

**Nothing is Impossible.**

**Autobiography of**  
**William Hamilton Robertson**  
(Known as Wullie, Scottie, Ginger, Sparks and Bill)

**Ballenbreich by Avonbridge, Falkirk**



**Me my mum and Fred**

## **Explanation about Fred KARNO who I refer to in this book.**

Frederick John Westcott (26 March 1866 – 18 September 1941), best known by his stage name **Fred Karno**, was a theatre impresario of the British music hall. Karno is credited with inventing the custard-pie-in –the-face gag.

During the 1890s, in order to circumvent stage censorship, Karno developed a form of sketch comedy without dialogue. Cheeky authority defying playlets such as “*Jail Birds*” (1896) in which prisoners play tricks on warders and “*Early Birds*” (1903) where a small man defeats a large ruffian in London’s East End can be seen as precursors of movie silent comedy. In fact, among the young comedians who worked for him were Charlie Chaplin and Arthur Jefferson, who later adopted the name of Stan Laurel.

These were part of what was known as “**Fred Karno’s Army**”, a phrase still occasionally used in the U.K. to refer to a chaotic group or organisation. The phrase was also adopted by British soldiers into a trench song in the First World War, as a parody of, or rather to the tune of, the hymn “*The Church’s One Foundation*”. In the Second World War it was adapted as the anthem of “**The Guinea Pig Club**”, the first line becoming “**We are McIndoe’s Army**”. The men, having their burnt faces etc. rebuilt, by the Famous Plastic Surgeon Mr. McIndoe.

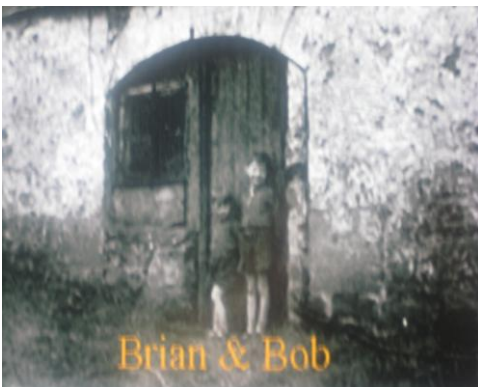
**Mr. McIndoe defied the authorities and having beer and tobacco in the wards as part of the treatment.**

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# Introduction

I was born in Scotland in dire poverty, in 1927, half way up a hill two miles from the village in a “converted” cow shed 14 ft. long by 12 ft. wide. (They put a fire in it for my mum to cook on and two fixed in beds.) To get into bed you climbed on to a chair, then the table and in to bed. Under the bed was where we had our clothes etc.. No electricity or any other service. We carried water up the hill in a pail from a hole in the ground. From there the water trickled into the river. I could never understand why Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch their pail of water.



Before I was old enough to go to school I liked to go to Ferry's farm. The stable door was always open and the horses were never tied up.



***The view Brian and Bob are looking at.***

At the farm I would call out Missy and Missy, a giant of a shire horse, would come out and walk over to the dyke. I climbed up the rough stones in the dyke and got on her back. Only having little legs, which couldn't stretch over her back, I walked along her back and sat on her neck with her mane for comfort and in an emergency to hang on. There was only one rope attached to her bit for steering, so I just told her the field and off we plodded. She was as gentle as a lamb, not like her sister Mary. If they were ploughing and you stopped with your foot in a furrow, she would put her foot on top of yours so you couldn't get away. She never hurt you, just the devil in her. I'm sure she was smiling.

One day my mum caught me up on missy's back and dragged me off and gave me a thumping. She told me I could get hurt falling off. I thought falling off the horse wouldn't be as sore.

We walked to school hail rain or snow. (We were snowed in every winter for two weeks because our legs weren't long enough to reach through the snow.) If we had a blizzard my dad always told me not to sit down in the snow or I would go to sleep and never wake up. The school was on the other side of the village; just our luck. I started at five years old and one day, when I went home, I told my mum Miss Main had given me the strap. (No canes in Scotland). I told her what I had done and got another thumping. This happened again another day so I thought there must be a way round this. Any time Miss Main, or any other teacher, asked who had done something wrong, and nobody owned up, I knew I would get the blame because I always blushed, so I put my hand up and said I did. I was told not to do it again and that didn't hurt. I used this system throughout my schooling and never got punished. Many years later something happened in school and the form master was accusing different boys and nobody owned up. Later I overheard him talking to another master about it. The other master asked if it could be me. He said no, if it was he would say so. It was me, but he never asked me.

My mum taught me always to tell the truth as liars need a good memory. She also taught me never to buy things on hire purchase. You should save up for them.

The mill at the farm had a wheel in the river which never worked so it was a great place for us to play. We got a sack which we opened up to form an oblong. We tied a rope on each corner to form a parachute then on to our belt. We jumped out of the opening they once lowered the sacks of flour from. We landed on the pile of manure which was underneath and soft. We climbed trees, fished in the river and jumped in the "Dookin hole" (A bend in the river where the water was deeper). NOBODY ever got hurt. No "elf" and safety.

One day an ambulance took Isabel Hamilton away. We didn't know where to, but later on she came back. We couldn't understand this as when you were taken away in the ambulance (with diphtheria) you never came back. When one of our grandsons told me they were doing a project at school on toys our grand parents had. He asked me what toys I had. I told him none. We made our own toys and games. We were never bored.

A highlight in our year was at Easter. Our mum's hard boiled eggs and put coloured cloth in the boiling water along with the egg so that we had coloured eggs. Living on a hill was very convenient as we rolled the eggs down the hill until the shells broke then we ate them. I look back on those days with many happy memories. We had a wonderful view but you can't eat a view!!

One day we went on a trip to South Queensferry, about 17 miles away, at the other end of the earth. We had a small boat trip on the river Forth and went under the Forth Bridge. I had never seen such a sight before and was amazed.

One boy started crying and wanted to go home. His mother gave him a wallop and told him they couldn't walk back. Another village trip was to some lochs. The roads were very narrow. At one point we had to back up and the back went into the loch. What excitement. Apart from that we only ever went to my grandmother's outside Falkirk where the Falkirk Wheel now stands.

The gentleman at the bottom of the hill, where we lived, was a manager in the Falkirk Iron company. He was transferred to England and moved with his family. His son, who was in his early twenties, gave me his big box of meccano. The first thing I made was the Forth Bridge. I realise now that this was the start of me working out how to make things and having a photographic memory.

On arriving home from school one day I found a light bulb hanging from the ceiling and a switch on the wall which turned it on and off. I told my mum that's what I want to do, put lights with switches in people's houses. Some time later when I came home there was a box that people spoke out of and it played music. It fascinated me. Again I said that's what I want to do. The music was Henry Hall's band and the singer George Elrick broadcasting from the Falkirk transmitter. I would be about six or seven at the time. Remember this paragraph.

We spent summer holidays at my grandmothers. A tar works had been down by the canal where the Falkirk wheel is now. Every time I smell anyone using tar on a road or flat roof, my mind goes back to Lime Road and "Maw's".



Farther up the hill towards High Bonnybridge there was a fish fertilizer plant. I can't remember the smell, but it must have been wicked. At High Bonnybridge there's a clay pit where they dig the high quality clay for fire bricks. The bricks are made in local brickworks. It's where we get the bricks for the night storage heaters. There are also coal mines where my grandfather (Forsyth) had been an Engine Winding Man. He died in the bus on his way home the day he retired. My Robertson grandfather was also a Winding Engine Man at a different pit. He died before I was born. I have his name. My uncle John also worked at High Bonnybridge. (Later he became a manager at a private pit.) Another uncle, on the Robertson side was a bus driver for Alexander's Buses.

Walter Alexander started by hiring out bikes. He then had one bus which went round the villages and grew from there. They built Blue Bird coaches and buses which eventually covered Scotland. If today you travel on a Stagecoach Bus the odds are it came from the Alexander Garage outside Falkirk where they were made. So did the founder of the Stagecoach buses, where he was a driver.

The family are all short; at 5ft. 8" I was tall. Our uncle John told my cousin, Ester, that her Dad played the big drum in the pipe band. He told her that one day on the way from Bonnybrige to Falkirk he took the wrong road. (There are two roads from High Bonnybridge to Falkirk, one direct and one via Lime Road, both meeting up in Camelon near lock 16 outside Falkirk.) When she asked what happened he told her they met up at lock 16.

