

# The stuff of Legends



By David Gardner

Many readers know the VP Twin legend - that it was sold in two parts by Woolworth's so that they could keep their promise that nothing in the shop cost more than 6d. Like all legends there is an element of truth in the story, but it's much more interesting than that...



**M**ANY cameras are highly sought after because they are rare, or have sophisticated technical features, or wonderful optical performance, or are particularly attractive to look at, or they have some other sort of mysterious or legendary story to their history. Any one of these features can mean that the camera can command a high price which collectors are happy to pay. The VP Twin is one such camera, it comes with a legend attached, and yet it can be snapped up for under a fiver.

One of the marvellous things about the VP Twin is that if you find it in the box (any of the four designs it was sold in) you can learn all you need to know about the camera. This is because the manufacturer thoughtfully provided a full description of every feature on the various faces of the box. So we can see that the camera had a BOL Co optically ground every distance lens, with an aperture of f/12.5, and it took 16 pictures 1½ x 1¼ inches on standard VP (127) size film. There is even an actual size sample image on one version of the box so you can be in no doubt as to what size contact print you will get. Owners were also supplied with a comprehensive instruction leaflet.

So, who were those thoughtful people who provided all this information; who made the camera? That vital information is on the box, albeit in code. The camera body was made in the Midlands by E Elliott Ltd, a well established Bakelite moulder in Birmingham, and the lens was made by a subsidiary of Elliott's, the British Optical Lens Company. BOLCo is very clearly marked on the box, but the name of the manufacturer, Elliott's, appears to have been omitted. Not so, it is on the box and on the camera in the form of a coded clue in the trademark. The registered trade mark is an 'L superimposed on a Yacht: L + Yacht = Elliott!

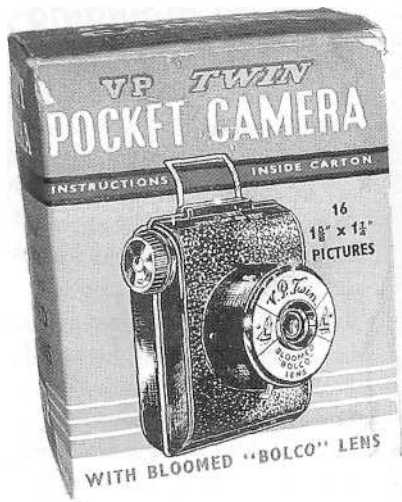
The history of Elliott's is fascinating and typical of

many British companies. It was the life's work of a 'self made man'; in this case Edwin Elliott, born in Great Tindal Street, Ladywood, Birmingham on 31st May 1878, the youngest of twelve children, only four of whom lived beyond childhood. Keen to go to school at the early age of three and a half, Edwin Elliott enjoyed school and was regarded as a clever child both artistically and academically. At the age of 12 Edwin was one of the first, just after his brother Harry, to go to the recently established Bridge Street

Left: A rainbow of VP Twins

Right: A range of coloured tableware produced by Elliott's





Seventh Standard School, in the old Cadbury factory in the heart of Birmingham. This was a new experimental technical school, established by George Dixon (an ex-Mayor of Birmingham), where Edwin developed his understanding of maths, applied maths, machine and technical drawing. At the age of 14, after a few months in an engineering works, Edwin made the move into the jewellery trade which was to set him on the road to forming his own company. This second job was working for Hyde's at Warstone Lane, assembling brooches, but it was short-lived, Edwin was 'let go' after only six months when they found he needed glasses for the fine work that was involved in assembling small beads on brooches.

### Office boy

Staying in the jewellery trade, Edwin then became office boy for the import/export firm of Eckardt, Bendorf & Peine, at 16 Vyse Street in the Birmingham jewellery quarter. He was involved in sourcing and pricing quotes for goods made locally (e.g. cheap pearl cufflinks) which were supplied to Hamburg for resale, and he delivered goods which came the other way for customers in Birmingham. He made many German and Austrian friends and learnt German to help in this trade. This was to stand him in good stead throughout his business life and led to him being appointed Consul for Austria in Birmingham from 1925 - 1938 (Birmingham Mail 2.8.66). In 1903 he left Mr Peine to become agent for the Bohemian firm of C. Aug. Schmidt of Gablonz (now Jablonec in the Czech Republic), who made imitation stones which he marketed to jewellery makers in Birmingham.

