

Ink under the fingernails

When I left school, unless you were going into the Military you got a job through who your father happened to know. My father knew the manager of a large book printing firm and so an interview was arranged.

'You were not very good at maths' said the manager reviewing my school report, so he gave me an apprenticeship in a department where I would need it! On my first day I tuned up nice and smart but the overseer told me I should wear something that could be got dirty and so I got a boiler suit.

One of the first jobs an apprentice got to print was the Race card for the Fakenham Racecourse meeting. Everything had to be kept hidden during the lunch hour because one of the staff could make use of seeing the runners when it came to betting, which he did quite a lot of, even nipping out to the bookies during working hours!

I got on well with the older apprentices, only two of us got caught for National Service! In the main, the older tradesmen were OK with a couple of exceptions. As I started there was a strike in the industry. It began with the newspapers in Fleet Street where the Unions called the shots, it then filtered down to the trade in general. Apprentices and overseers were allowed to work. It was a very hot summer and all the outside doors were left open to help this 19th century building, built like a fortress to cool down. Once, a door onto the street was left open and the Police got the manager out of bed in the middle of the night to go and lock it up, he was not amused! I was invited to join the Trade Union because printing was a closed shop. I had no political agenda but there were some advantages to being in a union, but some disputes invited questions about the wisdom of them.

Part of my training was to go to Norwich College one day a week. This meant a two mile walk to the station to catch the first train out in the morning. When I got to Norwich I would have a second breakfast in a café which once stood near the station, it sold the most wonderful cheese rolls.

The Norwich apprentices tended to look down on us from the sticks but we soon became friends. We were part of the Art School and the art students did not like us a lot. The tutors were OK and could be bribed if we were late back from the pub at Christmas Time. They were also fair game for a laugh when a science experiment went wrong, I remember one ending up in smoke and flames but it proved the point! One new tutor was a Sunderland supporter and when they played City he got some good natured stick about it! Because of the train timetables I was not able to stay for evening classes, this went against my attendance record, but the Company understood. Until the

line was closed a year later I used to return home to Fakenham's other station. This meant that I would have to catch the train at City station which had been bombed out in the War. I remember all the buildings were prefabs!

After the strike all returned to work. Many were as brown as berries having spent the time fruit picking. To my surprise I passed my exams and was now a tradesman and promoted to the large printing presses where I had an assistant to help me. He was a funny man who could make fun without being offensive. He was also a shop steward and when the Company Chairman paid a visit the two were introduced. 'Sir, would you consider being President of our football team?' 'Why, thank you, what exactly would I have to do' (The Chairman was a titled gentleman who was very small and in his 80s) 'You only have to play one game a season' was the reply. Those of us who heard the conversation thought it was hilarious and so did the Chairman who did not take up the invitation. There were sometimes troubles with the machines. I once had a job go wrong and had to work on a Saturday without pay to reprint some of it while everyone else was getting time and a half.

By this time I was getting a bit fed up with the job and restless so when a job came up in admin I went for it and to everyone's surprise I got it. The overseer was not best pleased because he had spent five years training me up only to lose me. I made a good move because consideration was being given to close down the big presses I was working on, they had been there since the 1920s with the technology of the time. With my local History contacts I was able to get one of the older machines to a museum where it has since fallen apart in spite of efforts to get it moved to a more suitable museum!

After I had spent some time in the 'time & motion study department' a job then came in the new Production Office which I got, and over the year I got to the position of Production Controller For Printing. I learned much about publishing encouraging me to later later start up my own little company.

By the 1970s the firm was in trouble - our competitors in Europe were able, for many reasons, to produce books at a price we were paying for the paper to print them on. Then the Fakenham works was sold to an English competitor whose produce was different to ours and the two did not integrate very well. After a couple of years and a change of name they closed the Fakenham works down but not before I had sent off a good deal of archive material to the Norfolk Heritage Centre in Norwich, keeping some back for our own Museum.

Being redundant I spent the next two months doing gardens and job-hunting and then I was offered a job with a Lithographic Repro House set up by some former colleagues. It was not the best job in the world and I was glad when they moved to Norwich so that I

could leave and go and work with a former colleague who had set up a Print Management company.

I stayed with him for 3 years until I applied for a job as Resources Manger at my old school. I came second in the interview to a chap who only wanted the job part time so that he could spend time in his boat sailing! Getting the job I was given a budget to set up a Reprographics and Print unit to my specification. My assistant and I ran it on commercial lines, producing work for the Admin and teaching materials. We also earned money doing work for other schools and for outside customers being careful not to poach work from other printers in the town who would often help us and we them. We considered ourselves as part of the printing family in the town and helped to organise the Fakenham Print Fair which showcased the work of all the printers in the Town. The installation of a new machine got us a mention in a printing trade journal. I retired at 70, the school was to become an Academy and would not want me any longer. I worked from home writing and publishing as well as doing some print management, also working at the local Museum where we had set up a section dedicated to Fakenham's Printing Heritage.