

A CENTURY IN

OIL

The "Shell" Transport and Trading Company
1897 - 1997



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establishment in 1959/60, the general public and many shareholders (whether of Shell Transport or Royal Dutch) had continued to regard their company chairman as the ultimate authority of the given company, when in fact he should have been seen more accurately as its emblem and public spokesman – though by no means a mere figurehead. Shell Transport's previous leaders in that period (Stephens, Barran, McFadzean, Pocock, Baxendell and Holmes) had all in their day been extremely active managing directors, and no less active as chairmen.



*Sir John Jennings,
Chairman of Shell
Transport and Trading
1993–7*

Of course collectivity has two sides. In the event of outside criticism, each company chairman in his turn has had to stand up in public and take the flak on behalf of the whole CMD; but when the time comes for praise, they do not seek personal commendation. It is simply inappropriate: although good ideas originate with someone, they are evolved by the CMD. So it was in 1994–6: 'New Shell' was evolved collectively. However, just as John Loudon is credited with the original idea of the CMD, it is fitting to register that in this instance the perception originated from Cor Herkströter and John Jennings. Neither man sought the credit, but it was a concept of such potentially enormous influence that it seems right to identify them for the record. The way it came about and was developed provides an intriguing insight into the creative thinking of a multinational oil major, and will form a properly large proportion of this chapter; yet without wishing to tantalize, it is probably best to defer that

account until closer to its chronological position in this narrative – that is, towards the end of this book, and the end of Shell Transport's first century.

Meanwhile, the period of John Jennings' chairmanship of Shell Transport saw significant developments in Shell's staffing profile; numerous technical advances, particularly in deep-sea exploration and production and in natural gas; two short but dramatic periods of public criticism; and the world-wide introduction (outside the United States) of a strikingly re-designed pecten.

Last undertaken in 1971, the 1990s redesign of the pecten actually involved far more than the pecten alone. Within Shell the process was called Retail Visual Identity, or RVI, and it entailed a complete overhaul of the total design of Shell's service stations. The professional press described



it as 'the world's largest re-imaging programme' – with justice, for outside the US, which would retain its own pattern, the new look was to be applied to all Shell's 38,000 service stations world-wide in a ten-year programme, at a cost of £500 million. Obviously it could not be undertaken lightly, and when applied, it had to be right.

Beginning in 1989, the new RVI was four years in the planning, under a team led by Paddy Briggs, a marketing specialist of 25 years' standing with Shell. Market research in seventeen countries established that motorists perceived Shell petrol stations as places staffed by friendly, caring, trustworthy professionals, and that Shell red and yellow were popular colours; but it also established that Shell as a whole was beginning to be seen as old-fashioned and rather undynamic. Moreover, the 1970s design had lacked detailed guidelines: individual operating companies had only artists' impressions of architecture and signage to go on, and stations in neighbouring countries could look confusingly different, with no common elements apart from red, yellow and the pecten, which was often scattered randomly around the site. The new appearance was intended to change all those negative elements while maintaining and enhancing the positive, in an evolutionary rather than revolutionary manner; and like all really good design, the result – formally launched in the UK in May 1994 – looked as though it must have been quite simple to determine and achieve. But the fact that its achievement took four busy years indicates how much hard work and careful thought was required.

There were ten main elements in the new RVI, all working together to produce a harmonious, attractive and welcoming setting in which customers felt relaxed and safe – 'not the greasy garage,' as someone said, 'but the fully fitted kitchen.' Of the ten elements, the single most noticeable was that the pecten, hitherto always two-dimensional, became three-dimensional. Otherwise the numerous alterations were so subtle that their total effect was almost subliminal, and people only really recognized the differences when photographs of sites old and new were placed side by side; but if that was done, it became obvious that in contrast, the older design just did seem old-fashioned. How effectively RVI would achieve its main aim (the preservation of Shell's position as the world's leading petrol retailer) in the longer term remained to be seen, but it looked like a winner at once. An encouraging level of success was apparent as soon as it was launched: the new look not only earned a European Sign Design Society award, which was gratifying, but also something much more valuable – the warm approval of customers. And if a 3D pecten did for Shell's sales what 3D seismic had done for its exploration, its £500 million cost would prove a wise investment.



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