



## Ekco Sounds: How a Southend radio maker changed the world

By Chris Poole, Peter C Brown

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**Ekco Sounds: How a Southend radio maker changed the world** By Chris Poole, Peter C Brown

At the turn of the 20th century, an exciting new invention had everyone transfixed. The radio brought the world into people's homes and for young Eric Kirkham Cole it was a chance to experiment, as he built 'Cat's Whiskers' radio devices at his parents' kitchen table. Never could he have imagined then how his unique talent would be used to defend Britain from Nazi invasion, nor how his small radio set business which he set up in his garden shed in 1922 - the same year the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was formed - would become an international brand designing the must-have gadgets of the day.

From radios with station dials, car radios, convection heating, fluorescent lighting, to the first genuine portable television, E.K.Cole Ltd (EKCO) dominated the market for over four decades. EKCO is less known for its role in the birth of radar, developing tactical radar for the V-bombers, groundbreaking military and civilian airport and airborne radar systems, as well as

vital equipment for the medical and nuclear industries. EKCO even provided the technology behind Britain's first guided missile. Subsidiary EKCO factories carried out secret manufacturing work for the British government during the Second World War and it has recently been revealed that EKCO modified radios for use as listening devices for Bletchley Park to decode Enigma-encoded signals and that EKCO employees were so highly skilled, many were employed on the Enigma monitoring duties.

Eric took the same pioneering ethos to his workforce, and his company was one of the first in Britain to introduce paid holidays, occupational pension schemes, and an employee social and sports club which still exists today. In its heyday, EKCO was the largest employer in Southend, employing over 7,000 people. It was said that if you met somebody in Southend High Street it was

an odds-on bet that this person either worked for the company, was related to someone who worked for EKCO, or knew somebody who did.

This book, with narrative by Eric's son, Derek Cole, and many former employees, reveals not only the history of this great Essex company from 1924 to its sudden takeover in 1966, but the passion and talent of the people who once worked there. EKCO was much more than just a radio factory.

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- Published on: 2014-03-01
- Released on: 2014-03-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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