

The assembly line – which began in the slaughterhouse, not the car factory

Upcoming episode

The assembly line was not invented in the car industry. It came from the Chicago slaughterhouses, where animals were taken apart on rails. Here is how the idea was reversed, what happened to the price – and what it cost the people standing at the line.

MAIN TOPICS

- Where the idea actually came from
- The slaughter line, reversed
- How cars were built before
- What Ford really invented
- Highland Park, and the numbers
- The price that fell
- What it cost the people
- What the line does to work

QUESTIONS THIS EPISODE ANSWERS

- Who invented the assembly line?
- What does pig slaughter have to do with building cars?
- How were cars built before the assembly line?
- Why did doors have to be fitted by hand?
- How much faster did production get?
- Why did Ford introduce the five dollar day?
- What is actually new about an assembly line?

KEY POINTS

- The idea came from the Chicago slaughterhouses, where animals hung on rails and were taken apart – not put together.
- Ford reversed the disassembly line into an assembly line.
- Before this, parts were filed and worked by hand until they fitted, and every car was unique.
- What Ford achieved first was parts precise enough that they needed no hand-finishing.
- A chassis went from around 12.5 hours to 93 minutes.
- In 1914 a Model T came off the line every 24 seconds.
- The price fell from \$850 in 1908 to \$260 in 1924.
- Turnover was 380 per cent in 1913. The five dollar day came in January 1914.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

- The Henry Ford – Assembly Line (research guide)
<https://askus.thehenryford.org/K12/faq/433848>
- Library of Congress – Ford Implements the Moving Assembly Line
<https://guides.loc.gov/this-month-in-business-history/October/Ford>
- The Henry Ford – Crowd of Applicants outside Highland Park Plant after Five Dollar Day Announcement, January 1914
<https://www.thehenryford.org/collections/explore/artifact/35765>
- James P. Womack, Daniel T. Jones and Daniel Roos – The Machine That Changed the World (1990)

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