

A Brief History of Hill Graham Controls



There is some misleading information about the history and status of Hill Graham Controls Limited, the company which was founded in the 1970s to build SCR systems in the UK. This article clarifies the facts.

1972

Ross Hill Controls incorporated in the USA to design build and sell a DC drives product for the drilling industry. There were a couple of founding principles in the design aimed at maximum reliability. These primarily were:

- No connectors – all connections to be screw or fast-on type
- Minimum number of ICs in electronics
- DC drive control electronics to be incorporated into a single replaceable module
- AC generator control electronics to be incorporated into a single replaceable module
- Drives (SCRs) can be cross-assigned to at least 2 motor functions
- No trim potentiometers which could be adjusted by rig technicians. All calibrations were by fixed resistor to prevent tampering.

1974

Due to the emergence of UK North Sea exploration, Hill Graham Controls was incorporated with four directors, with Ross Hill as a principle shareholder. Unusually the business was situated in High Wycombe, England (rather than the more likely Aberdeen) but this choice was made because communication links to Europe and the rest of the world were better, being only 20 miles from London's Heathrow airport. The four original directors were:

- David Graham
- Horace Hughes
- Gordon Shear
- John Tribe

The first system built by Hill Graham was Piper Occidental. This was given the job number 6000 and was closely followed by job number 6001, the ill-fated original Piper Alpha system.

Ross Hill had started at job number 5000 – presumably they never believed they would exceed 1000 job orders, a number which has been comfortably surpassed, sometimes leading to confusion in later years.

Although Hill Graham designs were largely based on the Ross Hill format, Hill Graham tended to deviate and specialise, and developed its own enhancements and products. Some of these developments were fed back to Ross Hill and became incorporated into the standard products.

In the late 1980s Ross Hill and Hill Graham began developing a modified current source inverter drive (Variable Frequency Drive or VFD). This design lent itself to high power applications and medium voltage drives up to 8MW were developed.

1989

Hill Graham Controls and Ross Hill were acquired by Ansaldo Sistemi Industriali, who would later combine with Robicon to become ASI Robicon.

1997

April 1997 NOV purchased the drilling businesses of Ross Hill Controls and Hill Graham Controls for \$19 million, excluding the VFD drives business. Hill Graham continued to service systems and provide support on behalf of NOV in the UK.

2005

Siemens stepped in to rescue Robicon from Chapter 11 bankruptcy in the US. Siemens paid around \$197.5m in cash for Robicon's assets, including the stock of its subsidiary in the UK, Hill Graham Controls.

2007

Siemens closes the High Wycombe office (location of Hill Graham Controls) and re-deploys assets and staff throughout the UK. Hill Graham Controls Limited was formerly dissolved and de-listed as a registered company.

Recent Years

A company based in South Wales, Olsen Subsea Controls Ltd, re-registered the company name Hill Graham Controls Limited in April 2010 (Reg No. 07231795) but this was later dissolved. In October 2014 Zeefax Ltd registered the same company name (Reg No. 09287895). The registration numbers are evidence that there was no continuity of ownership.

About the author:

Gary Barnes joined Hill Graham Controls Limited in 1981 as Senior Electronics Lab Technician, moving on to work as a Field Service Engineer, System Design Engineer and ultimately as Engineering Manager, leaving the company in 1998. He now heads his own company, CONTRELEC Ltd providing support and spare parts for Hill Graham and Ross Hill systems from High Wycombe, UK.