While the Vinten name has been associated with television since the earliest days of TV, the company pre-dates television by many years, celebrating its centenary on 1 January this year. The GTC is immensely grateful to Vinten for its continuing support since the very start of the Guild, and as Zerb’s tribute to a much valued sponsor, Dudley Darby looks back at the company’s long history of innovation and engineering excellence.

Edwardian times
Vinten was established by 28-year-old William Charles Vinten as ‘W. Vinten – Gear Cutting, Engraving, Small Machinery for the two-colour machinery for the two-colour printing trade’ in 1900. By now, newly married to wife Ellen, Bill had set up a small workshop in their flat to take on freelance projects, one of which was producing steel punches and dies for mending friends’ bicycles for sixpence a time. After an apprenticeship served partly with Fredrick Lamplegh, the builder of an unsuccessful steam car, Bill moved on to Vickers’ Armament Factory where he rapidly acquired a reputation as a talented precision engineer. His ambition to get into the film business had already been fired by a film of the 1896 Derby screened within 24 hours of the race, and in the early 1900s, he started work for the camera maker R W Paul. In the middle of the decade Bill moved on to Newman & Co in Halifax where he would build spring-driven cine-cameras.

First World War
Then came the First World War. The Government took over the Vinten workshops which were put to use producing aircraft and aero-engine parts. Such was Bill’s engineering flair, that a solution he came up with to a problem aircraft manufacturer, Sopwith, had with engine valves seizing up in their guides, was so successful that it led to expansion into adjacent premises and the setting up of a separate company partly to manufacture valve assemblies. This problem had been solved over a weekend, with Ellen and young son Charles helping to produce samples to be tested on the Monday. During the war, Britain’s Royal Flying Corps required an aerial cine-camera, so in 1915 Bill designed his Model B, the first ever all-metal camera to withstand buffeting from updraft and weather. The camera had a pivot at its centre of gravity to allow it to be positioned vertically with the minimum of effort. Development also continued towards producing a studio camera when peace came.

Twenties and thirties
The 1920s were difficult. The company had to make ends meet with a foot in both camps though. They’d supplied camera masts and boxes for the EMI studios at Alexandra Palace as well. A bet in a pub with Harry Stringer at RAE Farnborough led to Bill and Charles developing the HS-300 high speed camera capable of 300 pictures per second. Unfortunately, Bill didn’t see the project come to fruition in 1930. Long hours and addiction to work had taken its toll, leading to his death on 16 November 1937. His wife, Ellen, took over as Chairman.

World War II and after
Film industry equipment production virtually ceased with the outbreak of World War II, but Charles managed to secure a role for the company as a specialists manufacturer under the Ministry of Aircraft Production, thereby safeguarding its independence from Government control. Production of the Williamson-designed F-24 aerial reconnaissance camera constituted the majority of their work, but the HS-300 also found use in various projects, including testing of Barnes Wallis’ bouncing bombs.

Dawn of television
Vinten’s first brush with television occurred in 1936. One of the systems had taken its toll, leading to his death on 16 November 1937. His wife, Ellen, took over as Chairman.

By 1937 Vinten machines were processing some three-quarters of all films shown in the United Kingdom

“the company’s first order was from Urban and it was for “25 Kinemacolor Machines (heavy type)” at £25 each”

“by 1937 Vinten machines were processing some three-quarters of all films shown in the United Kingdom”
Vinten's camera had a profound impact on television and film production. It was the first camera to use a continuous band of film, allowing for the smooth and accurate movement of the camera head. The Pathfinder camera, with its mechanical Pan and Tilt mechanism, was a significant advancement in camera stability and control. The Vinten nameplate, with its distinctive design, became synonymous with quality and reliability.

During the early days of television, the Vinten nameplate was associated with the best cameras available. The company's commitment to innovation and quality ensured that its products were sought after by both television and film producers. The Pathfinder camera was one of the most popular models, with its sturdy construction and reliable performance.

Vinten's success in the market was due to its dedication to innovation and quality. The company's commitment to research and development ensured that its products were always at the forefront of technology. The Pathfinder camera was just one example of the company's ability to meet the needs of its customers.

The Vinten nameplate has a rich history, and its legacy continues to this day. The company's commitment to innovation and quality is evident in its products, and its nameplate remains a symbol of excellence in the television and film industry.
The Vinten Group was formed in 1973 aimed at diversifying the product base. The 1970s and 80s saw acquisitions aimed at diversifying the product base: The Vinten Group plc. Vinten Broadcast’s new head joined the Vision range (the 950) in particular with Vinten Radamec. The business had diverged in terms of production techniques and terms of production techniques and development, so in 1988 the company was split into Vinten Broadcast Ltd. and W. Vinten Ltd. The military part of the business had diverged in terms of production techniques and development, so in 1988 the company was split into Vinten Broadcast Ltd. and W. Vinten Ltd. The military part moved to premises just down the road, the broadcast side moving to premises just down the road. The military and broadcast sides of the business had diverged in terms of production techniques and development, so in 1988 the company was split into Vinten Broadcast Ltd. and W. Vinten Ltd. The military part moved to premises just down the road, the broadcast side moving to premises just down the road.

Richard Lindsay, designer of many Vinten’s current offerings, retired in May 2010. He had maintained Bill Vinten Sr’s principles of innovation and high quality engineering to the end of the company’s first century.

The Vinten Group was formed in 1973

© SIS Live/BBC Sport

End of an era

The Vinten family’s involvement with the company came to an end in 1952 with Bill Vinten’s retirement at the age of 72. Precision work had been taken over by numerically controlled machines, but as in the early days, the operators were responsible for their own quality control. New drug systems appeared, new tripods and accessories, then in 1994 a new heavyweight head using a pantograph system to achieve perfect balance, the Vector 70.

By 1995 Vinten Group had acquired a myriad of companies including Vinten’s rival, Sudètes, and become the founding company of The Vitec Group plc. Vinten Broadcast’s new four-stage low pressure pedestal, the Quattro, appeared in 1996 with further developments for OBs and later a more compact version, the perfect balance, the Vector 70.

The Vinten Group has recently appeared.

Perfect Balance – a Vision 250 partially assembled

Pedestal-mounted Merlin arm with operator behind

A partially assembled Quattro SL base

The 1930s and 40s saw acquisitions aimed at diversifying the product base. The Vinten Group was formed in 1973 to look after the investment side of the business. Moves had been made into microfiche products, radiation monitoring badges, Didak (an early educational AV teaching system), a betting shop camera, even an attempt to develop the Wallis Autogyro for military and civil use. The mid-80s were disastrous for Vinten, mainly with SIG Davall. Its projected video recorder design was found to be monumentally flawed and ended up costing the company well over £3 million. As the 80s developed for OBs and monitoring badges, Didak (an early educational AV teaching system), a betting shop camera, even an attempt to develop the Wallis Autogyro for military and civil use.

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