

Visitor from South Africa

Monday 21st March 2016

by

Edward Richardson

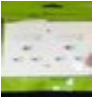
The train from Birmingham came to a halt at Walsall Station and the carriage door slid open. I heard a voice with a South African accent say, “Hello Ted” – it was James Calmeyer, Chief Executive Officer of ‘Crabtree’ (South Africa), over here on a visit to the ‘Electrium’ head office in Cannock.

James stepped from the train with hand outstretched and we exchanged greetings. I wondered later if James thought we had stage-managed the train to stop exactly where we were awaiting. It was a good start to an important day for ‘The Crabtree Society’ and the South African ‘Crabtree’ company.



Allan Preston and I were the initial welcoming group, but at ‘Lyndon House Hotel’ in Lower Rushall Street (the first ‘Crabtree’ factory), Ray Parton and Alan Redfern were organising the reception which would include a visit to Mr Crabtree’s original office.

Whilst on the station platform James presented the ‘Society’ with a memento of his visit, a twin switched socket – but South African style!



Allan took the travelling bags and departed for ‘Lyndon House Hotel’, whilst I walked James through the ‘Saddlers Centre’ and out into Bradford Place, showing him the place where the public toilets used to be (today the Cenotaph), and I told James the story of how Charlie Jones (Progress Department at Lincoln Works in the fifties and sixties) so narrowly escaped death from a Zeppelin bomb. James was fascinated with the ‘framed’ shrapnel damage on the house where Jerome K Jerome was born (I wondered if his camera would take the strain!).

From there to ‘The Bridge’, where I had already told James I was going to show him something he couldn’t see, but before I let him into the secret, I told him about Sister Dora and why she is so revered by local people – more photographs! When we reached the middle of ‘The Bridge’ I called a halt and advised James he was now standing on something he couldn’t see, the bridge over the River Tame.

Then into Digbeth and a walk up High Street past the Guildhall to the Parish Church. There was a market in progress, and James found this interesting – no doubt quite different from a street market in South Africa! When we reached the church I pointed out the funeral service for J A Crabtree had taken place there – more photographs!



Just a short walk from the church to ‘Lyndon House Hotel’, where Allan was waiting for us and introduced James to Ray Parton and Alan Redfern. We had a welcome coffee break and were joined by Ken Towe, the hotel owner. This was the opportunity for Allan Preston to show James the book ‘The Crabtree Story’ – which fascinated him; he was promised his own copy to take back to South Africa.

Ken Towe escorted everyone up to room 212 (now a luxury bedroom, but once used by J A Crabtree as his office). A great thrill for James, and again many photos were taken – this time to show to staff at the South African factory.



Having taken photos outside the hotel, making sure the 'Blue Plaque' was well in evidence; we went by car to the site of Lincoln Works – now a smart housing development with the name 'Crabtree Road'. James wanted us to take a photo of him in front of the nameplate – we obliged! Then

he asked to take a photo of our group - we also obliged!

Allan and I took James on a short tour of the estate (in Allan's car), and for me, it seemed very odd to be moving over ground where once Lincoln Works stood. Could that lovely house really be standing in the middle of Control Gear Assembly – or was it Moulding Department?

Next was a visit to the home of Andrew Noakes in Aldridge; where James inspected the extensive collection of Crabtree products – going back to the earliest days of the company. More photos were taken by both James and Ray Parton. Andrew told James how he managed to save so much of the original 'Crabtree Museum' from being lost. In the short time we were there, James tried to look at everything; an impossible but interesting task!



Then to Cannock and the head office of 'Electrium' (parent company of the 'Crabtree' brand today), where lunch was provided. Here we met Andrew Will of 'Siemens' ('Electrium' is now part of the 'Siemens' group), and Carl Kimberley and Alistair Eaton (of 'Electrium'). After lunch James had a business meeting with 'Electrium' executives, which of course was not the concern of 'The Crabtree Society', but when the meeting concluded, we had arranged (courtesy of 'Electrium') to show James two films; the BBC 'Going To Work' programme, and the film made by Crabtree staff of the 'Royal Visit' to Lincoln Works (the 'voice-over' version). The 'Society' will be providing James with copies of both films.



From the 'Electrium' offices, we went our separate ways to 'freshen-up' for the evening (James was staying overnight in Cannock) – we were to have dinner at the 'Mackintosh Restaurant' in Lichfield.

Allan and I had already planned to take James on a short tour around the centre of Lichfield, but it turned out better than we expected.

We set out along Bird Street and when passing Beacon Park, Allan told James the park contained a statue of Edward John Smith (Captain of the 'Titanic') and James asked to see it. Not so easy in the dark! Allan asked a passer-by where the statue was and we were directed towards the darkest part of the park, but not to worry, for James' camera was able to take photos in very subdued lighting – which it did. James was pleased.

On towards the Cathedral, where James was in his element taking photos. Because of his interest, we went right up to the west front, which was a good thing, for a lady who seemed knowledgeable about the statues approached us. I mentioned we had someone with us from South Africa, and the lady asked James if he would like to see inside the Cathedral. We dived in, and James now has something special to tell the people back home.

From the cathedral we walked along Dam Street to the market place. Looking at the old buildings, James commented there was no house as old as these in South Africa. In the market place we looked at the statues commemorating James Boswell and Dr Johnson, and of course the obligatory viewing of Dr Johnson's house. James' camera must now have been getting hot!

It was time to assemble for dinner, and we met, outside 'Mackintosh Restaurant', the representatives of 'Electrium' (Carl Kimberley and Alistair Eaton). Inside a table was ready for our party, and we settled down to enjoy the meal. The evening was much enlivened by James' stories of life in South Africa, and what it was like working in a factory out there. Quite different conditions to those existing in the United Kingdom.

The 'Electrium' people talked to James about financial matters and what it was like doing business in Africa. The members of 'The Crabtree Society' listened. We learned how 'Crabtree' in South Africa has a high reputation and a huge share of the market; James had all the figures! He told us about trade union representation – very different from here in the UK, for there the Government closely regulates what unions can and cannot do. Conversely the Government also keeps tight control on companies too! James told us about the short-term work offered to locals – people are called in when needed. It is a system not favoured in the UK, but in South Africa it seems popular amongst many of the workers.

The end of the dinner was not the end of the evening, for James was invited (by the 'Electrium' team) to visit a typical English pub. In this case the 'Earl Of Lichfield Arms' dating from the eighteenth century and on the opposite side of the street to the restaurant. 'Crabtree Society' members stayed in the restaurant – was this a sign of advancing years, for the 'youngsters' were still ready to party? After about half an hour we did go across to the pub and say it was time we returned to Cannock (using the old excuse, "We all have a busy day tomorrow.").

For 'The Crabtree Society' we hope this is the start of much closer contact with our South African cousins.