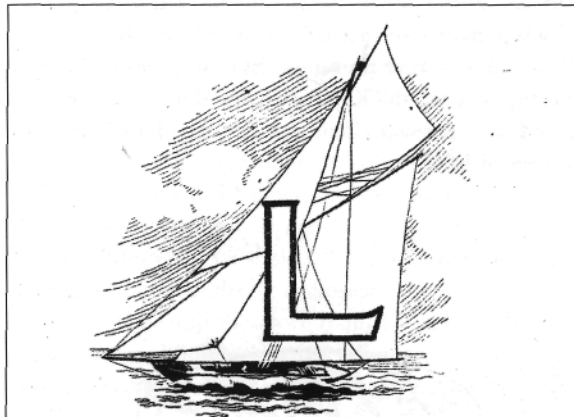
In 1909 Edwin Elliott left the employment of Schmidt, but kept the agency to deal in their stones, and in 1910 he founded the firm of E. Elliott at 55 Frederick Street to import and manufacture imitation precious stones and merchandise for the jewellery and fancy goods trade (this work was still part of the company's business at least into the 1950s).

In 1910 employees from a Sheffield optical firm started a factory in Birmingham for the manufacture of spectacle lenses, this factory became the British Optical Lens Company (BOLCo). Edwin Elliott held

the agency to sell these lenses, and in 1912 he bought the business. Along with spectacle lenses they produced hand-coloured (by EE's sister Lu) miniature photographs for use in jewellery, brooches, pendants etc. Harry Elliott (EE's elder brother) joined the firm as manager, and he was also an excellent engineer who reorganised and modernised the plant, enabling the business to grow and to move to Regent Street, Smethwick and Frederick Street, Birmingham.

At the outbreak of the Great War the import of

**Above: The box carried the instructions.**



*Registration of this Trade Mark shall give no right to the exclusive use of the letter "L."*

477,037. Goods included in Class 50, made wholly or mainly from Phenol and Formaldehyde Products, or from Casein Products, or from Wood, and not included in other Classes, viz., Stands for Manicure Sets, Handles for Manicure Instruments Calendar Stands, Frames for Reading Glasses and for Pocket Magnifiers, Clothes Pegs and Pins, Pomade and Powder Boxes, Lip-stick Tubes, Bridge and Whist Markers, Garment Hangers, Button Hooks, Shoe Lifts, Cigar and Cigarette Cases, Cigar and Cigarette Holders, Stands for Sewing Implements, Serviette Rings, Trays, Trinket and other Boxes, Toilet and Trinket Stands, Cups, Saucers, Dishes, Cutlery Handles, Switch-covers, Necklets, Bangles, Clasps, Girdles, Bag-rings, Beads, Picture and Photograph Frames and Stands. EDWIN ELLIOTT, trading as E. ELLIOTT, 17-18, Warstone Lane, Birmingham; Manufacturer, —25th January, 1927.

**Left: Trade mark 477,037 of a capital 'L' superimposed on a sailing yacht was registered to Edwin Elliott, trading as E. Elliott 17-18 Warstone Lane, Birmingham; Manufacturer on 25th January, 1927**

imitation stones and jewellery from Germany ended and so Elliott's diversified their range of photographs to include generals, army crests and other military subjects. They also got a major War Office contract grinding and polishing green glass for goggles used by troops in the bright sunlight of the Egyptian desert.

As well as their optical work, the company also had a factory manufacturing Vegetable Ivory goods such as studs and buttons. Elliott's also had the agency for a couple of early polymers - Galalith, and later Erinoid from which they manufactured knife handles and buttons.



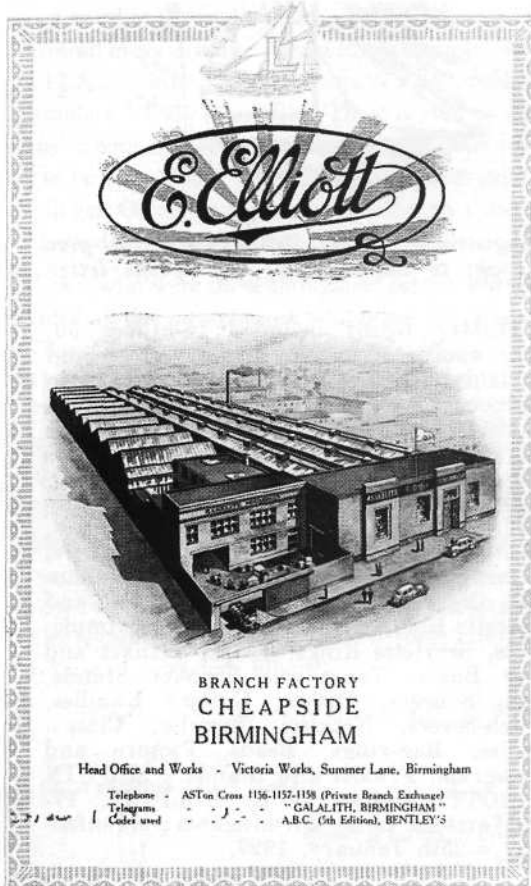
Right: Edwin Elliott.

