

The World of Work

by Roy M Horne

I left school in the summer of 1947 when I was fifteen, started work on the 10th August of the same year and reached the age of sixteen that October. In those days most pupils left at the age of fourteen and it was only those who went on to some form of higher education such as Grammar, High and Technical school who stayed longer.

As to knowing what I wanted to do in life, well, I didn't really think about it as once again, in those days most people like me just went out and found a job to do. I do remember that there were two jobs that Dad said I couldn't do, they being mining, which was dangerous, and printing, which was Dad's job and was poorly paid.

On reflection I must have had some idea of what type of work I wanted to do because I knew that I wanted it to be mechanical and that I wanted to work with my hands, but it was the visit to Barnsley Tech by a Mr Partridge, who was the Apprentice Supervisor at the Brush, that settled it and ensured that I came to Loughborough.

I stated earlier that when I came down to work at the Brush I went straight into the Gables, which is not strictly true. It had been intended that I would go straight there, but there were some sailors on a training course at the Brush and they were staying at the Gables, so I had to go to the other Brush hostel, The Brooklyns, until they had returned to their base about four months later.

The Brooklyns was in fact only a couple of hundred yards further down the road towards town from the Gables and was used mainly for graduate and student apprentices. Incidentally the matron of the Brooklyns was a Mrs Lant, who was the sister of Mrs Crammer, the matron of the Gables, and therefore aunt to my then future wife Inez. Both hostels were at the other end of town to the Brush works, so I had to get my cycle legs going again and cycle back and forth to work every day.

The first part of my apprenticeship was at a Craft Training Centre owned by the Brush and situated near the Ashby Road end of Regent Street in Loughborough. At this centre we were taught the basics of fitting, machining, woodwork and electrical wiring/winding, and collectively they covered a period of six months.

There were about fifty trade apprentices at the centre at any one time and they were taught the various trades by four tutors - Mr North (fitting), Mr Clarke (electrical), Mr Gent (Machining) and Mr Woodhead (woodwork). There must have been the best part of five hundred apprentices in training at the Brush, with not all of them being trade apprentices as there were both student and graduate apprentices there also. This figure of five hundred out of a total labour force of some five and a half thousand ensured that a good supply of skilled people were trained by the company.

At the end of our initial six month training session we were all asked which department we would like to go in within the main works, and if that coincided with a vacancy in that department, you were okay. But if there was no vacancy to match your choice

then you were placed in a department where there was one. I was lucky as I asked for Switchgear and got it.

While I was serving my apprenticeship I had to go on day release to Loughborough Technical College as part of my training. There we were taught all about volts, amps, ohms and watts etc, subjects which were chosen for me but which I had already been taught at Barnsley Tech. So I never liked it and dropped out after one year. My two years at Barnsley Tech. counted as a first year pass for the National Certificate but I never had anything on paper to prove it.

When I first started at the Brush the working week was of forty-four hours duration, made up of eight and a half hours on Monday and Friday and nine hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. In those days we worked a week in hand, meaning that the firm always owed us a week's wages, so at the end of my second week in work I was paid the princely sum of one pound, one shilling and ten-pence ha'penny (£1/1/10½). This equates to just less than £1.10 in today's currency, or two and a half pence an hour.

I had one big problem with only earning that amount of money and that was that I needed one pound, sixteen shillings and sixpence (£1-16-6p) a week just to pay for my board at the hostel, regardless of the need to pay for food etc. It actually meant that Dad had to send me money just to get me by until I obtained a government grant which made up the shortfall in my rent, gave me ten shillings to buy my mid-day meals, seven shillings for laundry and then ten shillings for pocket money. This went on until I had finished at the craft school and had moved down into the main works, where I started to earn bonus money on top of my wages. I had also turned sixteen by this time, which meant that my basic wage went up as well, and I also worked overtime, so it wasn't very long before I was earning so much that I had to give up my grant.

I recall one year when I hit the jackpot, working from 7.30 am till 9.30 pm on a Monday, 7.30 am till 10.30 pm on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday's and a normal day of 7.30 am till 5.00 pm on Friday's. I also went in half day on Saturday (4½ hours) and all day on a Sunday (8 hours). Taking away breaks such as the dinner hour and the fifteen minute break before overtime started, this made a grand total of 75 actual working hours, with overtime premiums added in meaning the actual hours of pay amounted to 91.66. Overtime hours were paid at time and a third for mid-week hours, time and a half for Saturdays and double time for Sundays. I kept this up for almost a year, but as to where the money went I just don't know, I guess I just fritted it away.

