

Apprentice Days - Ted Richardson



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In August 1955 I was called to the works manager's office for an interview. Severe panic set in, but I needn't have worried.

In those days Mr Hancock was works manager. He asked me to sit down and said, "Would you like coffee?" Panic settled into worry. "We've been keeping an eye on you." That had me very worried; who had been keeping an eye on me and why? He continued, "We are prepared to offer you a position as a management apprentice. It will mean five years hard work on your part. We will give you time to go to college, and at the end of your apprenticeship you will have learned sufficient to be a factory manager.

As far as I can recall, my reaction was to gulp.

I've never been quite sure how right he was with his last comment, but as I finished up in Works Office dealing with trial production of new accessories, I suppose he wasn't far off the mark.

I joined the company late in 1953, and went into Accessories Specials (Fred Sharp was foreman then), and it was from there I became an apprentice. The department provided good training in the use of machinery – though most of it was belt driven in those days.

My apprenticeship proper started at the end of 1955 when I moved into Control Gear Drawing Office the chief draughtsman being Mr Middleton. I exchanged bib and brace overall for a suit, and went home at night not smelling of oil. The pleasure I had seeing my first 'real' drawing transferred onto cloth by a tracer is something I've never forgotten.

The 'clean' days came to an abrupt halt after ten months when I was transferred to the Foundry. From the neat and clean drawing office to the dirt and noise of the foundry was a culture shock. I arrived home each night looking as though I'd been down a coalmine - with very dirty coal at that.

On top of this it was one of the coldest winters I remember; in the foundry, white-hot iron would be coming from the furnace. It singed your eyebrows, but your back was freezing. In the pattern shop there was no heating other than a large pot-bellied stove in the centre of the room.

We took turns stoking that stove, and though by half past ten it glowed red, it didn't warm us. We went to it occasionally to thaw our hands and feet. Les Large, the foreman, suggested we bring potatoes to bake on the stove – one of the good things I remember. It's the only time I worked in a thick overcoat, woolly hat, and gloves.

From there I went to other departments; the Chemical Laboratory, Electrical Laboratory, Model Shop, Electrical Maintenance Department, five different Assembly Departments, Progress Department, and Stock Control.

A great experience for any youngster, and I revelled in it.

Learning about production methods, absorbing new processes and techniques, and most important of all, meeting people. It was vital to 'get-on' as quickly as possible with people. When working in a new department time was always short, and I needed to learn as much as possible. The successful way was to make friends quickly.

Company apprentices attended college one day a week, and at one time I had two evening classes as well. It was hard work.

The apprentice supervisor (Mr G T Dickson) organised outings to places of interest; I remember visiting Enfield Cables (seeing whole ash trees fed into a crucible of molten

copper - to burn off impurities), Ham's Hall 'B' Power Station (watching 'rain' pouring down inside a massive cooling tower), and a colliery (to see how electrical equipment was protected underground). These visits were an important part of our education and training.

Every year there was a party for apprentices to enable them to meet senior members of staff (who were on the lookout for likely material). In later years this changed to a formal dinner.

My first public speaking came at one of those dinners; I proposed the toast to 'The Company'. The response came from Mrs Crabtree, wife of the founder. As I had to sit next to her at the top table, I felt I really had moved up in the world.

When I completed my apprenticeship I was offered a position with the company.

For a few months I was 'held' in Circuit Breaker Specials Drawing Office (managed by George Foster, assisted by Gordon Sifford); whilst a suitable place was found for me. That place was Works Office – I couldn't believe my good fortune. What Mr Hancock had said all those years before was about to come true.

Eric Whitehouse was in charge of Works Office and also Progress Department. I knew Eric from my earliest days with the company; when I joined he was a progress chaser, calling on Accessories Specials.

He told me I would be in control of arranging tooling, materials, and trial production for the new 'rocker' switch. Eric went on to say I was to use my knowledge of the works and the people to get the required results.

Eric was a 'class act' not easy to follow; the speed at which he moved round the works made even keeping up with him a problem. When he wasn't shouting down the telephone, he was rushing from one department to another. I've often seen Eric in full flight, pursued by Harold Smith (Progress Department) – now Harold was a tall man with long legs, but even he found it difficult to keep up with the much smaller Eric.

Because of his 'push', Eric Whitehouse wasn't an easy man to get on with, and I fell foul of him many times. He wanted everything done 'yesterday', which was good for the company, but not always for the individual. I learnt a lot from him.

My time spent in the works proved its worth, for I knew how to get things done far better than someone coming in from outside. Having once worked alongside people often made the difference.

A regular port of call was my 'first' department 'Accessories Specials', where Frank Proffitt was now foreman. Many times he and my friend Roy Vincent were able to devise small tools for me to use on trial assemblies.

