁰ *The Shell Magazine*, May, 1935, 'Oil Policy and Publicity', 213-16.

do so he urged the oil industry in Britain to adopt the use of public relations, something which was as important, he argued, as their production, distribution or any other operation.

The development of Shell's corporate brand during this period must be seen in the light of Corbett's speech and observations. In this respect it bears resemblances to Marchand's analysis of the growth of public relations in the United States and a similar development by the Prudential in the interwar period in Britain, which faced hostility from the press, the government and the medical profession (Marchand, 1998, Heller, 2007). In the late thirties Shell-Mex began a series of publications emphasising its contribution to the economy and welfare of those regions of Britain which it operated in. Vernon Nye recounts that the company mounted a local campaign in the North-East of England where it took large spaces in local newspapers and demonstrated the large sums of money in spent on local industries such as ship-building.⁴¹ In 1939 it brought out a series of short pamphlets dedicated to a number of localities entitled *Facts Relating to Shell-Mex and BP Ltd.*⁴² These books emphasised, like the campaign in the North-East, the contribution of the company to the local economy. The pamphlet for Merseyside, for example, stated that the company employed 800 people in the area with an annual wage bill of £134,00, it paid major taxes to local government, ordered ships from the Mersey shipbuilding industry, operated a huge refinery in the area and operated a fleet of boats and rail which were all built in Britain.⁴³ Highly defensive, the pamphlets are a clear example of PR and show us that Corbett's words and the company's public image were taken seriously.

⁴¹ Shell Art Collection, Beaulieu, 'Recollections of Shell and BP Advertising By Vernon Nye'.

⁴² BP Archives, BP Plc, Ref. 45174, 'Advertising – British Isles Shell-Mex and BP'.

⁴³ Ibid.

Corporate branding must also be taken seriously by historians who think that brands are important. For too long their gaze has been myopic, taken in too much by the allure of brands and blind to the larger organisation which had created them. The modern brands which emerged in Britain following the second industrial revolution were born out of the growth of the large-scale vertically integrated firm and the emergence of a popular mass media (Chandler, 1990, Hampton, 2004). The relationship between all three needs to be considered. As seen from this case study of Shell-Mex, its corporate brand provided important benefits to its product brands and acted as a central component in its brand building programmes. Yet at the same time it realised that the public image of its corporation had to be protected and promoted if these product brands were to thrive. Historical accounts of corporate image building and public relations consequently have to be integrated in the accounts of the emergence of the modern brand for a more comprehensive and analytical picture to emerge. They need to acknowledge that the growth of the large-scale organisation and the growth of modern marketing and development of consumer markets did not take place uncontested. There was often an imperative for the former to engage with its publics to legitimise itself, both in terms of its size, its scope and the products and services which it provided. Such awareness and research is crucial if the historiography of the brand in Britain is to develop and progress.

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References for Illustrations

Figure 1: Shell Group Archives, London, Photograph Albums, Marchese de Pinedo, 'Pinedo at Nigeria', 1925.

Figure 2: Shell Group Archives, London, Photograph Albums, Marchese de Pinedo, 'Pinedo at Manila', 1925.

Figure 3: *Daily Telegraph*, 6 May 1937, 14

Figure 4: *Daily Telegraph*, 4 May 1937, 16

Figure 5: Shell Art Collection, Edward McKnight Kauffer, 'The New Forest', 1931.

Figure 6: Shell Art Collection, Edward McKnight Kauffer, 'Stonehenge', 1931.

Figure 7: Shell Art Collection, Robert Miller, 'Devil's Elbow, Braemar', 1936.

Figure 8: Shell Art Collection, Lord Berners, 'Faringdon Folly', 1936.

Figure 9: Shell Art Collection, Hans Shleger, 'These Men Use Shell Journalists', 1938.

Figure 10: Shell Art Collection, Edward Bawden, 'Land's End, *but Shell goes on for ever*', 1936, John Patrick, 'Pity Me near Durham, *but Shell goes on for ever*', 1937.