Sir William Siemens
(1823-1883)

Wilhelm Siemens (1823-1883), who changed his name to William after moving to England, was born on April 4, 1823 in Lenthe near Hanover. His older brother Werner von Siemens, who was then in serving in the Prussian army, took him with him to Magdeburg, where William attended trade school. After breaking off a course of practical training in engineering in Magdeburg and natural science studies in Göttingen, William spent the spring and summer of 1843 in England. Here he succeeded in patenting the silver and gold-plating technique developed by Werner and selling the rights to the English company of Elkington for £1,600, or roughly EUR15,000. This not only helped the brothers out of major financial difficulties, but also made William decide to move permanently to England. Werner encouraged this, so that after a short stay in Magdeburg, William moved back to England in January 1844. However, the quick success of the previous year could not be repeated immediately. It was several years before the situation improved, and in 1849 William obtained a permanent position as an engineer in Birmingham. At the same time he also worked on his own inventions, among them a water meter that later proved very successful.

In 1850 William took over the management of the newly opened agency of Siemens & Halske in London, although its beginnings were somewhat inauspicious. New business fields opened up with the manufacture and laying of submarine telegraph cables. William’s good contacts with engineering circles and government offices facilitated the difficult entry into the highly developed English telegraph market, where private operating companies were in competition with one another. The participation of William and Werner Siemens in the laying of the first deep-sea cable in the Mediterranean between Sardinia and Algeria in 1857 was a great success and the brothers from then on acted as personal advisers to the British government for all deep-sea cable projects.

In 1858 the London agency was converted into an independent company “Siemens, Halske & Co.” Among the orders which subsequently consolidated the prestige of the German supplier were the laying of the lines from Constantinople via Chios to Candia, from Syra to Chios and from Candia to Alexandria as well as a section of the telegraph
line to India through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Access to the English market was thus finally secured, so that at the beginning of 1863 Siemens, Halske & Co. was able to open its own cable factory in Charlton near Woolwich, to ensure independence from the quality and prices of the existing suppliers.

In 1865 the London business was restructured under the name of “Siemens Brothers” after the departure of Halske, who considered the sea cable business too risky. The reorganization was not without problems due to the differing views of William and Werner on the relationship between the Berlin and the London company. While William wanted to be independent of Berlin and have a free hand with his business policies, Werner pursued the idea of an international, closely linked family company under his leadership and ultimately overruled his brother because of the significantly greater funds he had at his disposal.

The next major project undertaken by Siemens Brothers, the Indo-European telegraph line involved all parts of the company: Berlin and St. Petersburg were responsible for the construction work, while Siemens Brothers in London took over the laying of the submarine cable in the Black Sea and supplied the material. Because construction began on three sections of the line simultaneously and the line ran through four different sovereign territories, there were considerable logistic, political and financial problems in addition to the technical ones. In spite of this the construction work was finally brought to a successful conclusion at the beginning of 1870. On April 12, 1870, William Siemens in London created a sensation: before invited guests, he demonstrated sending and receiving an answer to a telegram on the 11,000 kilometer route between London and Calcutta within an hour. This line remained in operation right through to 1931 with only a single interruption due to World War I.

Even more daring than the construction and operation of the Indo-European telegraph line were the submarine cable ventures to which the London company, under the management of William Siemens, devoted itself almost exclusively in the 1870s. For economic and political reasons as well as for its prestige value, efforts were focused on establishing a telegraph link to America, which was commenced in 1874. After his disastrous experience with a poorly equipped ship, William designed a special cable steamer for the laying operations, the “Faraday”. A total of 1,700 miles or 2,735 kilometers of cable could be accommodated in the rear part of the ship. The laying of
the transatlantic cable turned out to be a real adventure, to which Werner devoted several pages in the memoirs he wrote in 1891/92, but was ultimately successful. The strong personal commitment of the brothers to the cable business however came to an end when Siemens Brothers was turned into a stock corporation in 1880.

In addition to his activities as a businessman and entrepreneur, William also devoted himself intensively to scientific research. Together with his brother Friedrich, who spent several years in England, he worked on the development of a new process for the manufacture of steel, which became known as the Siemens-Martin process. In 1866 he built “The Siemens Sample Steelworks” for experimental purposes in Birmingham. In 1867 he registered his first patent for steel manufacture, and further patents followed over the next few years. In order to put his steel-manufacturing process into practice, he founded the “Landore Siemens Steel Company”, which acquired a steelworks in Landore near Swansea. In Canada William was for a time Chairman of the Steel Company of Canada, which had acquired the patent rights from him. The town of Londonderry, where the steelworks were, was renamed “Siemens” in 1878.

William was an established figure in English scientific circles and was involved – frequently in a leading position – in numerous associations and societies. He was a member of the Royal Society from 1862, and in 1872 he was the founder and first president of the Society of Telegraph Engineers and Electricians. He received honorary doctorates from a number of universities.

England had become William’s second home. On the day he became engaged to the Scotswoman Anne Gordon, whom he married in 1859, he took English nationality and changed his first name to “William”. A few months before his death on November 19, 1883, he was knighted Sir William Siemens by Queen Victoria.