

The industrious inventor Mr Coan

Robert Coan, who ran an aluminium foundry in the early 1920s, was also a skilled craftsman and a prolific inventor, says Christy Lawrance

Driving could be cold work in the early 20th century – so Robert Coan, who ran an aluminium foundry in Clerkenwell, invented a centrally heated steering wheel.

He didn't stop there – his patents concerned gas burners, combined scraper/step mats for cars, kettle handles, miniature golf games and a hands-free telephone.

Coan's main business was the foundry, based at various sites in Clerkenwell.

A government contractor, during the war, the firm produced tons of aluminium castings each week and cast a 36" diameter scarf gun ring, a feat believed not to be possible at the time. *Flight* magazine wrote: "Experts did not believe this method practicable with so difficult a pattern until Mr Coan, the founder of the business, proved it, and, incidentally solved the problem of the acute shortage prevailing at the time. Over 20,000 were produced and gave entire satisfaction."

Robert W Coan Ltd specialised



in aviation equipment – as may be expected from a firm working with a lightweight metal – and produced aluminium castings and crank cases for aircraft and road vehicles – many of its advertisements carried the alliterative slogan "Coan casts clean crank cases".

His approach was innovative – his firm devised Coanilium, "a corrosion-resisting alloy for marine parts and all outdoor purposes", to meet demand for marine equipment.

Yet search online for the firm



Adverts put an emphasis on quality with their use of illustration, experience ("original number plates") and innovation ("original and only ... patented")

today and you'll find its name listed most often in the antique sections of auction sites and antique dealers.

Alongside its industrial work, the company made numerous aluminium novelties, which demonstrated skill and precision. These included cast aluminium dishes, cigarette boxes and other items – often given away at Christmas – as well as indoor games and aluminium bowling balls (picture below). Some of these items were stamped with the name of the firm and others on behalf of the King's



The foundry at 219 Goswell Road in 1907; the firm later operated from Coan House in Duncan Street



Cross Philanthropic Society, of which Coan was president for many years.

Shops and shows

Robert William Coan was born in Islington in 1864. The firm was established from at least early 1902, when it was based at 15 Myddelton Street. In November of that year, it exhibited at the Stanley Cycle Club Show at the Royal Agricultural Hall, where it showed “all kinds of castings in aluminium in connection with cycles”; its programme entry, like its advertisements at the time, contained a guarantee “that castings can be made from a customer’s own patterns in a single day”.

At this time, the company was already making craft items, with “various novelties in the form of souvenirs, badges, medals, etc” on display at Stanley Cycle Club show.

The firm exhibited aluminium castings in 1912 at the Non-Ferrous Metals Exhibition at the Royal Agricultural Hall and items including aluminium boot trees at the British Industries Fair in 1922 in Shepherd’s Bush, which was organised by the Department for Overseas Trade.

Inventions

Coan was a prolific inventor. His patents cover “gas burner rings and the like” (1912), pillion seats (1921), fastenings for loose-leaf ledgers (1906), a system of cords and metal rings for measuring tennis courts (1921) and a kettle handle that wouldn’t burn your hand (1921). He had several patents for boot



Robert Coan’s inventions included a hollow steering wheel that could be filled with hot water and a hands-free telephone



Precision and skill in aluminium were shown in novelty items such as the kittens give-away, the dish and the keepsake of Harry Randall’s performance at Islington’s Grand Theatre (below left)



trees and stretchers (1910, 1912, 1914), one of which involved a u-shaped spring bolt, and for step mats for cars (1915, 1920s) – these were marketed as “the Coan ‘cone’ stepmat – the motor mat that matters”.

His heated steering wheel (1904) was hollow and could be filled with hot water from the cooling jacket of an engine. Unsurprisingly, he said it should be made of “aluminium or other suitable metal”.

After finding it “at times exceedingly inconvenient to write down a message or the like when one hand is engaged in holding the telephone receiver”, he invented a

hands-free phone (1907).

In 1928, just two years before his death, Coan brought out a patent for a game “in which rings are pitched at... a polyhedral ball”. Before then, in 1924, he had patented a miniature golf game.

Coan also found time for philanthropy, and was president of the King’s Cross Philanthropic Society for many years.

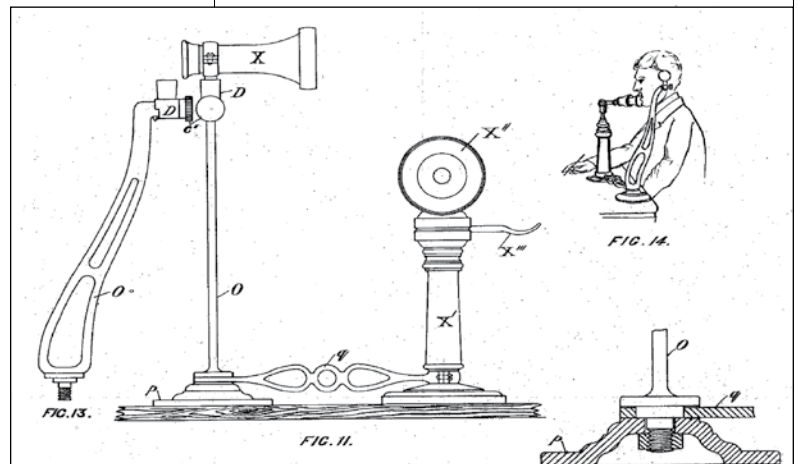
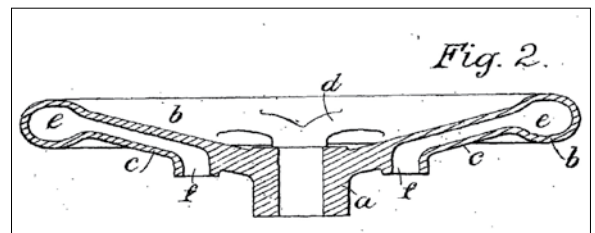
He retired to Clacton, where he supported sports clubs and set up a bowling club which is still going. His obituary in the *Chelmsford Chronicle* in April 1930 noted that he “was largely responsible for the splendid bowling greens on the Marine Parade”.

He died in a nursing home in London in 1930. His obituary says he was twice married, and left a widow and a married daughter. *Flight* in 29 August 1930 reported that he left £64,344 in his will. ■

Sources

European Patent Office: www.epo.org
Flight magazine archives: www.flightglobal.com/archive
 Grace’s Guide: www.gracesguide.co.uk
 Intellectual Property Exchange: www.ipexl.com

Many thanks to Philip Mernick and Michael Reading for their research



British sport advert and novelties: Philip Mernick; other adverts and shop: Grace’s Guide