



The story begins

The factory had stood here since 1926, it stated this quite clearly on the stone plaque over the new office entrance which had been constructed to welcome the Queen on her visit to the works in 1962. I just missed this great occasion having commenced my employment in early 63. Though this was not my first encounter with the company, that had been some six or so years before when just after leaving school I had applied for an apprenticeship, an application which on that occasion had been unsuccessful. I did serve an apprenticeship within Binks Bullows, a company situated only some two miles away, but in a much less pleasant location.

On completion of my time, spurred on by the acquisition of a new wife I pushed through the doors of the new entrance, reading the name J A Crabtree as I passed into the inner sanctum, awaiting my interview with Mr Walter Thompson, head of the production department. This time things went better and so started a long relationship between R A Beaman, new husband and J A Crabtree, manufacturers of electrical accessories and control gear. This would turn out to be a long and mainly happy partnership one which was to last some forty two years.

First steps

The company's founding father, the original Mr John Ashworth Crabtree had shaken off this mortal coil, to be replaced by his son the younger Mr Crabtree but the company was still a proud family owned and parochially managed business with a long history of innovation and development.

Twice I had occasion to visit JAC's office, an oak panelled inner sanctum, with a heavy chair and desk, the desk's top surface covered with a much aged green leather writing area but the man behind the desk was certainly not hidebound or backward thinking. Indeed as later events were to show he was not only a forward thinker but also a concerned and benevolent employer.

The relationship between employer and employee has changed so much in the intervening years that these early times seem now a little unreal, almost like watching an old film, a film in which I had a small part but which now even I find it hard to believe but here goes, let's try and paint some pictures.

Brown & Beige

Lots of brown. Acres of toffee coloured industrial strength linoleum. Dark table style desks, oak or at least oak veneered. Hard wooden chairs, you brought your own cushion. Everything done by hand. Typewriters, great sit up and beg Imperials. Gestetner machines, they could print any colour you liked as long as it was blue or red. You cranked them over by hand and always ended up with as much ink on your hands as the paper.

The factory manager, Mr Barnard lived just up the corridor, but the gulf between us workers and this higher being was much greater than the physical distance between the offices. He was literally in another world. He was an executive. The world came to him. He was quiet in speech, always wreathed in clouds of tobacco smoke from his pipe, he didn't need to raise his voice. We had about as much daily contact with him as the average catholic has with the pope. The chain of command was fixed and rigid you knew exactly where you lay in the hierarchy. You received instruction from your direct boss and messages to those higher in the command chain were relayed upward only through your department head.



John Barnard

What was to be produced was planned and overseen by Eric Whitehouse, a jockey sized dynamo of a man who I swear knew every operation on every part number in the company's production portfolio. Progress chasers working with departmental foremen pushed work through the plant. Foreman had a great deal of authority for the day to day decision making it was they who really planned and scheduled the work. There were no beige boxes running any sort of operating system, all control and decision making was through direct human intervention.

People power was much in evidence and in this time before political correctness all female factory workers were known as girls, regardless of age and these "girls" had never heard of repetitive strain injury (even the legal profession was not aware of its existence) so these "girls" pulled hand presses in some cases in excess of a thousand times an hour.

In those heady days we had a subsidised canteen and no day was complete without the afternoon visit from "May The Tray" bringing afternoon tea and cakes. Since our office was on the last leg of her journey we always took advantage of the special offer "to save me takin em back to the canteen".

Production Office

This was my first home. The principle task was to produce routing documents for all the company's products, this would include specifying the machines and processes to be used along with estimates of the time that the processes would occupy. In addition we acted as an adjunct to the drawing office producing drawings of the smaller jigs & fixtures as well as factory layouts. Last but by no means least we did that new fangled American import - Time Studies.

There were four of us, our chief, I use the word only lightly, Roy, drummer with the Vostok five and England's answer to Casanova. Keith a six foot two hippy, quiet in talk with a sharp brain, and Sylvia (who is Sylvia indeed). She occasionally did some typing and even more occasionally some filing providing that these tasks did not conflict with her social calendar or the repairs to her immaculate make up.

Into the study

Any one who has watched formula one racing will have seen the equipment we used, three stop watches mounted in a line across the top of a board to which you could clip data sheets for collecting information. The watches were activated pressing a side lever and were so arranged that one was always running, one was zeroed and one was stopped allowing you to read off the time it displayed, as you pressed the side handle this sequence moved across the study board from left to right. This then differed from the more conventional single stop watch which ran continually returning to zero each time the crown was pressed (if you did not take the reading at the instant of pressing the crown you lost the reading) the three watch system allowed you to take a reading from a stopped watch (no pun intended).

I was instructed in the method of taking studies a-la Crabtree and until I attended college for a work study course I believed that this was the way things were done. College did instruct me in the BSI method of time study. I remember the animated discussions with Walter Thompson (the boss) when I explained that the British Standards Institute's method required that you rated each and every observation as and when they occurred, and that you had to clock on and off your study, eventually the whole department was moved onto the BSI method. Much later time study, like engineering drawing before it was to be computerised.



