

A Brief History of Piaggio

Piaggio & Co came into existence 14th September 1887. The company grew up in the shipyard industry of the Liguria region where they crafted the interiors of large Italian passenger liners and prestigious German ships. By the turn of the century, more than 60 ships were sailing the seas bearing witness to the quality of the company's work and the ability of its cabinet makers. At the turn of the century Piaggio took the bold move of involving itself in the up and coming Railway industry by setting up a new company and factory. Metal working was new to the company. Railway carriages of all kinds were manufactured. Around 1915 many Italian companies were looking at the new aviation industry. In 1920 Piaggio took over an ailing aeronautical firm, this re-defined Piaggio & Co as a manufacturer involved in many pursuits including trains, trams, naval shipbuilding, fitting of ships, planes, mechanical engineering, forestry cultivation and production of coal.

New headquarters were purchased at Pontedera in 1924, where some twenty years later we were to see the birth of the Vespa. Meanwhile the focus was on aircraft design and manufacture led by the energetic Enrico Piaggio raising the work force from 136 to 6950 in just six years. Before the outbreak of world war 2 considerable engineering feats were achieved with over 20 records being set using radically designed aero engines. By 1941 the large Pontedera factory became the headquarters of the whole group. with some 7000 employees. By 1944, the factory being an obvious target was repeatedly devastated by Allied bombing. With the whole of Italy's industrial and social infrastructure collapsed Piaggio sought to find a way out of the situation and sought a product through which the company could be re-built.

The company management were billeted in the mansion of a local textile entrepreneur and motorbike enthusiast Count Trossi. Enrico Piaggio was introduced to two odd two wheeled vehicle in the Count's collection. Possibly these were a 1938 American Cushman and a Velta, an Italian scooter produced in Turin also in 1938. From this came the idea of producing cheap transport which became the MP5 project which was awkward and with little style became known as the ugly ducking. Enrico wanted to solve the problem and on December 2nd 1945 thanks to the genius of the inventive engineer Corradino D'Ascanio (also credited as the father of the helicopter) a new machine was produced, the MP6. Mass production commenced. The name Vespa was conceived by Enrico Piaggio because he said the vehicle reminded him of a wasp. (Vespa is Italian for wasp)

Production was modelled on 'Ford' type lines the only question was would the public accept this vehicle, a new concept. Heavily marketed, the first pre-production 50 units almost didn't sell! Efforts to market through Lancia car dealerships and the introduction of payment by instalments kicked the production into a boom that was to see over 130,000 units produced over the next four years. The rest as they say, is history.