Back home Ester asked her dad if it was true. He said yes. They cured it by cutting a *Wee Window in the drum*.

Going back to High Bonnybrige, my uncle John repaired the family boots and shoes. My uncle Bob, the bus driver, collected and returned them from and to my grandmother's which was on his bus route from Falkirk to High Bonnybrige.

When I was about 19 I was on leave in Scotland. My uncle John told me he had one of the new coal cutters in his pit and would I like to go and see it? I had to crawl on my hands and knees to get to the cutter. I kept banging my back on the roof and there was a conveyor belt inches from my side. It reminded me, as a boy, being in my grannies when my dad came in. His brother told him he had his new shovel. It had a large shovel part and a short handle. My dad tried it for balance then got under the kitchen sink to try it out. He was a "brusher". No conveyor belt in those days.

They often worked in water and in the winter walked home with their trousers frozen. He could take his mole skin trousers off and stand them up. We had a tin bath in front of the fire. The fire was alight 24 hours a day summer and winter.

My brother Fred was three years older than me. We had two young uncles, one eighteen months YOUNGER than me, Alec and one eighteen months YOUNGER than Fred, Bobby. Bobby evidently had rickets and was small and walked on his toes. He also suffered with asthma. We were told to be careful with him.

He had a tremendous sense of humour. One day we got chased by a bull. Bobby was first over the dyke, He became a bookies runner. He had an office, one room, where he collected the bets. Everybody in the area knew Wee Bobbie. They legalised the betting and it put Bobby out of business. Alec was a moulder and engineer in an iron works. He was very good at football and trained with the Rangers Bairns (children) he turned professional and played for Darlington. His wife wouldn't leave Falkirk. Contract ends and he's back home as a moulder and mine electrical engineer.



**Like my sailor suit?**

He also became a player then director of East Stirlingshire Football Club. (They gave Sir Alex Ferguson his first managerial job.) For many years he did talent spotting and worked tirelessly for the Scottish Youth Football. He printed bingo type tickets and had agents selling them for Scottish football. (For many years he came to us, during “Falkirk Week” for a holiday.)

Years later, a cousin, said she always thinks of me in my long trousers. My mum got a flour sack from the flour mill in the village. She hand sewed the trouser as we didn’t have a sewing machine. I was very proud of my long trousers as all the other boys only had shorts.

Back at Maw’s we used to sleep four in a bed, heads and tails like sardines. Where they lived mothers were call Maw, so I called my grandmother maw the same as the family. (I had eight aunts and uncles. Because of their ages half were called aunt and uncle the other half Bertha, Betty, Bobby and Alec.) One day I called her maw and Alec told me she was not MY maw, she was HIS maw and MY granny. My mother was the eldest in the family. She got upset if any of them died. She said she should have died first.

They moved us to a council house in the village while my dad, a miner, was in a sanatorium - he never saw it. He died at the age of 36 from silicosis, the miner’s lung disease, I was nine. He made my mother promise that she would never let my brother or I ever put a foot inside a pit. We could walk the streets before that.



***The main road through Avonbridge.***

The council house was marvellous. We had two bedrooms, a living room, bathroom and kitchen. The living room fire had a damper you could pull out and the heat worked the range in the kitchen and the hot water. The range had an oven; my mum never learned how to use, having spent so many years cooking on a fire. A boiler for washing clothes and six plates you could remove and put pans over the holes.

One of the boys at school told me you can make six pans of chips at the same time. A bit different from Ballenbreich with a tin bath in front of the fire. I was broken hearted as we had moved away from the country and all the animals. The village seemed big to me. One cross road.

## When I was Ten



When I was 10 my mum moved us to England. How she did it I will never know. Probably she had a penny policy on my dad's life. She reminded us to always tell the truth, as liars need a good memory. To always save up for things we wanted and NEVER to have hire purchase. She worked in a fish and chip shop as the hours fitted in with me at school. Fred started work.

I came from a small village school with two classes to a room yet I was a year ahead of the class. I was in the last year before the pupils went to the next school. This was long before the eleven plus. The headmaster managed to make special arrangements for me to have an exam at the grammar school. The exams had finished by the time we arrived. I didn't go much on the masters in gowns and the whole school set up.

My mum couldn't afford the uniform or the bus fare, it was too far to walk, and they played rugby, **so I failed**. The head master was not pleased he had gone to a lot of trouble to get me the test. They couldn't understand my strong Scottish accent in school so I told him I couldn't understand them.

Our first house was half a house. The front room, the front bedroom and box room. We shared the bathroom and my mum had a cooker in the kitchen, with separate meter. We moved from there to half a flat when the Mungall's daughter, Jessie, opened a hairdressers in a new parade of shops a few streets away.

From school and Saturdays I worked in the hardware shop at the end of the parade of shops doing deliveries on the trade's bike and helping in the shop. The shop had a decorating business. On Saturdays I trimmed the wallpaper, got the paint, size and putty for the order and delivered the lot to the site on the new estate. I got one shilling and sixpence a week. (Seven and a half pence.)

The boot and shoe repairer was looking for a boy to do the heelball, the black or brown wax finish on the soles of the shoes. A candle was used to melt the wax and heat the tools. No health and safety. You learned to be careful the hard way. This job was three shillings plus tips (2 pence tip if I was lucky.) on delivery.

I didn't have a bike. I had heard people talking about a local tip. I didn't know what that was so; I went to have a look. I could see there were enough parts to build a bike. I found a frame and took it home.

Then gradually I found the other parts and took them home. I looked at the other parts to see how they went together.



**Me and my bike – note the hair centre parting.**

Over a few weeks I built myself a bike and with a six penny tin of Japlac paint I had a bike, my pride and joy. Panic! How do you ride it? I built many bikes during the next years. I never had a new one.

When I started work I built a roadster bike so I could carry the bags of tools on the handlebars. Cable brakes were no good as the cables got in the way of the tool bags. I later added a Sturmey-Archer three speed and a chain guard. (Posh)

At 14 years and 5 days I started work to learn to become an electrician. Our showroom windows were blown out the previous night so I had to clear out the wreckage. In the window of the shop opposite was this beautiful blonde with gorgeous curves.



On the Saturday I plucked up courage to go into the shop and ask how much the blonde guitar hanging in the window was. She said it was 5 guineas but, as I was the new shop boy across the road, I could have it for £5 and she would put it aside for me till I paid for it.

I had this job finishing boots and shoes in a repair shop in the evenings and weekends so I saved up the money and took the guitar home. Day in and day out I practised the chords, from a 1/6 (Seven and a half pence tutor), a lot more than the 3 chord wonders who made a fortune with rock and roll and 12 bar blues. My mum met a friend of hers and told her about me practising the guitar. The lady told her to tell me to go and see her husband Albert who played in a small band.

I did. He copied the music from the one shilling sheet music, transposing it for his E flat alto sax and B flat for the trumpeter. I copied the chords out for the guitar. He was like a father to me and gave me every encouragement. I joined the band at 16 - 3/6 a night. It may not seem much but I got 3/- **a week** finishing shoes.

Some weeks later I got seven shillings as it made the band look and sound good. This was the business to be in. The band - "*The Rhythm Stylists*". His bass drum could light up, had a row of skulls on top and two swan necks to hold the cymbals.



We played in all sorts of halls. Dance, Church, Working men's clubs etc. The first one I played in was a working men's club in Eltham. When they told me that was where Bob Hope started. I had visions of ending up in Hollywood. I worked out later that the 3/6 was half Alberts money. Many years later, Albert was very ill and in great pain. He said if he was a dog his wife would be prosecuted for keeping him. He asked me to put his medication where he could reach it. I wouldn't do it and never went back because I might do it.

I have lived with the fact that he helped me and when he needed my help I let him down. I did make his helping me up to him in odd ways so it didn't show. At his funeral his son told me he knew what I was doing.

Back in the electrical world; One of the early jobs, as an apprentice, I helped with was to convert a house from gas to electricity. The boss said he had a complaint about the job. The lady said the light hurt their eyes and showed up all the dust and cobwebs. At seventeen I had often to work on my own, mainly on bomb damage as the electricians were being called up, or with a “mate”, much older than me, who had been disabled out of the navy. The customers always spoke to him first. When he told them to speak to me they looked at me with a suspicious look on their faces.