Eric Whitehouse



Roy Smith



Terry Smith

I've made my day

In the late 60's the trade unions had great influence and the following true story does much to illustrate the state of management/worker relationship at that time.

One fine summers afternoon the then factory manager Terry Smith decided to "walk the patch". It was just 1pm and his perambulations took him past the entrance to the hand moulding department. To his surprise one of the operatives, who still had one hour to his shift finish, sat taking the sun. The manager asked "Have you no work?". The man patiently explained "It's ok, I've got my day in". When asked to amplify this statement he explained that he had reached the pre agreed number per shift for the job he was currently engaged on. The company was not a party to the aforementioned pre-agreement, but this explanation did shed some light on the remarkably consistent output rates.

What follows is hard to believe but is absolutely true. The following Saturday, when all shifts had finished, the manager, aided by a strong member of the maintenance department, broke open several lockers in the hand moulding to find that many of them contained piles of mouldings. These were used to fund any shortfalls from the pre-agreed output rates that occurred, presumably only on sunny days.

After heated discussions with union reps "the untouchables" from Production Office were ordered in to "clean up the town". The locals fought many grueling battles with the watch bashers before at least a semblance of management authority was established.

In no way did industrial relations at Crabtree resemble those prevalent within the motor industry. Though the output of my department was used within a payment by results scheme and did therefore influence the size of peoples wage packets there was a high level of mutual acceptance that we (in Production Office) had a job to do and that it was just that, just a job. There were altercations as to the validity of some of the values we produced but heat was only generated within the negotiation arena. Once the negotiations finished we became fellow employees. Over the years we did use a number of contract work study staff and without exception their view was that we had a "great bunch of people working on the shop floor".

The clouds gather

Throughout the sixties the company continued on its profitable way. There were times, as is always the case in a company associated with supplying goods linked to the building trade, when orders declined, but Jack Crabtree would always attempt to absorb these setbacks. He had a strong sense of community, he knew many local families depended upon him for employment and lay offs would always be a last option.

In general relationships between workers, trade unions and management were cordial, a little like those in a family, there were arguments but usually every one pulled in the same general direction. The same could not be said of the founding family. The majority shareholding was within the Crabtree family but it became apparent that there was disagreement between the two Crabtree brothers (David, Jack's younger brother managed a subsidiary company in South Africa). The climate in manufacturing had become more aggressive. Many organisations now began to expand by acquisition rather than by internal development. There were rumours that the company was soon to be the subject of a hostile take over bid, initially this was

not a cause for concern since the two brothers held a controlling interest. What was not known was that the brothers had a disagreement and that the younger brother was to sell his birthright for a bowl of potage. The potage was to be purchased by the British Ever Ready company and so began the battle for ownership.

A group company

Alas since most of the workers did not own shares the protest could be only vocal and in early 1972 the family owned business of J A Crabtree passed into the hands of a large multinational corporation. What now we all wondered. We weren't kept wondering for long. The new boss was small in stature but supercharged in operation. He was of the old direct authority school of management. He had a reputation with Ever Ready of being the hard man, the sorter and fixer. Though strict, he understood manufacturing. He was incisive, clear and direct and always fair. In fairly short order the management structure was changed to reflect Ever Ready structures. The assembly areas, which had been changed from balanced assembly lines to individual assembly units, were returned to assembly lines. After an initial upheaval things settled in and much of our early trepidation proved to be unwarranted. The new owners did have a different approach but it turned out to be people centered. There were opportunities to attend work related courses, where related was quite wide. Course took place within the company and sometimes at an external venue. One such course springs to mind, it was held at Moor Hall Hotel in Sutton Coldfield. This was definitely at the upper end of the swish ratings scale, at least three cocked noses. The course subject was value engineering, we quickly proved that we had absorbed the course content when on the second day four of us arrived on push bikes (it must be said we were four members of the Birmingham St Christopher's Catholic Cycling Club). Reception staff were stunned by our asking "where are the bike sheds"? They could not answer this so we parked them against a tree in the grounds in clear site of the lecture room.

It was perhaps as a result of the similarity in management philosophy between Crabtree and Ever Ready, where the major difference was only one of size, that led once more to the next change of ownership. As we moved toward the end of the decade the comfortable trading position we occupied, sharing the market with other competitors of a similar size and marketing disposition began to erode. There were the first indications that customers were becoming more demanding, manufacturing moved up a gear, a faster response to orders was required, computers began to appear. A bigger more voracious predator was eyeing up the Ever Ready group. Change was once more afoot.

Before my working life at Crabtree came to an end we would see, as many in industry did see, further changes of ownership and changes in management philosophy. Throughout these times of flux somehow despite who owned the company there still existed a feeling that this was a family company, due in no small part to the fact that the company did employ (almost) whole families. No matter where you roamed, abroad or at home you would always run into a Crabtree employee. It was my good luck to have worked with some fine people.



The Cyclists



Bob Beaman



Tony Wiggin



Steve Whittaker



Pete Swinden