I had to serve my apprenticeship until I reached the age of twenty-one, at which time I was classed as a skilled fitter with my exact qualifications, as shown on my Indentures, showing that I am a 'fitter erector, electrical switchgear'.

My Working life at the Brush

During my forty-nine years at the Brush I worked on many different products. During the time when I was serving my apprenticeship in Switchgear I was firstly in the sub-assembly section for two years and then in the main erection section for about three more. Switchgear is, as the word implies, a switch that (in this case) controls

electricity much the same way as a switch on the wall at home will turn the lights off or on. So did the switches that I was involved in making, excepting that where the wall switch at home controls electricity of 230 volts and, perhaps, 5 amps, the ones I built would control voltages up to 132,000 volts and amperages in excess of 3,000. These pieces of equipment would be used to control the output of electric generators such as water or steam powered turbines or to control the input to very large electric motors which could be used in rolling mills, stone crushing equipment or large printing machines like the ones that print your daily paper.

After I had served my National Service in the RAF I went back to the Brush and into Switchgear, but this time to work on the manufacture of control cubicles for diesel locomotives - firstly on shunting types known as Bo-Bo's and 0-4-0's. These were used to shunt coal wagons about in colliery yards or, as was the case of one lot, to move molten steel about in the British Steel works at Port Talbot, Wales. At that time I was also involved in finishing off a contract for twenty main line locomotives for the Ceylon Government Railway. Over the next fifteen years I was involved in the manufacture of over 500 Type 2 and Type 4 locos for British Rail, and was, in fact, the charge hand on the cubicle section for most of that time.

During those fifteen years a big change took place at the Brush as the firm was bought out by a company called Hawker Siddeley, who split the company into four separate Divisions - Brush Switchgear, Brush Transformers, Brush Electrical Machines and Brush Holdings. Brush Holdings were the owners of the site, to whom the other groups had to pay rent. Shortly after that, Hawker Siddeley formed a fifth company called Brush Traction, with Traction Control Gear being transferred from Switchgear to Traction. And I went with it.

Work in Brush Traction was always a bit sporadic, as it would depend on what orders we obtained - mainly from British Rail. We would get an order for, say, eighty engines (locomotives), which would last for a couple of years, only for no more to be forthcoming for a while. This would then be followed by another one for, say, a hundred etc etc, and each time the work dried up, part of the workforce was made redundant, only for them to be re-employed for the next order. On one particular occasion when we were short of work I was asked if I would like to transfer back to Switchgear as I had experience of the place, to which I agreed.

The only other place where I was employed was in the RAF where I did my National Service. I never worked for any other company other than the Brush, although I did leave after 28 years [because of redundancy], but I went back some six months later. I couldn't find anywhere else that paid the kind of wages I needed for me to support my family.

When I did go back it was into a different department altogether - Control Gear, which was the place I had spent most of my time at the Brush. It was now part of the Traction Division and not Switchgear. The work was the same in that it was [making] control equipment for loco's, excepting that now we were making spare parts for all the cubicles the firm had made over the years - as parts wear out and need replacing or repairing. We did also make a few new control cubicles. Because the department was much smaller we were rehoused next to Industrial Controls, which was part of Brush Electrical Machines (BEM).

The first words the foreman Colin Rush said to me when I turned up for work were “I expected you here six months ago, Roy, when you left Switchgear!” I stayed on the shop floor in Traction Control Gear for about three years until work took a down turn again, at which point I was asked if I would like to spend some time in Traction’s Rate Fixing Office and assist Jack Tyers with some technical costing. This I did, and it was while I was there that a vacancy arose for a rate fixer in Industrial Controls which I applied for and succeeded in getting.

I stayed in that Division and job for the rest of my working life, only seeing it change from me being a Senior Process/Rate Fixer and having a senior partner (David Coombs) with me as the Methods Engineer, to me being the sole person in the office doing it all. This went one stage further when we moved off the main Brush site to a small industrial unit on Monarch Way about a mile away, where I was also given the responsibility for plant and building maintenance, but for which I was paid nothing extra.

Come my retirement I was being paid some £3,000 a year less than my contemporaries on the main site. All the office staff at Monarch Way were bereft of Union support because of our isolation from the main site, and missed out on annual pay rises we should have got. That didn’t apply to the shop floor workers as their Union protected them all the time.

Needless to say the only reason I left the Brush again was because I took early retirement. I left in May 1996, which was six months before my 65th birthday the following October.

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