One of the jobs I had to do was to get the electricity working through the house. When I called there the lady looked very dazed, this was normal. An incendiary bomb had come through the roof and burnt through the ceiling. It landed near the foot of the stairs and burnt through into the meter cupboard burning the wires and main switch. I cut the wires back, jointed them, fixed a new main switch and connected it up. The main switch had to be connected live. The earth wire had to be fitted before fixing the main switch to the wall as the screw was behind the handle.

The cupboard is the smallest one which also held the gas meter. I had to lie on my side, the normal position when working there, the gas meter had a slow leak which meant if I had caught the live wire on the metal main switch I wouldn't be writing this today. What was left of the cupboard door was burnt. When I got up I ran my hand over the wall behind me. The surface was sharp and soft in places. I told the lady I hadn't seen that finish before. She said it was her husband's head.

The incendiary bomb had exploded when he tried to put it out. I was seventeen - where was the marvellous health and safety then.



I was also in the scouts. The 15 year olds and up were called war service scouts working with the civil defence.

One of the regular jobs we did was on the roof of Danson Mansion on a Sunday night. We had a home made compass and when the bombs went off we took a compass reading of the flash and telephoned it to the young lady, in one of the tunnels below, who collated the readings that came in from other posts.

She drew lines on the map and was able to send the rescue and fire service to the site. We were so accurate that she could tell which half of a semi-detached house it was. One night when a bomb went off I said to the other scout that was close; it is either in the park or Roseacre Road. The young lady doing the plotting knew it was her house. She carried on working and when she went home she found she had lost her home, possessions and family. She was back at work that night. NO COUNSELLING. She was awarded a medal. Not much for what she had lost.

As scouts we saw some horrible sights. We just carried on. The scouts have never been recognised for the work they did during the blitz. We worked with no pay and no protection, even the steel helmet we had to provide ourselves. It did have its lighter moments.

They took us to a cleansing station, built in case of gas attacks. The lady told us they held an antenatal clinic there once a week. We looked at each other. Who was going to ask her what an antenatal clinic was. Like the time I was cycling along the road and a converted ambulance stopped me and the driver asked if I would give him a hand with a stretcher case. (I always had my steel helmet on the carrier with "M" on it.)

When we got to the gate I asked him what the problem was and he told me we had to pick up a pregnant lady. I asked him if it was catching.

I represented the scouts on the local youth council. At the meetings I noticed a particular young lady who represented the guides.

I could never speak to young ladies without blushing. I asked one of the lads if he knew Rene Cole. He did. I asked him to ask her if she would go to the pictures with me. He asked her and she said yes. Panic! What do I do now?



She knew I played in a band as I ran dances for the scout and guide movement in our scout hall. I told her there was a good film on in Dartford and they had a band at the intermission. Sid Seymour and his Nitwits. We seemed to get on well. We went out together and one day we went to Woolwich.

She casually went into a sweet shop, me following, and there was a very large man behind the counter. In those days the space behind the counter was always higher. He came from behind the counter via the wholesale side which was cut off from the retail. The trouble was he was no shorter. A giant, Rene said he was her dad.

I got quite a shock and nearly ran for my life. I was seventeen and a half. At eighteen I was called up into the army, just my luck.

## **The Army**

So, after years of trying to save peoples lives I am now learning the different ways of killing them. I sat down on my bunk one night and thought about the future. I had been taken away from everything that mattered to me. My girl friend, my family, my work, the band and the scouts. What could I take away that they couldn't take back from me if I lived long enough to get demobbed?

## **Ah ha. Knowledge!!**

The barrack room was laid out in alphabetical order. Inside the door was Roberts then me (Robertson), then Ross. The blackboard was at the other end of the room.

Ross kept asking me to read it. One day, when the sergeant wasn't shouting at me, I said to him, I don't tell tales on people but I don't think Ross can read. I think he needs help and explained why I thought so.

The next day Ross was missing and at a quiet moment the sergeant told me Ross had gone to the education corps where they would teach him to read and write. Hoping it was the right moment I told him that I had done four years training to be an electrician and I thought I would be more useful working in the electrical side of the army rather than killing people as there are getting less and less people to kill. He managed to get me a trade test. Bless his cotton socks.



I did three tests. Royal Engineers (RE), the Royal Electrical & Mechanical Engineers (REME) and The Royal Army Service Corp. (RASC). The first two no trouble. The third I only knew what solder was made of.



When the posting came up I was to go, on my own, to the Arts Training Battalion at Westcliff-on-Sea near Southend. I don't know anything about art. I found it was the RASC's Artificers Training Battalion the one I knew nothing about. I was to learn how to be a vehicle electrician. I thought typical army.

We were in Palmera Towers, a vacant hotel with some windows missing and no heating. This was winter time and we did PT on the beach in PT shorts and plimsolls until our course started. When the course started I found the workshop was around 2 miles away. We had to walk, three abreast in a long line. On the return it was dark. We had a white hurricane lamp at the front and a red one at the back so we used to sing and whistle the seven dwarf's songs.

The workshop was the requisitioned local bus garage. I don't know where they serviced the buses. There was a static water tank alongside the garage which was a common sight in those days in case of air raid fires. A corporal Regimental Policeman was often found inside it on moonless nights complete with bike. We often carried our knife, fork and spoon in our field dressing pocket. To him this was a serious offence. The blackout had its good points.

It was a very good course on the repair and maintenance of the electrical parts of vehicles and some other things. An excellent start. I was gaining knowledge to take home - if I lived long enough to get demobbed. At the end of the course the posting list went up.

Again, I was on my own. 275 Private Robertson report to the posting officer. I thought I was in trouble. The posting officer asked me why I had asked so many questions during the course. I said I wanted to make sure I got it right. He said he had a proposition for me. I had to decide if I took it or not. It would make no difference to my army record. He told me we were having difficulty getting spare parts and we needed people with open minds, mine was blank, who were able to find alternative ways to fix the problem or make parts from other materials. He wanted me to join the Technical Training Group at the Northampton College of Technology. I jumped at it. When I arrived at the college I found there were six of us. A nice number for the training we were about to go through. The lecturer welcomed us.

He said the first thing I want you to impress on your mind and to believe in and live by is that **Nothing is Impossible**. Tell that to people and they will tell you to try putting the toothpaste back in the tube. That's because they look at the problem from the wrong end. I struck oil. My billet was in a corner grocers shop. Mrs. Smith, a widow, treated me like a son.

In the morning we went into the laboratory and tried all ways to magnetise the aluminium without success. He got the lab assistants to wheel out a very tall set of sheer legs. (It's like an Indian Tepee without the cover.)

In the centre was a pendulum with a three foot aluminium disk. They wheeled out a large electromagnet. It had a horizontal coil with a rod coming out of each end which was bent up and round so as to almost meet in the

middle. This they positioned so that the pendulum was able to swing in the gap. They connected the DC electricity to the magnet. He got one of the lads to work the control to the magnet and another to swing the pendulum. The pendulum was pulled to one side and let go. It just swung backwards and forwards. This was repeated time and again. We noticed that the pendulum was starting to slow through the gap with the increase in current. Eventually the pendulum stopped in the centre. He just said

**“NOW YOU HAVE SEEN THE IMPOSSIBLE”.**

I don't think any of us will forget it. It made me believe and practise the fact that nothing **is** impossible. In the afternoon we went to the classroom. He wanted us to draw a tool-makers clamp and told us we would make it in the morning. We drew the tool-makers clamp and wondered what surprise they had in store for us tomorrow.

### **The Workshop**

The Workshop had a large bench positioned so that it was possible to walk all round it. There were three vices on either side. Beside the vice was a 15 inch very rough file. Its official name is a bastard file. The name given to any non standard items, such as nuts and bolts etc., also a large block of chalk. The more chalk you rub into the file the smother it becomes. One size fits all.

There was a rule (Not ruler, she is the queen.) and a wooden tool box with our name on it. On opening it we found it empty. On asking about the tools we were told we were going to Burma to meet our Japanese friends and

there were no tool shops in the jungle, so we would have to make them.

We had to make tools to make the tools we needed as we went along. The first one was a scribe to mark the metal. They gave us two 3/16" rods. One steel and one silver steel which we had to braze together and sharpen. We thought this was a piece of cake. He then told us to get the metal for the jaws of the tool-makers clamp. Where? The engineering side of the collage had a tip where they dumped all the leftovers and failed experiments.

We found some metal that could be cut and filed to do the job. Where are the hacksaws? There aren't any. What does a carpenter use instead to shape timber - a chisel? Back to the tip to find something suitable.