In 1916 the Company moved to Warstone Lane, bringing both sides of the business together in enlarged premises to meet the growing demand. After the war ended Elliott's went back to making spectacle lenses, a business which had only limited success until they secured a contract from F W Woolworth (Woolworth's were prevented from importing cheap spectacles when the Key Industries Duty was introduced after the war.) This was the foundation of the success of BOLCo.

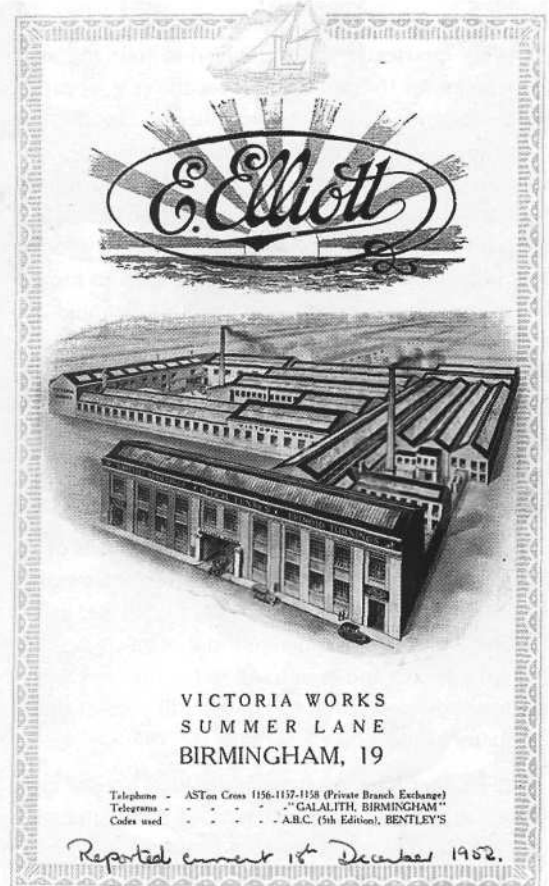
In the early 1920s the company entered into the Bakelite moulding industry by installing new presses to make radio parts and in particular to capitalise on the potential of coloured powders which were becoming available. Techniques and machinery were continually developed and modernised and they eventually installed some of the first machines for injection moulding of thermoplastics, which enabled more delicate and intricately designed items to be produced.

It is significant that during the 1930s the Coronet Camera Company was adjacent to Elliott's Victoria Works (in Summer Lane) and that the owner, Mr S J Pettifer, was a friend of Edwin Elliott. Elliott/BOLCo did some sub-contracting of camera body mouldings and lenses for Coronet, most notably the bodies for the Midget and Vogue, and Coronet made the metal parts and shutters and marketed the cameras under their name.

Edwin Elliott was himself a keen amateur photographer and cinematographer who joined the Birmingham Photographic Society, took documentary films of Birmingham life in the 1930s and eventually became the President of the Society. Some of his films



Right: Factories shown on E. Elliott Trade Catalogue of 1936.



were included in a 1974 BBC documentary on Birmingham, "A Tram to the Bull Ring".

On 23rd May 1936, a private limited company was formed to acquire the two companies (E. Elliott and The British Optical Lens Company) from Edwin Elliott. BOLCo became a wholly owned subsidiary of E. Elliott Limited and Edwin Elliott became Chairman and MD of the new Company.

It was at this point that the VP Twin was being made for Woolworth's - no doubt building on links made through making spectacles for them. Elliott's assembled the camera from the bodies they made, the shutters they bought-in (probably from the adjacent Coronet works) and lenses, designed by Howard Anstice and made by BOLCo. The camera was certainly on sale in Woolworth's in 1938, at 1s 6d (7.5p), because a PCCGB member remembers being given one at that time as a present on his 12th birthday. This was the first version of the camera, a plain Bakelite body with a fold-up metal viewfinder and the name pressed into the moulding of the camera back. It was available in black and a range of colours most of which - brown, maroon, green and blue - were quite dull in contrast to a wonderful bright blue version which must have been the 'vanity' model.

