

Bill Miller

Engineer who left Rolls-Royce to launch a firm that made circuit boards for Sinclair computers.



Bill Miller, centre, with Chris Rivett, left and Roy Polson. Miller and Rivett founded Prestwick Circuits together.

ALISON MARTIN

During breaks at the Rolls-Royce plant in East Kilbride where he worked, Bill Miller often chatted through a fence with his friend Chris Rivett from the Standard Telephones and Cables (STC) factory next door. “Chris was faffing about with cat litter trays and chemicals, in a disused women’s toilet block,” said Miller’s daughter, Alison. “He was always experimenting.”

In fact, Rivett was devising ways to improve the circuit boards, destined for the first electronic telephone exchanges, he had been involved in manufacturing at STC. “Chris was an accomplished precision tool-maker by trade who made things happen, and I was the dreamer, the person who set the strategy,” Miller said.

As his friend continued to experiment, Miller exploring the market potential. “Printed circuit boards were an evolving technology when we started,” he added. “Chris and I developed the processes and very often made the circuit boards during the day and debated long into the evening to improve what we were doing.”

The pair went into business together, with Miller raiding his pension fund, borrowing from the bank and even putting up the family home as collateral. In April 1969 Prestwick Circuits was born, the irony being that both Rolls-Royce and STC had the expertise to take on the project though neither did. They chose Prestwick because it offered space at an old coal board factory, a well-educated workforce and an airport with direct links to the potentially large North American market.

Business was soon booming, with more jobs being created and new factory space added. “The demand for circuit boards grew to a massive extent,” Miller recalled. The company expanded overseas and in 1978 acquired a majority interest in United Solder-Wrap in Dallas. By 1980 three

shifts a day were building printed circuit boards for Clive Sinclair's revolutionary ZX and ZX Spectrum home computers. "For about four or five years we virtually had a monopoly of their work, and it paid very well," Miller said.

In 1983 George Younger, the Scottish secretary, opened the company's new plant at Shewalton, near Irvine, and in 1985 Prestwick Circuits floated on the stock market at 100p a share. By the following year it was employing 550 people at factories in Ayr and Irvine. All this expansion meant Miller having to dilute his stake to bring in outside investors. "That was a start of disaster as far as I'm concerned, because the fancy investment managers and analysts didn't like my style", he later said ruefully.

The economic downturn in the late 1990s began causing problems as did the emergence of cut-price rivals in the Far East. Prestwick Circuits, which had once exported 70 per cent of its printed circuit boards for the car, telephone and consumer electronics markets, was hit by a slump in orders. "Unfortunately, the bubble burst," Miller explained. "The demand for circuit boards for personal computers collapsed overnight."

In April 1999, ten months after being awarded the Queen's award for export, the company's shares had fallen to 13.5p and trading in them was suspended. TT Electronics, the engineering conglomerate, came to the rescue with what Miller considered to be a derisory offer of only 1p a share. He put up a fight, trying to arrange a rival bid, but in June 1999 reluctantly sold his remaining 10 per cent stake.

Prestwick Circuits continued to struggle, especially with high energy prices. Even the offer of a £1 million regional aid grant in 2005 could not stave off its demise. Manufacturing ended the next year with the loss of the remaining 264 jobs.

William Brown Miller was born in Kilmarnock in 1932, the younger of two sons of William Miller, who became head of Rolls-Royce in Scotland, and his wife Ella (née Brown); his brother, Eric, a chartered accountant who was chairman when Prestwick Circuits prepared for floatation, died in 1999.

Although the first few years of Miller's life were spent south of the border, in Coventry, he was raised in the Presbyterian tradition. When visiting places such as Aden and Singapore on business he tracked down outposts of the Church of Scotland. During the war he stayed with his grandparents in Dumfriesshire. Later the family moved to Glasgow, where he attended Hutchesons' Grammar School, and at age 17 worked his passage on a freighter from Manchester to Montreal.

Back in Scotland he took a sandwich course in mechanical engineering at the Royal College of Science and Technology, now Strathclyde University, though his passion for rugby had a detrimental effect on his exams until the final year "when I passed them all". Returning to Canada, he worked in the engineering department of Trans-Canada Airlines, now Air Canada, and captained the Manitoba rugby team in Winnipeg.

A Ministry of Defence job based at Rolls-Royce in Derby meant he was exempt from National Service. While there he met Brenda Carter, a student PE teacher, through a church youth fellowship group. They were married in 1960 and drove to Geneva for their honeymoon. She survives him with their daughter Alison, a technical writer. Their son, Andrew, died 12 years ago.

By 1962 Rolls-Royce had transferred him to East Kilbride. The success of Prestwick Circuits brought Miller a place on the Irvine Development Corporation, chairmanship of the Scottish CBI, a seat on the board of Prestwick airport and an OBE. However, his departure from the company came “as a bit of a shock”. Picking himself up, he took on several directorships and consultancy posts, including one requiring a monthly commute to Minnesota.

Latterly he was involved in the creation of the Carrick Centre in Maybole, near his home in south Ayrshire. This involved the closure of two draughty old churches and creating a building that offers not only a place of worship but also other community facilities. In 2021 he was described as “the driving force behind this historic project”.

Miller had been an enthusiastic amateur radio operator since childhood, passing the Morse code proficiency test at age 13. During the Covid lockdown, he was able to keep in touch with fellow “hams” over the airwaves without breaking lockdown rules.

Looking back on the glory days of Prestwick Circuits, Miller paid credit to those who worked there. “They always had a willingness to do things out of the ordinary to get the job done,” he told the Daily Record at the time of a staff reunion in 2010, adding: “It really was a terrific adventure.”

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