After finding a suitable rod we then had to cut a groove round it using the file and breaking it off in the vice. We filed the rod to the required shape. It was useless like that, it needed tempering. They taught us how to temper metal for what ever job it had to do. In this case you first get it red hot and dunk it in water, which makes it glass hard, clean it up and then apply the heat a little way back from the tip. You watch the colours run along the rod and when the tip gets to light straw dunk it in the water quick.

We used this chisel throughout the course and I continued to use it ever after. It is still in my tool box. A little smaller due to sharpening and repeated tempering.

We found metal for the clamp's jaws and set about cutting and filing them to shape. We now have the jaws shaped and we have to drill holes in them. Tapping and

clearance. What size? All the time we had to think ahead. How are we going to drill the holes and worse still tap (thread) them? Then make the screws for the clamp? We had to find a bolt or nut the size we would need. With the bolt we could make a tap then from the tap we could make a die, or vice versa. If we found a nut it would be easy to make the tap. We would then be able to taper and groove it. The other way round, the die would mean making more tools to be able to cut the tapering and then clearing slots, all inside it. We found a nut and a bolt. Whew!

The drills were made from nails and rods. We cut the head of the nails and flattened the other end. This was filed to the correct angles then tempered. If you have seen the flat woodworking drills, which have a spike sticking up in the middle, without the spike you have the drills we made. The main part was filing the correct angle for the cutting edge. Again we have the tempering to do. The tap and die were made in a similar way only more difficult. The finished screws had a handle so you could turn them.

**Some of the tools we made.**



**Top –The toolmakers clamp.**

**Middle – The four and six BA box spanner.**

**Bottom - The 2 BA universal jointed box spanner.**

We also made box spanners by finding a nut the correct size. The spanner I am most proud of is a 2 BA universal jointed box spanner. The joint in the middle is very small. The pin in the middle is a nail they use for nailing soles on boots and shoes. Think of the drill to bore the holes and the size of our file. They also taught us the various threads including metric and American.

I think the hardest thing we made was a spring for a Morse taper. To start with we needed spring metal to make it from. Nothing in our tip - so off to the council tip where we found an old wind-up gramophone.

We took the motor out of it and back to the college. We then had to get the spring out without anyone being decapitated, and then killing the temper. Then followed trying to get it flat and cutting it to size. Three inches long and a quarter or an inch wide with rounded ends. A needle size hole had to be drilled one eighth of an inch from each end. Then temper it. Have you ever felt you were flogging a dead horse?

It had to be perfectly flat, the correct holes and dimensions. The intended spring was made red hot and dunked in water (Glass hard.) without it bending. Careful how you handled it or it will BREAK. It was made hot, colour blue, and dunked in oil. When cool it was passed to the instructor who held it with his thumb on the anvil of the vice and with his other thumb pushed the overhanging end down the side of the vice. Either "A", a crack sounded as it broke or, "B", it stayed bent when he let go. If, on the other hand it sprung back up a cheer rang out. In the case of "A" or "B" you went back to square one as the one you had just made was useless.

(By the way, did I mention these instructors had escaped from Hitler's Interrogation Unit?) I did make one - eventually. We made brass springs for the dynamos and starter motors. If you heat the brass and dunk it in water it makes it soft. You have to beat it. As you beat it gets wider and thinner and don't forget it has to end up in a circle with the end coming out straight with a curl on the end which pushes the carbon brush in position. The instructors were marvellous.

Besides the tools, in the process we learnt how to solve problems in general. We tend to look at the beginning of a problem. It is often better to look at the other end and work back. An example I use, although not taught. You want to build a shed on a concrete base. Do you lay a base, the first part of the construction, and build a shed to fit it or do you work out the dimensions of the shed to suit the requirements of what is going inside it then lay a base to take it? In this case you have to look at the **end** first.

To digress, when I went home one weekend I took my guitar back with me so I wouldn't forget how to play it. On the station at Northampton I was approached by a Private from the Ordinance Corps. He asked where I was stationed and I told him. He asked me if I would like to join his unit band. I thought they must be desperate as he didn't ask if I could play it. The deal was I would be picked up at the College and taken to Castle Ashby where I would be fed and watered and returned to Mrs. Smith at night. I would also be paid. I knew then that they were desperate as he hadn't heard me play.

His name turned out to be just Zukker. That's what everybody called him, yes, even the officers. If you have ever seen Bilko, on the television, that's where the material for the scripts came from. He was Jewish. His uncle was the boss of the Bexleyheath coach company. As I lived in the Bexley Borough I knew him.

**So ended the course. We were a whole lot wiser and a whole lot more tired.**



**I never met any of the lads again. We were very supportive of each other.**

**Where to next?**

## **No.1 Holding Battalion in Leeds**

The course over I was posted to the No.1 Holding battalion in Leeds where I was in a requisitioned house in a residential street. The cookhouse was the pavilion at Headingley cricket ground. The food was diabolical. The queue was outside in the rain. I haven't liked cricket since. I was put on receiving back our Japanese prisoners from recaptured territory. These were the ones that could walk. I shuddered to think of those who couldn't. As the German war was over and the Japanese one looking brighter they started moving out of requisitioned houses.

We all had to get on a train in Leeds in the morning and after being shunted into sidings and with one thing and another we arrived at night in the pitch dark after an all day journey in a train without corridors. The station, in Cheshire was called Tarporley or Little Budworth. The trouble was the platform was only about 1 carriage long. When the call went out to disembark those next to the door landed on the side of the track. The camp, an ex POW one, was in darkness. We had to collect a palliasse and then stuff it with straw.

The only problem was they'd forgotten to order the straw. We were on two tier bunks with half inch metal straps done in 4 inch squares. We got up in the morning like draught boards. The next thing we had to do was queue for meals.

The head cook would come along the queue and say "You in front are last breakfast, behind first dinner". This went on for days then a lot of us were sent home to be called back when things were sorted out.

About a week or so later I got a letter and railway warrant telling me to report to No.2 Holding battalion at Thetford in Norfolk. The next stop would be the banana boat as we called it.

## **No. 2 Holding Battalion**

### **Knetishall Thetford**

Thetford was a transit camp where you were sent to other units, mainly abroad. Leeds was where some came back to. The draft I was on was going to Burma. We spent our time moving coal from one side of the yard to the other. The next day moving it back again. Some days we peeled potatoes, by the sack full. One day I had to report to the posting's officer. He told me, as the Americans had dropped atom bombs on Japan, there was no need for me to go to Burma. He said I was needed there and told me to report to the local workshop. On going to the workshop I asked where the electrician was. I was told I had just missed him; he had gone on embarkation leave. So I said that must be why I was sent here.

The camp was spread over a large area. It had been an American Aerodrome. They moved out at the end of the German war and our lot moved in. The permanent staff were no more than 200 altogether. The transit numbers were in hundreds.

We were on the site which had been the WAAF site or what ever you call the female Americans. We had toilets but no urinals or doors. We only had cold water. Our Nissan hut held the workshop staff of about 12. Opposite the MT were in 2 huts with the gap filled in. You went in there then turned left or right to enter the huts you wanted. Ahead of you was the coal bunker. On our side there was quite a gap then the admin staff.

The workshop was quite a big building with room for about a dozen vehicles. The far corner of the left hand end was the electricians own workshop which was fitted out for the purpose. The part nearest being for motorcycles. The whole of the right hand end was the stores.

We maintained all our own vehicles and those sent for special treatment, like engine changes. The lads worked together. Engine changes, when required, were done at weekends. Only half the fitters were needed and they sorted it out amongst themselves. The other trades helped out when required. Being the only electrician I had to do all of them. I had to take parts of the old engine, such as the dynamo, starter and charge controller, service them, and put them on the new one. On QL's the cab had to come off after removing the front wheels and lowering the front of the vehicle. We only had the crane on the breakdown lorry angled up to use.

**A new workshop officer arrived.**

He called us all together for the usual introductory talk. He had been a boy soldier who worked his way up. He started. "You know the usual drill, you can have it good or bad, it depends on you. Now I won't put you on a charge for wrong doing, I'll take you round the back of the workshop and knock the \*\*£^&\$"%(\* out of you. By the way, I was the southern area boxing champion." A bit different from the M.T. officer. We called him Dagwood from the Blondie cartoon strip.

One day the workshop officer said that I worked every engine change, so if I could work it to have a week off, I was to see the clerk in the office and he would do the paper work. That was the sort of person he was. We would do anything for him.