I got on well with Eric Rostron, manager of Inspection Department. He signed his name with a simple large 'R' followed by a small circle with a '1' enclosed. I asked him what it meant; he said it was to indicate he was the number one Rostron. I'd no argument with that.

Eric had long gangling arms. It was whispered that, as a young man, he'd been caught in overhead belting, and was whirled round before the machinery could be stopped. True or false I don't know, but it fitted his appearance. Out of the factory, Eric's main interest was his car, a magnificent Lagonda, and referred to affectionately by him as 'The Old Lag'

Part of the job in Works Office was arranging tours for visiting organisations. My colleagues, Peter Williams, Frank Locke, and I, would escort these groups round the



Eric Whitehouse



Frank Proffitt



Eric Rostron

factory. The reason we were called on as guides was because, through our work, we knew the factory intimately.

At lunchtime we would take guests to a local hotel, usually the George Hotel on 'The Bridge' in the centre of Walsall. This often meant using our own cars and on one occasion I was in Eric Rostron's Lagonda with Bill Sidwell (works manager's personal assistant). There was gentle rivalry between Bill and Eric over 'The Old Lag', and on one occasion, Eric pulled up at traffic lights. Not a sound was heard in the car, and Bill started to laugh, "You've stalled her," he said. A slight look of annoyance crossed Eric's face, "Not so," he replied. "Watch the rev counter." Everyone looked at the rev counter, it was doing its job, and the engine was still running. Just to prove it, Eric pressed the accelerator and the needle moved over, still no sound from the engine. He looked over at Bill, who had stopped laughing, and said, "Quiet, isn't it?" Bill said nothing.

Bill Sidwell was a large 'cuddly teddy-bear' type. Friendly and always ready with good advice on production problems. It was Bill, who on the occasions we went to the George Hotel with visiting parties, introduced me to the pleasures of Amontillado sherry, a taste that has never left me.

There was always a wide variety of work to do in Works Office, and Frank Locke had the job of dealing with experiments on B15 timers. On the B15 timer there was a rubber diaphragm in which a small amount of air was admitted through a needle valve. The valve controlled the speed of ingress of air, and therefore the time in which the diaphragm filled and operated a lever to turn on a switch.

The air-operated system often failed due to dust blocking the valve.

Company trouble-shooter at that time was Dr Eric Sherard, who was brought in to find an answer; Frank Locke helped him on the production side.

A dust-proof test booth was set up in Control Gear Assembly, where foreman Jack White arranged for Maureen Wildig and Olwen Wiggin to have blue 'anti-static' uniforms. Working under controlled conditions, Maureen and Olwen assembled various designs of needle valve into pneumatic timers. None of the variations worked successfully.

Dr Sherard eventually recommended clockwork timers. Though more expensive than the pneumatic design, they worked accurately, and could be adjusted on site by the installation engineer. Wonders of electronic timers were unknown to us in those days.

Peter Williams was involved in initial tooling and production trials of the C50 Circuit Breaker. This design, from the beginning, was particularly trouble free. A delight for any production engineer, as it went together so easily, and required little or no assembly line calibration. Peter arranged for some of the C50 outer cases to be moulded in clear Perspex, so every member of the sales team had a sample to show how the mechanism worked. These 'clear' C50s became a valuable sales tool.

As in every workplace there was humour. I remember one day talking to Jose ('Joker') Edwards, foreman of Sheet Metal Box Department, when a man came along pulling a trolley. Trolleys were made of steel, and on rough concrete made a lot of noise. A voice close by let itself be heard with, "Be quiet! There's blokes here trying to sleep." We laughed, but then quickly hid our faces, for walking behind the trolley was the recently appointed Works Manager, Mr Barnard.



"Joker" Edwards

Miss Pat Hackett, works manager's secretary, was a regular visitor to Works Office. She sat on the edge of my desk and we would recite Edward Lear's nonsense rhyme, 'The Owl And The Pussy Cat' – done with suitable squeaky voices. I still smile at the thought of, "Dear pig are you willing, to sell for a shilling, your ring?" Said the piggy, "I will!" It may have sounded like 'Children's Hour', but it relieved the stress of a busy workload.

Sometimes people asked what we did in Works Office. It wasn't easy to give a simple answer. We were peacemakers between what was, and what was to be. We were trying to bring in new products whilst existing ones were still in full production – never an easy task with so many people pulling in different directions.

I suppose every Crabtree apprentice will say they have a lot to thank the company for, certainly I have. From a boy in Accessories Specials, to becoming an apprentice, and through to Works Office, all within ten years isn't bad going.

In 2009, on behalf of 'The Crabtree Society', I laid a posy of flowers on the graves of Mr & Mrs Crabtree and made a short speech – what it came down to was this, "Thank you. That which is built soundly endures well." It did with me.



Crabtree Apprentices Dinner in the staff canteen at Lincoln Works in 1958.