

CRABTREE DAYS, 1945 -1958

by Sam Whitehouse

My first memory of J A Crabtree & Co Ltd was going on my own, for an interview - I recall that this had been arranged via the local Youth Employment Bureau - and whilst I vividly remember walking on an autumnal morning past my Secondary Modern School to catch the Number 17 bus from Norton Square to Walsall, I have only the vaguest memory of my interview which I think was probably with Mr Dickson who was in charge of the apprenticeship scheme. I was selected to join the scheme as I had very good school leaving certificates, although it was more usual for the company to take Grammar school leavers. I started at the firm after my fifteenth birthday, 3rd October 1956, but I am not now sure whether this was immediately after my birthday or the beginning of 1957.



I may have been influenced in my choice of employment by my sister Rose, who had worked for Crabtree's in 1945, 46 and 47; she started work at Crabtree's, Walsall, on 24th April 1945, at the age of 14 (having just left school) and was set on as a mailing office clerk by Mr Dabbs, the office manager and had to keep the various offices supplied with typewriting paper, carbons, envelopes, pens and blotting paper; additionally, in the afternoon, had to go round all of the offices, collect their post, and frank it for mailing. It was a working week of 48 hours including Saturday mornings, for the princely sum of 16s. 6d. (82.5p). Walsall Corporation ran a special service from Norton Canes which dropped off outside the factory – these were double decker buses which must have been the oldest in the fleet, open platform, no heating, slatted wooden seats and with holes in the floor.

This of course was before the end of the Second World War – V. E. day, 8th May 1945 – and she remembers the jitterbugging to Glen Miller in the works canteen at dinner time; sometimes there were singers and pianists, both classical and 'sing-along'; at dinner times factory workers were harangued in the street by a gentleman on a soapbox, in the run-up to the General election, which was held on 15th July 1945; hours were reduced considerably after the election when a Labour Government was formed. Although Rose liked working for Crabtree, she decided to find somewhere closer to home – leaving Crabtrees on 29th December 1945 to get a job in early 1946 working at Edmunds Lockmakers which was located at the site of the old Cathedral Pit on Watling Street, Brownhills, just to the West of the Rising Sun railway bridge. Initially she worked on a press, then on a conveyor belt, fitting components into lock frames. Suddenly Edmunds announced that they were relocating to Wednesfield; for anyone who didn't wish to go there, the company that was moving into the factory would take them onto their payroll. It was Crabtree's! So on 17th December 1946 Rose was again an employee of Crabtree's – the conveyor belt now carried components which were assembled into small electrical products such as household switches

J. A. CRABTREE & CO. LTD., LINCOLN WORKS, WALSALL
WORKS PASS

Reference : Date 2nd. May 1945.

Name : Rose A. Whitehouse.

Address : 187, Norton East Rd., Norton Canes.

National Registration Number :

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Department : Mailing. Check Number : Staff.

Holder's Signature : R. A. Whitehouse

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and sockets – Rose was at the end, packing these into boxes and making up the packages, and the foreman Jack White was pleased with the work. A year later, although happy enough with the work, she felt like a change so said goodbye to Crabtree's on 3rd December 1947. She did not work in the building shown in the photograph on page 97 of 'The Crabtree Story' but in a much older building which must have been part of the original Cathedral Pit premises.

But to return to the 'Sam Whitehouse Story' – the factory bus service was still much the same as in Rose's era, except that they had mended the holes in the floors.

I was first of all seconded to the model making shop, whose foreman was Mr Thomas, joining a number of other new apprentices, and my first task was to walk down into Walsall to buy myself a cow-gown (a sort of brown smock coat) and a one inch Moore and Wright micrometer – I think I had to pay for them myself. The store, a hard ware and ironmongery shop (it may have been Hilditches) was situated at the back of the Savoy Cinema [re-named ABC in late 1960, demolished 1995] at the top of Park Street, so it was a good old walk!

The hours of work in the factory were 8.30am to 6.00pm on Monday and Friday and 8.30am to 6.30pm on the other days, together with a Saturday morning; I would thus be out of my house from about 7.00am until about 7.15pm on a typical working day. I believe that the office hours were shorter, probably 'nine to five'.