While there the workshop officer put me in for upgrading tests. I was a third class Electrician, Vehicle and Plant. That covered about everything. I often wondered what was electric about a Speedo or an oil gauge. What is electric about a chain operated shutter? I just put them in my knowledge file.

I went to Mill Hill. It was mainly a tank workshop so I had to work on tanks. The first thing I learned was to mind your head. No part in a tank gives. No hard hats in those days you just watched what you were doing. The bit I found interesting was the junction box in the base of the turret. A mass of wires to connect. The box was essential as without it the wires would get tied in knots as the turret swung round. Little did I realise that, before I was demobbed, I would work on Buffaloes. Not the hairy type.

They are amphibian tanks, or a better description would be a lorry that looks like a tank and swims. Still very hard on the head. When he sent me on the first class test I went to Colchester. I found civilian workers doing alterations to an intake panel. This is a frame where you fix the necessary intake chamber and all the switch gear and distribution boards etc. for supplying the various parts of the works. I stopped to talk to the electricians who were working on it.

The officer I saw about the trade test asked me if I had worked on these jobs and if I had worked on them **live**. I said I had. He asked me to do some work on the panel. Some time later the officer told me he had a call from my workshop officer wanting to know how much longer I would be as my work was piling up. I don't remember doing any test. I left as a first class electrician and they had a panel that worked. A fair swap? This automatically increased my pay.

Back at the camp I got a call from the medical officer. He was at the C.R.S. (Casualty Reception Station a two ward hospital.) He told me as we no longer had casualties being sent there and we didn't have any A.T.S. girls so there was no need for two wards. They could do with the second ward for something else and could I move the electrical equipment into the first ward.

This I did for him and he asked me if I could get rid of the beds and lockers. The beds were hospital style beds. The lockers were a two door wire mesh unit which had shelves down one side and the other full length for your overcoat etc.

I told him to leave it to me and went back to the workshop. Our workshop officer knew all that was going on. Some things we didn't tell him because he didn't want to know officially, but we knew he would get to know. This was a shining example. I went back to the workshop and got our driver mechanic, (Paddy) who wasn't the brightest in the bunch, to go down to our billet and move all the beds to one end. I then recruited three of the other workshop staff and another truck and we set off to the C.R.S.

We removed a load of beds and when one truck was full it went to our billet. The beds off loaded, the old ones were loaded. This lot was taken to a blister hanger we used as an overflow store, or for anything we didn't want to throw away. Back to the C.R.S. for the lockers. The other truck had taken the remainder of the beds and some lockers to our billet and the overflow to the blister hanger.

We left Paddy to sort everything out. The workshop officer found his bed had been mysteriously changed. Paddy came back all smiles. He had done the job AND polished the floor. The trouble was he used diesel as a polish. We had to sleep with the windows open. Did I mention it was the middle of winter? Paddy was mysteriously posted.

Some time earlier, the unit band advertised in the NAAFI for a pianist and a guitarist. I did an audition and joined the band. It turned out to be mainly George Elricks band that had been called up. Remember when I was six or seven years old.

George became a disc jockey. If you are old enough some of you may remember his intro, "Mr. & Mrs. Elrick's wee son George", and he dee,dee,dumed the intro music. This really was a knowledge building exercise for me after Horace Howes Rhythm Stylists. We played for our dances and sometimes for other units when they had something special going on.

One of the workshop lads came up with the idea, that as I was often back late, and was my own boss, I could do the night breakdown work as most of the faults were electrical. The lads had taught me a lot. When I had nothing to do I went along the vehicles looking at the fault ticket and picking one out.

If it was brakes I would have a look at it and if I thought it was the master cylinder I would take it off and lay it on the bench. The store man would lend me the parts book for that vehicle and I would strip down the master cylinder and lay it out just like the exploded view. Look at all the parts and if any looked worn I would draw the parts from the store and rebuild it. Fix the master cylinder back on the truck, bleed the brakes and test it. If the system seemed to work all well and good. If it didn't I put the fault card back on the truck and move to another one. I was gaining knowledge AND EXPERIENCE. Which is lacking today.

I was landed with fixing the motorcycles. This came about because I had to take the dynamo off a Matchless motorcycle. It was behind the chain case. When I asked one of the fitters how I got it out. He just said to take the chain case off. I found only the outside part came off.

The clutch was in the way of the inside part. He told me to remove the clutch plates then the housing and I would be able to get the dynamo out. As I pulled the clutch housing off, a load of roller bearings landed on the floor running everywhere. He said "Oh, didn't I mention them?" I had to think how I would get the lot back in. Grease has many applications. I found it was learning the hard way. You never do that again and I had to remove many more dynamos. From then on I repaired the motorbikes. I loved it. Where else could I get such knowledge? It served me well when I did live long enough to get demobbed.

On the way back from a pitch black night-time breakdown in the middle of nowhere, the vehicle repaired and the driver had gone on, we came across a motorcycle lying in the middle of the road. It was one of ours. We found the dispatch rider who was badly injured. His forehead was a bluish colour and swollen down over his face. He looked dead. We put him in the back of the breakdown truck on top of the ropes and jacks and hung his motorcycle on the crane. When we returned to the camp I asked the other fellow with me if he would call in the cookhouse and ask them for a cup of tea explaining the situation and I would meet him there after dropping our passenger off at the CRS.

The medical orderly on duty came out. I told him the situation and he brought out a trolley and we put the dispatch rider on it with a sheet to cover him. Just by looking at him he looked dead. Suddenly as I was giving the orderly the details our dead patient sat up. I don't know who got the biggest shock.



The medical officer had the bright idea of sending people to me when they had squashed a ring on their finger. I put their arm in the vice and took down a very large hacksaw from the wall and pretended to use it. After I revived them I cut off the ring, with side cutters. WICKED!!

Earlier we had a new Mechanist Staff Sergeant posted to us. He fitted in well. He was mad as a March hare. The QL's were 4X4 trucks with a differential on the front axial. He would hang on to the bumper rail and place one foot either side of the differential and get one of the lads to drive him around, dangling underneath, so he could listen to it.

One day I was standing by a truck and he asked me if it was finished and tested. I said I was waiting for the driver to come back so we could do the test. He told me I should do the testing. I told him I couldn't drive. He told me to get behind the wheel. This was a Bedford QL. It's what they call forward control. You sit up there beside the engine and the gear lever is a long bent rod to your side a bit behind you. You can't see it without turning your head.

He said I knew what everything was for so start up and let's go. We went all round country lanes and through villages. Backing round those grass triangles that hold a signpost in the centre. We returned to the workshop and he said now you can drive and jumped out. They checked to see who had driving licences, a buff postcard size. Only one, a called up bus driver. We then had to go out in a truck, taking it in turn to drive it, with the MT. sergeant.

When he gave me my buff licence I asked if it was good for a civilian licence. He said no, but I can give you a pink form to get one. I sent the pink form in and received an all groups licence. I did drive everything from a motorbike to tank transporters including the buffalo on it.

There was a battery workshop, which was my domain where I carried out essential experiments. The one I was famous for, by the workshop lads, was injecting sulphuric acid along the stitching of their boots so that the sole fell off. (Crawling under Lorries tends to ruin the uppers.)

The owner then obtained a new pair. Getting new batteries was a problem. I had a number of faulty replaced batteries. I shorted out the faulty cell, normally one cell, and put the battery on charge. I then took out a good cell and fitted it in place of a faulty one in another battery. Charged it up, gave it a heavy discharge, recharged it and put it on test. I found this worked and solved our battery problem.

Being in charge of the batteries I had to obtain distilled water. Naturally I couldn't trust just anybody to get it. This meant me having to drive through a beautiful country side to a laundry in Great Yarmouth to make sure the water was distilled. As there were no sign posts, getting lost was easy, and having to go through the Norfolk Broads. The truck was a three ton with a large carbide (glass bottle in a metal cage) in the back just to get distilled water. The clerk in our office read all the company orders and let us know if we were on it. On this occasion he didn't tell me.

I ended up on a charge for failing to do something or other. The officer gave me extra parades with full pack. I don't know where he came from. He wasn't any officer I knew. The officer wasn't used to a Fred Carno's outfit like ours. I had to do the parades at the detention centre which was opposite the workshop. I went to see the sergeant at the detention centre to see what I should do. He explained the procedure of full kit blancode and brasses polished. He then told me to go back to our billet and hide so that I wouldn't be seen and only come out to go to the cookhouse. **He** was one of Fred Carno's merry men.

