

The Founders



It was no April's Fool joke but Wearne Brothers was set up on 1 April, exactly 100 years ago in 1906. Two Australian brothers, Charles (Charlie) Frederick Foster and Theodore (Theo) James Benjamin Wearne, set up C F F Wearne and Co in a coach house belonging to their brother-in-law, James Craig.

Craig, a master mariner and husband of their elder sister Mary, took a one-ninth share while Theo invested \$700, all the money he had in the bank. Theo continued working for civil engineer and contractor, W Palliser, for about nine months, paying Charlie \$200 each month to run the company.

According to Christopher Fyfe's *Wheels in Malaya – The Wearne Brothers and Their Company*, a book that documents the history of Wearnes and its founders, the brothers had spent some time working in Singapore. They were first apprentice ship's engineers and later qualified as mechanical engineers. Charlie had arrived at 15 to work for the New Harbour Dock Company, a job he got with Craig's help. The younger Theo did the same when he was 14.

Legend has it that Charlie started the business by assembling bicycles. What is clearer though was his belief and fascination with the fledgling motor industry worldwide. The brothers bought the Oldsmobile agency from Howarth Erskine and acquired two second-hand cars and some spare parts. Three months later, Charlie and Theo's firm was the only exhibitor of vehicles and accessories at an agri-horticultural show in Beach Road.

Business was good. The timing of the company's formation was fortuitous, coinciding with a boom in the demand for rubber. There were a number of rich people in Malaya who wanted to show that they had arrived and there was no more obvious way to do so than with a new fangled machine called a motorcar. Soon, the coach

house was too small for the expanding business. They had to move to premises on Orchard Road. In the ensuing years, they acquired franchises for various makes of cars, including Reo, Star, Morris, Renault, Buick, Daimler, Rover, Rolls-Royce and Bentley, and vast amounts of property in Orchard Road, including the site of the present Dhoby Ghaut MRT station.

They brought the first Rolls-Royce into Malaya in 1910, which cost a local Chinese businessman \$15,000. The company also serviced cars and was reputed to be one of the best garages in Singapore. But it was with Ford that the brothers sealed their fortune. The first time Theo drove a Ford, he knew what price he could sell the car for. He told his brother: "Come out with me and see what this car can do, our fortunes are made."

On 1 October 1911, they were appointed the sole agent for Ford cars in the Straits Settlements and the Malayan states with a contract of 60 cars a year. In the first full year of the agency, they sold 137 cars and 300 cars in the second year.

On 26 November 1912, C F F Wearne and Co became the public company Wearne Brothers Limited. Branches soon opened in Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Penang, Malacca, Borneo and later, Burma. In 1925, the company set up an assembly plant in Penang Lane to handle Fords. The most economical way to buy Fords was to ship the chassis, together with the other parts of the vehicle in lots of one hundred, build the bodies and assemble the vehicle locally, for which jigs were obtained from Ford in Canada. There was no welding and the panels were nailed on. The plant assembled an average of six cars a day.

Profits rose. Its reputation grew. Charlie and Theo became respected businessmen and had some standing in society. They built homes in Singapore and Western Australia, where they intermittently holidayed. They were also avid sailors and commissioned the *Black Swan* – an ocean-going craft that Charlie used to sail from

Australia to Britain.

By 1924, when Charlie's eldest son, Walter, joined the company and his brother, Foster, a year later, Wearnes was assembling 12 to 15 Ford cars a day and the newly opened Malayan Motors in Orchard Road was selling Morris cars and spare parts.

Charlie and Theo relinquished active control of the company in 1928 but remained on the Board of Directors. The brothers had complementary styles of management – Charlie was expansive, while Theo more guarded – but in his book, Fyfe notes that they were both equally generous in their own ways. The company was noted for caring for all its employees and Charlie, who spoke fluent Malay, could be seen frequently chatting with the staff.

The company bounced back from bad times after the First World War and again in the Depression of the 1930s to prosper. In 1937 it went into the airline business as Wearnes Air Services, offering daily flights between Singapore and cities in Malaya, until the Japanese Occupation halted operations. Charlie and Theo managed to leave Singapore on the last boat out to Australia, but not Charlie's sons and some employees.

During the war years, Charlie had news that his sons were alive but prisoners of war. Back home, he helped the war effort by conducting auxiliary naval patrols with his boat *Selamat* along the West Australian coast. However, in 1944, he caught a chill after wading ashore at Mandurah, developed pneumonia and died in July that year.

After the war, the company, headed by Theo, picked up the pieces and recovered. In 1954 Theo retired and went to live in South Africa. Walter and Foster, Charlie's sons, remained to run the business. Tan Sri Dr Tan bought over the business for the OCBC Banking Group in 1974 and was made Chairman of the company. And a new chapter in the history of Wearnes began.