I had quite a long walk from home to the bus-stop, carrying a small fibreboard suitcase containing my cow-gown - always washed every weekend and put through the hand operated mangle in the back kitchen or brew'us – and a packet of sandwiches.

On some days after work, I think it might have been Saturdays, I would walk from the factory through the Arboretum Extension and the Arboretum itself up to the Lichfield Street-Mellish Road junction to catch a bus home, at the bus-stop outside the church. Sometimes I would encounter Mr Thomas there, who had obviously had the same idea. This of course was a very pleasant walk on a fine day, of about two thirds of a mile.

In the model making shop I was instructed in the use of lathes, milling and drilling machines, surface grinders and shaping machines, working to an accuracy of several thousandths of an inch.

We apprentices also made our own turning and cutting tools for use in the lathe - the shop had a small furnace and we were taught how to harden, temper and anneal various steel items. Case hardening required the use of cyanide powder, which potentially was quite dangerous. I also remember a very curious little machine, a mechanical hacksaw which when left on its own, would take an hour to saw through a two or three inch thick bar of metal.

The apprentices were a happy-go-lucky lot and I remember weight lifting competitions in the workshop with heavy steel and brass blanks, and lunchtime visits to the Arboretum extension for footballing. A colleague, cheerful, girl-mad Roy Spencer, gave me a memorable, exhilarating, first ride on a motorbike on the back of his BSA Bantam (probably spring/summer, 1957) up Lichfield Street, Mellish Road and back via Longwood Lane, Sutton Road and Broadway.

His advice on a Friday afternoon was "Sam, have yourself a shit, shave and shampoo, and get yourself off up the town"(this of course meant Walsall, pubs and the dance-hall). As I was going steady with my child-hood sweetheart, I didn't take advantage of his no-doubt very sound philosophy.

We were required to make certain tools as part of our learning experience and I remember carefully crafting a ring/open ended spanner, an adjustable spanner, pipe grips and tool maker clamps amongst other things. We were told to mount our fine products on a plywood presentation board, together with little plastic oval number plates, for inspection by the board of directors unfortunately, I forgot to clench the fixing nails which had pierced through the board, resulting in minor injuries to at least one august person.



Bring together a serious machine tool and a green apprentice and there were the inevitable mishaps, none fortunately with serious consequences; to change a chuck on a lathe you put the machine into reverse and the chuck would spin itself off quite rapidly, but the trick was to catch it as it came off the threaded centre - this I failed to do on one occasion and this great heavy steel mass fell with a considerable thud onto the concrete floor and bounced across the room, fortunately, no one was hurt.....Another time I was applying a thread to a steel bar in the chuck of the lathe, and this was achieved by putting the machine into a mode whereby the tool-stock was automatically traversed along the work piece via a threaded bar which ran the length of the lathe and slowly rotated – fortunately I noticed in time that my cow-gown was caught up in this bar and I was being pulled remorselessly into the spinning workpiece. I promptly stopped the lathe by hastily banging the big red “stop” button.

On one side of the shop was a long row of high work benches - I had one of these to myself, equipped with a large metalworking vice and here I learnt how to mark out designs on steel or brass sheet using 'engineers blue' a liquid which was painted on the plate surface, marking out being done with a very hard sharp scribing tool. Vertical faces would be marked out using a Moore and Wright surface gauge scribing block. The workpiece would be placed on to a very flat heavy cast iron plate called a 'surface plate' I remember re-facing one of these on our shaping machine, presumably it had got a bit tired or knocked about. If making an item which was required to be electrically non-conductive, we used a curious brown coloured man-made material called Tufnol – this was manufactured in Birmingham and consisted of alternate layers of resin bonded paper, cotton and/or glass fibre. I did of course learn how to use my micrometer, also a vernier gauge; steel rules were much in use, graduated to a millimetre and 1/64th of an inch, but I think we only used imperial measurements. Whilst most of the fine measuring tools were the British Moore and Wright, the American manufactured Starrett was also highly regarded.

I had great admiration for the model-makers, men of many years experience who could take a diagram fresh from the drawing office and create a perfect full-scale model of say, a new switch, working to a thousandth of an inch – I had a go and not surprisingly made a rather poor hand of it!