One winter we were snowed in so they had to drop our food by air. Always bully beef. I still can't eat corned beef. We were running out of coal. The catering officer came to me and asked if I could run the cook houses on electricity. (The permanent staff had their own cookhouse but there were others for the men in transit.) I said it was not possible as we were fed from an overhead supply. I told him to leave it with me.

I got a gallon can, copper fuel pipe and soldered the pipe in the screw cap and then cut the bottom out of the can. With a can of old engine oil I went down to our billet. I tied the gallon can to the stack pipe (chimney, no health and safety in those days, thank goodness.) of our pot belly stove. I put a small pyramid of sand in the bottom of the stove and constructed a small tepee like bundle of wood on top of some paper. After pouring oil in the can I lit the paper. When it was all nice and hot I let the oil drip in. It didn't work. I'm one of those people who don't know when to quit. After many attempts the oil exploded.

It worked well, too well. I couldn't control the oil flow drip so it got hotter and hotter. The fire brick in the stove was cracking up. I went back to the Catering officer and asked him to get 36 Matchless motorcycle petrol taps with the lever, not the slider, part number xyz. I explained that I had a system working but couldn't control it. He got the taps and everyone was fed proving that *nothing is impossible*.

A sign suddenly appeared on my workshop.

***The impossible undertaken daily.***

***Miracles by appointment.***

Still with the snow. One night, from band work, I found a note on my bed telling me of a breakdown. I woke the blacksmith and we set off to find the breakdown. It was still snowing. When we eventually found it in a narrow road. It was lying on its side in a ditch. He had pulled onto the side of the road to let another vehicle through only to find it was a ditch full of snow. It had a full load of coke on board. I told the driver I wasn't going to unload it as it would take forever. Instead I said I would pull it out backwards, in the opposite way to the way it went in. The driver said I would wreck the truck and he would spend the rest of his life paying for it. He had nothing to worry about as I did the inspection and report. The skid pans wouldn't hold so we tied the breakdown truck to a large tree.

We started winching and it was twisting as it was coming out. The driver had kittens. Eventually we recovered it.

The Bedford OY's chassis was perfect on test. British made! I was a strong supporter of Bedford when it came to reorganising the fleet. I also supported the Austin PU over the Hillman, which had Bendix brakes, (They are not a lot of good in reverse.) and Matchless G8 motorcycles.

It had stopped snowing. We then rounded up our gear and started to get the truck with it's smashed in front, caused by the tree it ended up against in the ditch, ready to go on an "A" frame and crane.

Two young ladies appeared, out the field, carrying a jug of tea and three mugs. The tea was piping hot and went down well. We thanked them and they set off back from where they came. We carried on getting ready for the journey back when the driver said how good the tea was and it was a change not to have sugar in it. We said there was sugar in ours and all the tea came out of the same jug with nothing added. We looked around us.

There were no houses or farms to be seen and there were no footprints in the snow in the field where they came from. We decided we wouldn't mention this when we got back or they would think we had lost our marbles. I found out later that there is a parallel main road to where we were. The place. Scole in Norfolk. In the pub/hotel they have rooms kept the same as the original ones for ghost seekers.

On another night we went to the other side of the aerodrome. The road had a lot of drifts across it. We had weights in the breakdown which we put on the front when using the crane at the back. On this occasion I had fixed them on the front because of the drifts.

We were battering along when we hit this big drift and became stuck. We got out and started digging a way through. Things were going well when we heard a vehicle coming from the other side. We tried waving to them to stop. They just kept coming and got stuck in the drift. The vehicle was called a PU. That is a car front with a small truck back with canvas over a metal frame.

The occupants piled out, (There were more than usual.) picked the truck up, backed off, turned it round and left. Suddenly they all came back searching around in the snow. They found one their members in the ditch. Threw him in the back of the PU and went off still singing like mad in Polish. Drunk as lords.

We had a problem with the Poles as they had better looking tunics than us. No prizes for guessing who got lumbered with undoing the band round the bottom of the tunic and forming a box pleat on the back then making lapel facing? All hand sewn.

We had a small group who made things. Remember, we were isolated with nowhere to go. We all made table and sideboard runners out of silk skeins. I made a sewing box for my girl friend, Rene, and a case for myself for going home. On the other side of the aerodrome were towers with the Tannoy speakers attached.

There were ventilating slats near the top which were just the correct width for my case. Four *became* loose. After cleaning up they were beautiful oak and with plywood from somewhere else - a beautiful case - payment for having to climb up there to check the speakers in the bitter cold and wind.

After the snow we still had very cold weather. Food was arriving normal and the MT. drivers were getting the coal through. The admin staff complained to the colonel that they hadn't any heating in their billet and that heat was coming out of the MT. and workshop billets. The colonel made a surprise visit to our billets. He went in the MT. billet first. A driver was standing at the coal bunker.

There were large blocks of coal at the front forming a wall with coal piled behind it. He asked him where he got the coal from. By a bit of luck he was our only Irish driver. He told the colonel that they were very proud of their trucks and when they had been on coal runs they brought the trucks back to the billet and swept them out.

The colonel called on our billet. He looked around and couldn't miss seeing our beds and lockers. He looked at our oil fired pot belly stove and gave a side glance at me. I couldn't help seeing a half smile on his face. He went next door and told the admin staff if they couldn't get sparks next door to convert their stove to oil, or pinch coal, they deserved to freeze. How do I know what happened? Our workshop officer told me. Prior to this incident our workshop officer always told us when the colonel was going to make an inspection. We then had to go like greased lightning to switch the beds and lockers back,

After the inspection return them to normal. The colonel never inspected our hut after that admin complaint. I seem to remember his name being Fred something.

When they had floods around Wisbeach and Ely two of us from the workshop were sent there. A vehicle mechanic with a stores truck and me with the breakdown lorry. It was a case of water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink. The country is flat and was like a giant brown pond. We arrived at a prisoner of war camp complete with prisoners who either had not been sent home or didn't want to be sent home.

They had volunteered to work on the water defences and were treated under the "Geneva Convention". Try imagining the Germans treating our prisoners in a similar situation. They were fed, dried and looked after. We were always at the back of the queue. When the NAFFI wagon came they got served first. If any was over we got it. The plan was to get friendly with a German and ask him to get served for two and get yours that way. They were building sand bag walls to control the water.

I don't know where the other solders came from. They were probably from our unit. We didn't know those in transit. We seemed to be all in one billet. It was jammed full of beds both sides and up the middle. The bed nearest the door was placed on top of another one so that we could open the door. An empty fire bucket was placed in the middle of the room in case anyone needed it in the night.



Working with the water all day it was impossible to get dry. The food consisted mainly of fried egg and pom (powered potato mixed with water). There was so much trouble in the camp that the Military Police, Red Caps, were called in. I was more fortunate. I had to go to a breakdown. The driver had been travelling along the road when he realised he was going the wrong way. Everywhere being flooded it was impossible to see the road. He noticed a gate open so he backed into the opening only to find the field was much lower than the road. I couldn't see the sides of the road, so where was I to go to pull him out. I didn't have Wellingtons to check the other side of the road.

To chance it could put me in the same situation as the truck. I honestly don't remember how I did it but the truck was pulled out. He had gone into the field backwards so the engine was alright. He managed to drive the truck slowly as the back brakes were solid with mud. We seemed to be the only ones on the road. I didn't want to tow him because if one had taken a dive in the mud the other would most likely have followed.

Things were progressing well when we came across an R.A.F. camp. I signalled to the driver to follow me and I pulled in. At the gate I asked the guard where the cookhouse was. (Breakdown Lorries never get queried.) He gave me directions. I explained to the cook the situation we were in and asked if he could possibly feed us. He did and he told us to go back any time we needing feeding.

That driver broke down at various locations every day with different truck numbers. The strange thing was I always found him at the RAF cookhouse.

Days on end the water was being pumped out in one direction, doing a tour of the countryside, and coming back from the other direction. Eventually they sent for the Dutchmen. They soon cleared the water away. It must be the clogs that do it.

The fitter and I returned to our own camp still wearing the clothes we had left in, now dirty and wet. We even slept in them. We never caught a cold.

The powers that be, who meet in some dungeon, decided to merge No1 and No2 holding battalions into a Depot Battalion. This was to have No1 move in with No2 and rename it a Depot Battalion.

