

My Crabtree story – Mike Blakeway

I was born in Walsall in 1951 and did not really enjoy my school life at Queen Mary's although I now realise what a good education they managed to give me in 5 short years. An interest in motorbikes and engineering led me to a student apprenticeship at J A Crabtree Ltd where I met a man who changed my life: Percy Shipton. Mr Shipton was, I recall, a triple chartered engineer: mechanical, electrical and production. This level of competence is almost unheard of today. Mr Shipton treated all his apprentices with respect and advised us well as to what courses to take and possible career paths.

I simultaneously completed both a craft apprenticeship and an Ordinary National Certificate in Engineering at Walsall Technical College and went on to study at Birmingham Polytechnic (now the University of Central England). My first day at work was under the wing of Mick Hammond working in the circuit breaker assembly area where the foreman was John Walford. Making arc chutes for E60 voltage operated ELCBs was my first job and Mick Hammond talked me through the workings of the various types of circuit breakers. Our paths would cross again years later.

The sandwich type education process continued through the next 6 years with working periods in the colour shop, press shop, chemical and electrical laboratories, data processing, costing, design and buying offices before ending up in Works office under Walter Purser and Alistair Munro. John Clarke, Terry Morgan and Graham Speed I remember being production engineers at the time in this same office. Crabtree's had treated me exceptionally well throughout my apprenticeship sponsoring all my fees and expenses and paying a salary on top. If you'd have cut me in half it would have read "Crabtree"!

After showing a preference for production management following completion of my apprenticeship, Mr Shipton arranged for me to go to Brownhills and work under Les Jones, Barry Houlston and Pete Williams just as the Ever-Ready takeover of Crabtree was completed. Bert Slater came in from the new owners as the top man at Brownhills and at just 22 years of age I was given the job of circuit breaker production manager overseeing Mick Hammond, Graham Birkdale and 208 female production operators. I recall Dave Lever, George Horner, Anne Winters, Gladys Burford and a Joan (?) as charge-hands at the time and of course, Jenny Webb in the office. The 1970s was a time of industrial unrest in UK and despite most of the operators being both industrious and reasonable the Union representing them was at times obstructive and petty. I learned a hell of a lot about human nature during this time and after about 2 years I moved into a production planning role. At this time unfortunately Bert Slater became seriously ill and Brownhills senior management was made up of some recently recruited pretty unpleasant characters from the motor industry. It was time to move on.

By the age of 27 I had fully qualified as a Chartered Engineer and left to join GKN in Birmingham in a manufacturing trouble-shooter role. GKN was expanding into Saudi Arabia and by September 1978 I was in Saudi Arabia as the works manager of a steel reinforcing mesh factory. Two and a half years was all I could stand in this desert hell and by luck Barry

Houton who had gone out to Malaysia to set up a Crabtree factory in 1976 sent me a job offer to re-join Crabtree in Malaysia as their Works manager.

I liked Ipoh, Malaysia both as a location and for its colourful Far Eastern culture. The Crabtree Malaysia team of Barry, George Koy the accountant and Fong Chin Onn the technical manager still keep in touch with me today.

Crabtree went to Malaysia to protect their E60 voltage operated ELCB market which had become subject to a tariff barrier in the country and had a wish to enter the wiring accessory market also. Sadly the venture never grew and in 1982 was wound down and I was without a job for a couple of weeks until Crabtree's competitor MEM offered me the job of works manager at their Singapore factory which had a host of problems with the manufacture of a mcb there. MEM had another loss making plant in Butterworth Malaysia making isolators, starters and metal consumer units and distribution boards. After sorting out the mcb issues and enjoying very much the life in Singapore it was decided to amalgamate the 2 loss-making factories onto the Butterworth site in 1985. This action coincided with a spurt of rapid economic development in Malaysia and MEM's decision to move to marketing its own products directly to wholesalers rather than go through an agent. The next 20 years saw uninterrupted growth of the business and a very successful period for MEM, then acquired by Delta plc. During this period I had become first General Manager and then Managing Director of the Asia Pacific businesses of Delta's electrical division.

With hindsight Crabtree missed out on a huge opportunity due to not being bold enough in the Malaysian market, not persevering through the hard times around 1980-83 and having no clear strategy to move forward in Far Eastern markets. With the C50 mcb range they had a great product to conquer the Malaysian market which had until then been fuse-based.

This idea was passed over due to selling via a sole agent who insulated Crabtree from the end-user market. They had no real end-user market intelligence to base any sort of strategy on. MEM/Delta on the other hand had initially an inferior mcb offering and 2 loss-making businesses but they hung on, persevered and surged ahead into a market dominant position not only in Malaysia but also exported into the Middle East and Africa. These were highly profitable years for the MEM brand.

All good things come to an end and in 2003 Delta sold all their electrical businesses to a US corporation who in a matter of 36 months reduced the profitable business to loss by actively failing to adapt to technological electrical Standards changes and by shifting production to China.

I retired back to Derbyshire in the UK aged 54 in 2006 to spend time with my elderly parents who had remained in the Walsall area. Sadly they both passed away the following year and with nothing to hold me in the UK I migrated to Australia in 2009 with my Chinese Malaysian wife Kim Gaik and our son Maxwell (born 1998).

Living in semi-rural South Australia I fish, raise beef cattle, rear chickens and try and keep fit bushwalking. Every year I go back to Malaysia and often to Ipoh and reminisce as I pass the

old Crabtree factory. In January 2016 a few of us will meet once again at a Crabtree Malaysia reunion.

I am forever in the debt of Crabtree and Mr Shipton, even now I cannot bring myself to address him as “Percy”!

Anyone wanting to contact me can find me on mikeblakeway888@gmail.com or by a FaceBook search of my name.