Foreman of the model making shop, Mr Thomas, sat in a little glass and timber booth at the head of the shop from where he could keep a beady eye upon the serried row of workbenches which the toolmakers and apprentices occupied – he was a good boss and a good man. I only learnt recently (from 'The Crabtree Story') that he was something of a war hero, having received the British Empire Medal for his management of the product development department.

Whilst we had a small store room in the model making shop, for some items we had to go to the main factory store, I remember being sent there on one occasion and the head store keeper (quite an important person in the factory) saying “Did you go to a secondary modern school?”, and when I answered in the affirmative, he replied “I thought so, as you are so much better mannered than the other apprentices” - who of course had gone to grammar schools.



All apprentices had to attend the Walsall and Staffordshire Technical college for one day a week, and two evening classes and also had to buy all their own text books, usually these were bought from Grices Bookshop on Ablewell Street; the double fronted building still exists, but is now home to 'Ablewell Cabs and Taxis'.

On some lunchtimes whilst at the 'Tech' on day-release, I would visit **my sister Rose** who now worked at Messrs Samuel Swindley Ltd, leather merchants of 18 Lower Rushall Street. Their premises were at the rear of the main building, a fine though rather decaying Georgian edifice, approached through a brick archway, and on entering the Swindley offices one passed through a great room festooned with animal hides, up a steep open wooden staircase to the directors office and passing thence through to Rose's domain, which was the quaintest Dickensian office imaginable with its high wooden desks and its tall chairs. Although some of the old

buildings in Lower Rushall Street still survive, on a recent visit I couldn't find any trace of a number 18.

I well remember leaving the factory at the usual finishing time and having an hour to kill before evening classes started. I was entirely on my own - I think that the other apprentices lived fairly close-by and went home before evening class - and I would wander around Walsall, sometimes going into a cafe in Upper Bridge Street for a cup of coffee and a 'Waggon Wheel' biscuit - my wage was just over £3, which I gave to my widowed mother, and I received back my bus fare and sometimes a few shillings. My lifelong passion for motorcycling began at this time, and I would make a beeline for the display windows of The Motorcycle Mart, Ablewell Street and FR Russell Cycles in Stafford Street. College tuition was directed towards pure theory; I remember asking our lecturer one evening for a wiring diagram for a two-way switching arrangement for a landing light at home, and he had to go away and come back later with a solution, you see, his thinking just wasn't oriented that way.

After night school I would catch the late Number 5 bus to Hednesford, getting off at the Wooden Stables with about a ten minutes walk in complete darkness, in the winter months, arriving home at about 11.30pm, having left there at 7.00am that morning, a working day of sixteen and half hours.

Looking back, I think that I was rather like the young David Copperfield who whilst working in the blacking factory, wandered about during his off-duty hours, alone and quite friendless.

Gradually, my fellow apprentices in the model making shop went to other factory departments, and the time came when I too left, to go to the Inspection Department where I first met the acerbic (older) fellow apprentice Ted Richardson who I recall told me that "I said very little, probably because I had little to say" - this was quite true; only fifteen I was still reading "The Rover" boys comic which I fetched every week from a little shop near to the factory in Lincoln Road - needless to say, the other apprentices would borrow it from me! (The shop, on the corner of Tong Street is still there).

I was taught about gauges, which were "go" and "no-go" such that the dimensions of an item could be checked and passed or rejected. I recall carrying out many checks on a very small but very important component, an L shaped arm that triggered the action in the E60 circuit breaker - I think they were having problems with this at the time. The factory was full of women, from young girls to quite mature ladies - my experience was that they were a nice bunch; one girl used to call me Tommy Steele because of my haircut. I also spent some time in the assembly shop, which seemed to be 100% women. After the initial training, when the principles of inspection were quickly mastered, the work was mundane and boringly repetitive for the secondment, which might have lasted six months.