We in No2 knew the whole camp. I mentioned it was in the middle of nowhere and where everything was scattered. So the powers that be, in their wisdom, decided that No1 would take over and the permanent staff of No2 would be scattered over the globe. You have got to hand it to these faceless wonders. Later on you will find out that in my problem solving, with people like these running the show, I had a job to work out how we won the war. I decided it was Churchill's bluff.

I lost my job in the band. I was retained as the unit electrician; their one was never seen again. Our carpenter remained as well. They didn't speak to us. How childish can you get? I stuck it out for some time till I had to do a job for the posting officer.

He had been our adjutant at No2. I knew him well. He, along with two other officers, had a small old cottage each outside the camp. They had their families with them.

They hadn't any electricity in the cottages and I had used tank batteries to give them some light. I had a milk run replacing them with charged up ones. I told him about the situation I was in and he told me his corporal, one of No2's, was in the same position. I asked him if I could get a posting. He asked me where I lived and I told him Welling in Kent. (Now part of the London Borough of Bexley.) He told me he would try to get me a posting near home. There was a Heavy GT unit in Woolwich, near Welling. When he got a posting for me he would tell his corporal who I knew. He told me I had to write a letter to the workshop officer requesting a posting.

He will try to talk you out of it as I was retained instead of his electrician. Just insist. I felt greatly relieved. In due course the corporal told me that I had a posting and I would get promotion. I wasn't interested in promotion but I was getting out of there. I was to write the letter and hand it in to the workshop office. The workshop officer was not pleased. I told him the situation I was in in the workshop. He said he didn't know but understood. He would put my request in. Not long after that I got the posting paper work. I was posted to

## ALDERSHOT

**Pause for the scream. They play solders there. No Fred Carno's**

The posting officer did what was good for me. It was to the Officers and Non Commissioned Officers School. I had so much extra clothing, from doing jobs for the Quartermaster that I had to make an unofficial detour home.

On arrival at BULLER Barracks, I found out how it got its name. Bull\*\*\*\* is the army name for spit and polish etc. I called at the guard room to book in. Standing there was our old Regimental Sergeant Major. He asked me what I was doing there and I told him I'd been posted there. I asked what he was doing and he said getting out of here and I should do the same. (I told you we were with Fred Carno.)

## Had I gone from the frying pan into the fire?

(To save the suspense, I tried to fit in and gained more knowledge.)

The barrack room I was put in was a small one. Just four of us. A wrestler, who when he went on the floor like a crab, we stood on his chest - one at a time! Derrick Ufton, a waiter in the officer's mess, who played cricket for us in the summer and football for the Artificers at Farnborough in the winter. (If you think this is class distinction just you wait.) He later played cricket for Kent and football for Bexletheath and Welling.

There were other "schools" within the barracks, all RASC. The RASC at that time covered all transport for land, sea and air. Next to us we called them the donkey wallopers.

They were training for horse and mule trains. They had a section where telegraph poles were laid between two tapering walls. The poles got higher as they went along. The students, using horses, would come in at the shallow end and jump over the poles which were getting higher. You could always tell a new class as the horse when it got to the highest pole stopped and threw the rider off.

We were the mechanical school to do with land transport. On checking in I found the staff were 4 Captains, 3 Staff Sergeants, (All lecturers), 1 Sergeant (Maintaining the engines after the students had wrecked them.), 1 Corporal in the office, and me, a humble private.

I was shown round including the cinema. I sat in on an electrical lecture by one of the officers. As I had spent my time in the workshops working on the subject - I wasn't impressed. No matter what non-commissioned rank you had you were called Staff, including me.

Some time later I was told to attend a lecturing course which was in the same barracks. The compliment was 1 Major and 2 Staff Sergeants - all Scottish. The major looked at me and said "You are a private." I thought here is someone who knows what he's on. He asked me why I was there and where I had come from.

I told him Lower W Square. He went on to tell me only NCOs could attend the course. He telephoned the boss captain then told me to go up to the stores and get a lance corporal's stripe (One for each Arm.) and to get the tailor to sew them on. PROMOTION! I had become a :-

## **Local, Acting, Unpaid, Unofficial Lance Corporal.**

It went on part one orders but not part two which meant the unit knew but not the army. *Promotion?*

## **HOW to Lecture**

They started the course by giving a demonstration lecture which was on teaching someone how to do the high jump. We watched with interest. We were told that to lecture you should follow: - Wait for it.

## **OPTRA.**

**O** - Observation - know your subject.

**P** - Preparation - have everything you need to hand, don't have to leave the room.

**T** - Transmission - Speak clearly; don't talk to the blackboard, (TV Weather presenters note). Don't throw the chalk up in the air (The students are hoping you will drop it.) Don't wave your arms about or other gestures they are watching you but not listening. People interviewed on TV please note. Best of all I like watching Mobile phone users. Sorry. Are you one of them?).

**R** - Reception - Are they getting the message, do they understand?

**A** - Assimilation - Is it sinking in?

They demonstrated and explained all of them.

Just before the end of the course that they repeated the lecture on the high jump. It was a comedy.

No alterations to the first lecture, we just spotted all the things **not** to do. Not **OPTRA**.

The students, in the school, were NCOs, Officer Cadets or any officer up to L/Colonel. This Included the Territorial Army. In the main they worked to rule. I had ways of dealing with those who didn't as you will see later. I found a lot of mistakes in the lecture précis. One précis I rewrote and handed it to the captain, the two of us were the electrical department. (Guess who did all the work.)

When it came to the starter motor pinion disengaging from the starter ring I wrote that it was due to the difference in ratio between them. When the engine fires the pinion can't keep up with the starter ring so, it is spun clear allowing the spring on the spline to push it along the spline out the way. I gave the précis to the captain and he told me I had got the starter motor pinion all wrong and that it was centrifugal force that disengaged it. I said that central force would mean the teeth flying off. He said that was rubbish and to tell Sergeant Cobb he wanted to see him. (Bill Cobb, remember, was in charge of the engine shed. He put the engines back to rights after the students had wrecked them. We were great pals.)

I told him the Captain wanted him. He asked me if we had been having a difference of opinion again. He went in to see his lordship, came out and told me to go back in. I was told there would be no more arguing about the matter and I would lecture the following. He then read out what I had written. He couldn't be wrong. I had many more differences with him.

The students sometimes had a problem understanding how something worked. I found a head for a four cylinder side valve engine.

I got a table and mounted the head, with an “A frame” each end so it could swivel over. Everything else to do with the ignition system was installed. Using a 12 volt dynamo as a motor (A DC dynamo will run as a motor and by installing a variable resistor in the field circuit it is possible to vary the speed.) Plugs in and the installation connected to a 12 volt battery we were away.

By turning the head over they could see the plugs sparking. The speed didn't alter the firing order of 1 3 4 2. How the distributor worked became clear. There is an old saying, “You can't win them all”. How does the ignition coil work? There is no electrical connection between the wires. The electricity goes in at 12 volt and comes out at thousands.

I wound a coil, with a hole in the middle, to take 240v AC mains current. (50 cycles.) I then started winding a coil to go on an iron rod to fit easily inside. I was called away during the winding and when I returned I couldn't remember the number of turns on it so I just filled the former. The former was then placed over an iron rod which was fixed at a right-angle on a stick. Two lengths of flex fitted to the coil with the other ends attached to 3 inch lengths of half inch copper pipe. We are now in business. Mains coil plugged in, stick at the ready, and then put it into the mains coil while I held the two ends, one in each hand. Have you ever felt a little more thought would have been better? My arm muscles stood out like Popeye's. Worse still I couldn't let go. I had to wriggle till my knees bent bringing the stick on to the edge of the table and levering the coil out.



To be able to use it in a demonstration I got 5 or 6 smart Alexs to form a horseshoe, holding hands, the end two holding on to the copper tube. The coil on the end of the stick was lowered into the mains coil. Coincidentally it was at this point the break bell rang and the class left. Except 5 or 6 called Smart Alexs. I did remove the coil when the others had left. They all changed their name.

Being electrical the cinema became my responsibility. The only cine projectors I had ever seen was when the Broadway cinema in Bexleyheath was bombed. They had carbon arcs with a chimney to take away the fumes and smoke. Luckily the ones I had to use had light bulbs and doors. On the inside was marked the route for the film. Splicing the film was a matter of trial and error. There were a load of captured German films which were interesting to watch but the dialogue was beyond me. Our own films were shown to the various schools within the barracks.