In 1939 with the outbreak of the Second World War the company again moved into war work, producing millions of anti-gas eye-shields for the army (and for their horses!) and a 12 ft periscope for amphibious tanks, which was subsequently adapted by the American forces for their tanks. During the war Edwin Elliott was made county film officer for the Birmingham Home Guard. He showed training films and made documentaries of famous visitors to the region, including Monty. In 1939 he had travelled to the West Coast of America and he often showed this film to entertain the troops stationed at gun batteries and balloon stations.

Birmingham's industrial areas were a natural target for German bombers and in 1940 on the 22nd November, the optical department in Brearley Street, Birmingham received a direct hit with incendiary bombs, and was largely destroyed. What could be salvaged was moved to Bescot Crescent, Walsall, to resume production and as a result this factory became the location of the British Optical Lens Co. Further bombing in 1941 resulted in the death of 18 men, and the majority of factory records being lost. As a precaution against the possible devastation of bombing Edwin Elliott had encouraged office staff to take company stationery home, and as a result they were able to operate the business from his home until the office premises could be rebuilt. These were very hard and difficult times for all involved with the firm and it is a testament to their dedication and sheer hard work that the company came through and prospered after the war.

Spectacles were once again to contribute to the growth of BOLCo's business when, in 1948, benefits for glasses were introduced through the newly formed National Health Service. By 1950 the two companies

were employing 500 people. Post-war austerity measures meant it was not until Christmas 1950 that the VP Twin was again available in Woolworth's at the very reasonable price of 3s (in November 1940 Woolworth's had abandoned its "nothing over a sixpence" policy). Although produced mainly in black, the camera was given a facelift (quite literally) in the early 1950s by fitting a metal plate to the front with the BOLCo name and 'L-Yacht' trademark proudly displayed. The camera made the trip over the Atlantic to the USA where it was marketed by a family friend of Edwin Elliott, Alex Weinstein the founder of the Edbar International Corporation of Peekskill, New York. Like Elliott's his too was a family business with even the company name being formed from the names of Alex Weinstein's wife Edna and daughter Barrie.

## Corfield

Another famous British camera manufacturer joined the VP Twin story in the 1950s when the VP Twin was marketed by K G Corfield Ltd both in the UK and abroad. This collaboration came about as a result of Edwin Elliott having provided financial backing for Kenneth Corfield to develop the Lumimeter and subsequently his range of Periflex cameras. The most important aspect of this collaboration was the work of Frederick Archenhold, the chief optical engineer at BOLCo, who designed and led the manufacture of the lens elements for the 50mm f/3.5 Lumar (1953), 50mm f/3.5 Lumar-X (1955) and 100mm f/4 Lumar (1957) and 150mm Lumar lenses. Elliott's made other products for Corfield, including simple plastic products like funnels and developing dishes. But, far more technically demanding was the production by Elliott's of Corfield's 'KLIKES', a plastic slide mount which completely enclosed a cardboard mounted slide and therefore required high quality injection moulding techniques to ensure the 'window' which covered the film was as clear and flat as possi-

## Some early 'plastics'

Vegetable ivory is the name for the polished shell of the tagua nut, the seed of a South American palm (*Phytelephas macrocarpa*), which was imported in very large quantities in the 19th Century and was used for buttons, chessmen, jewellery and other cheap imitation ivory goods. By 1887, it was recorded that two or three million nuts were used each year by factories in London and Birmingham.

Phenol Formaldehyde or Phenolic was discovered in 1907 by Leo Baekeland, a Belgian scientist working in America, and is better known by its trade name 'Bakelite'. Birmingham firms used Bakelite Resin for compression moulding, available locally by the mid 1920's and from elsewhere earlier. Mouldings are always limited to black, and dark shades of brown, green, red and less commonly blue. Urea Formaldehyde was an improved version developed by British Cyanides of Oldbury in 1925 and came in brighter colours. Moulding powders were marketed under the trade name Beetle (tableware made from it was marketed as 'Beetleware'). It is also commonly, though technically incorrectly, called 'Bakelite'.