I remember Ted Richardson relating to me a story about a young woman, who together with her friend, met some young men whilst on holiday in Rome; she was very taken with one young fellow whom his friends called 'Snooks' - she decided that much as she liked him, she could never marry someone called Snooks. Some years later she met her friend who had married a Mr Sevenoaks, and who had been happy to change his name from Snooks, because, after all, it was only a corruption of Sevenoaks. I could never understand why Ted told me this tale, and it was only many years later that I discovered that it was from the works of H G Wells, entitled "Miss Winchelsea's heart".

I was of course still attending the Technical College, taking the Ordinary National Certificate in electrical engineering - this would be followed by a Higher National Certificate, potentially leading to membership of the Institution of Electrical Engineers. In fact, the apprenticeship scheme was aimed at producing future managers for the company, and as such a comprehensive knowledge of electrical theory was required - this was apparently considered more important than knowledge of the manufacturing processes. I found the theory aspects challenging and struggled to get good marks; sometimes I would skip college. Mr Dickson hauled me into his office one day to question me on my performance and tried to pound into my thick head once again the theory of atoms and electrons. I suggested, rather apologetically, that perhaps I might be better suited to a different sort of profession, whereupon he gave me a fatherly talk about pulling my socks up, or I would never amount to anything. I seem to recall that he was quite an elderly gentleman

My next posting after the Inspection Department was in the foundry (their only apprentice at the time) where I learnt about the making of wooden patterns and the production of casting moulds. Interestingly, a special ruler had to be used when making the moulds – these had to be very slightly oversize to allow for shrinkage of the molten metal. Switchgear housings were made in cast iron on a moving track in the foundry proper; we apprentices weren't allowed to work on this, it was heavy, hot and dangerous work pouring the molten metal into the travelling moulds. We were however allowed to make small patterns for example tools, to create individual moulds and to pour molten aluminium from a small outside furnace. I spent quite a long period in the foundry, but it was such an intensive environment that managers really could not spare much time for instruction following the initial training period; increasingly with little work to do I would make “foreigners”, small items for home say, or would explore the factory, which at this date was spread across seven acres with a workforce of over one thousand five hundred. I liked particularly to visit the company museum with its splendid collection of old switchgear and vintage light bulbs.

At some point in time I must have visited other Departments, because I have vivid memories of rows of great automatic capstan machines producing, for example, pins for 3 pin plugs out of long rods of brass; of the pungent aroma of plastic powder kept in large cardboard drums ready for use in the plastic moulding machines – and of the experimental shop where a machine had been made to automatically operate the 'dollies' of light switches, thousands or perhaps millions of times to see whether they would “endure well”

After about eighteen months with the company, and whilst I had enjoyed my time in the model making department, I regretfully came to the conclusion that electrical science and factory life was not for me. In due course I left, and my indentures were cancelled. During my brief career with Crabtrees, the management had given me one 'dressing down' for not keeping up with my college work but otherwise showed no interest whatsoever in my well-being; management philosophy seemed to be “chuck them in the deep end and they will sink or swim” and being a lot younger than the Grammar school types, I sank without a trace.

Casting around to find my niche in life, I spent six months working at a garage, and finding that didn't suit either, I got a job with the Public Works Department of a local authority. Progressing from the Depot Stores to the position as a chain-man with the small 'Engineers Drawing Office' located in a large Victorian house, I found a friendly and supportive atmosphere, the older engineers kindly and encouraging.

I flourished in this climate and went on day-release back to Walsall Tech(!) initially taking year S2 of the ONC in Mechanical Engineering, three nights a week and even this included the dreaded 'Principles of Electricity' which this time I just scraped through. Obtaining my ONC, I then went to Gosta Green College of Advanced Technology, obtaining an HNC in Civil Engineering; another two years study resulted in a Diploma which was subsequently recognised as a Bachelor of Science degree by Aston University (which the college had become); and in due course, membership of the Institution of Municipal Engineers, membership of the Institution of Civil Engineers, Fellowship of the Institution of Highways and Transportation and Membership of the British Institute of Management. I spent forty years in the civil and municipal engineering professions and had a very full and satisfying career, I am of course now retired although still carrying out some consultancy work.

Curiously, my son went into electrical engineering, passed all his City and Guilds, and eventually went on to become an independent electrical contractor. Perhaps some of that electrical theory seeped into my subconscious after-all, and was passed on genetically!