Besides showing films and giving lectures on vehicle electrical parts, also motor bikes as I had worked on repairing them, I made more models to see how things worked which included sawing parts so you could see inside and painting parts different colours.

My own officer got on to me because there was always laughter coming from my class. He told me I was there to teach, not entertain them. When the next course came in I asked him how the previous marks were.

He said they were alright. When the current course finished and the exams were over I asked him about the results.

He said he was going to speak to me about them as the results were lower. I told him that was because I cut out the humour. One of the students said my drawing of the automatic advance and retard mechanism was almost pornographic. No one ever forgot how it worked. The simpler you make things the easier it is to understand and remember. I mentioned to the corporal in the office about the captain always moaning. He told me my results were better than his had been.

One day the officer in charge of our school asked me if I had any other bright ideas. Yes. Could we get hold of a lorry that was going back to be sold. Not a wreck. Then we could get one of each trade from the artificers training battalion at Farnborough to remove the body and cab. Everything to do with the brakes would be painted red, the clutch light brown and the accelerator green. He asked me why those colours and I pointed out to him the traffic lights. If its red you apply the brakes, when amber you use the clutch and the accelerator when they turn green. Some mornings later SIX trucks turned up, also six assorted artificers. HELP! He said you asked for them.

I took the lads along to an empty room at the cinema. I told them the one stripe was unofficial and I was a private the same as them. I'm a conscript, or as I call it a "Civilian on Loan", and not a regular. I told them what I had in mind for the trucks. When we come to do a project we will discuss it. If anyone has a better idea we will discuss that too and decide which way to do it. This will be our room where we will hold our meetings.

As you can see it needs a clear out. We need a table, seven chairs, mugs and a jug for our tea and a blackboard. We will have our tea break in here. If you go to your barrack room and get yourselves organised then have your dinner. During this time you may run across any of the items we need. I'll see you all here tomorrow morning. The following morning they had cleaned the room and **found** the items we needed. I never asked where they got them, although I did recognise some. We all got on like a house on fire. We carried out various modifications, all in a friendly and happy manor. Once, as the NAFFI wagon turned up, I got their tea and rolls. My captain told me off - degrading a rank! What rank?



Sgt. Bill Cobb often looked at what we were doing. We were very good friends. He lived with his wife in married quarters.

I often looked after his baby girl so that they could go out for the evening. The little girl got to the late crawling stage and was trying to walk. This night she wanted to try walking. We were walking round and round the table with her holding my finger. She was doing very well when we went past the kitchen sink. I noticed a wooden spoon. I got her holding the handle and I held the spoon part. After a few trips round I let go the spoon and she continued walking round holding the handle. She dropped the spoon and carried on walking. I told you. *Nothing is Impossible.*

The school had a visit from the Duke of Gloucester. We had our trucks lined up. Some engines could propel the vehicle. The trucks were being put away. I had just fitted the distributor in one as he arrived and that was the one Bill Cobb decided to start up. He had hold of the starting handle to swing it as I shouted. Too late he broke his wrist.

The system I had used many times in the workshop was to take the first spark plug out and with my thumb over the hole turn the engine over till the pressure built up, replace the plug, connect it then start the engine with the cranking handle keeping my thumb in line with my fingers so that if it kicked back the handle came out of my grip. I then ran the engine and adjusted the timing. Poor old Bill. I thought things were going well. The lads were doing a grand job and the lectures were no bother till one morning. The corporal in the office told me the company sergeant major wanted to see me. We didn't get on.

I was the only conscript in the school, the rest being regulars. Perhaps it was because one day when he shouted across the parade ground SOLDIER and I kept walking.

He caught up with me and said he called out soldier and I kept on walking. I told him I wasn't really a soldier just a civilian on loan, or it might be, being an unofficial lance corporal and he couldn't put me on guard, as the guards go on part 2 orders. However, this morning he told me to go up to the stores draw and seven sets of corporal stripes and go to the tailor and get them sewn on.

### (Promotion.)

He told me, from tomorrow, I would be the corporal in charge of the barracks, the mail and something else. He told me to hurry back as I was Orderly Corporal for the rest of the day. Being an obliging sort I ask him if I could do anything for him on the way up to the stores.

The next morning, wearing my new stripes, I found myself in front of the colonel on a charge of insubordination. The colonel sent me out and we could hear the CSM getting a right telling off. I thought this will do a lot of good to our relationship, especially, when he fell over on the ice, calling the roll at the Saturday morning parade of the whole barracks. With every body laughing his voice roared out –

**Corporal Robertson call the roll - more trouble.**

My friend, the CSM, sent me to Abergaveny in Wales to bring back a deserter. I had two privates with me as escorts. We were late getting to Abergaveny due, honest, to a cow on the line. We went to the police station. The prisoner was handcuffed between the other two. We missed our train and had to catch a later one to Newport.

On arrival in Newport we found we had missed our next train. The prisoner promised to be good so I took his handcuffs off. We went to the pictures after we had something to eat. Eventually we got to Aldershot about midday. The CSM shouting at me because we were late and not marching properly. I don't think he had heard of Fred Carno.

During one student examination, when I was sitting on my perch up the front, I noticed one student frozen to the spot. His family consisted of Field Marshals, Air Marshals and Admirals of the fleet. If he failed the family would have him hung, drawn and quartered.

I went back to my perch behind the desk and wrote the answer to question one. I slipped it to him the next walk round. He started writing and carried on to the next questions. If they had found out what I had done - I would have been hung, drawn and quartered. He passed the exam - only just. He was a University graduate who automatically became a Second Lieutenant..

They couldn't get him a posting so he kept being orderly officer. As luck would have it when I was Guard Commander, the CSM put me on plenty to make up for lost time, Brain Dead Orderly Officer with my pal Bill Cobb as Orderly Sergeant.

The inspection started with me, though the guard commander and conducting NCOs were not normally inspected. He asked me what I had in my small pack. I told him what should be in it and he told Bill to look. I whispered to Bill "Tell him". A cardboard box, to keep the pack squared of, writing paper and envelopes and a book. The normal guard commander's kit.

Brain dead put me on a charge. Again, outside, we heard the colonel. I could have spent the rest of my life in Aldershot's glass house (Prison) for helping him. Another reason why I wouldn't sign on as a regular.

My time at Aldershot was coming, I hoped, to an end. I had gained a lot of knowledge. My demob number came up, but no demob. Time was passing so I asked the corporal in the office what was happening. He told me the O.C. was trying to hold me back to finish the latest job the lads were on. I went to see him and said my time was up and I had done a lot for the unit. I wanted to get back to my civilian job. He told me he understood but had hoped I would finish the current project. I assured him the lads knew what they were doing and would complete the job.

I asked him for a favour. Could he get me a pre-release posting to Browning's Electrical Company on the borders of Eastham and Westham. This he did.

I arrived at the local POW camp. (No you haven't just come in.) They didn't want me and asked where I lived. Welling Kent, just over the Thames. Here's a ration book, go home and call in every week for your pay.

I went home and the next morning I caught the trolleybus to Woolwich, through the pedestrian tunnel under the Thames, and bus to Eastham and walk the rest of the way. The knowledge I gained was tremendous. One of the motors I worked on I sat inside after taking the armature out. They had a pulley block and tackle. I tried lifting the motor off the base after removing the nuts. The base came up with it. This was the first time I had seen oil acting like glue. Another was a fairground generator. When they ran the dodgems they had to increase the voltage. When the dodgems stopped all the lights blew. The trouble is the compound winding.

I had to set up a test with a bath of salt water and the head technical man would come and get the readings. He was the man I saw in the mornings with his ARP clothes and an army gas mask case. He was the man who invented the ceiling fan. Called a rotating stator. The bit that normally goes round stands still and connects to the ceiling. The casing etc goes round. Four weeks through the tunnel, my time was over. Why does everybody run through a pedestrian tunnel then stand and wait for a bus?

### **31<sup>st</sup>. March 1948.**

He did get me on the next batch to the demob centre. Four of us were lined up. A clerk from somewhere, two donkey wallopers and me on the end. The CSM came along the line asking each one to sign on till he got to me. He was as red as a beetroot as he said **“I won’t ask you.”**

I replied “You know you would be wasting your time.” and left the sir off the end.



PS Do you remember Snowy the camp policeman at Westcliffe – on - Sea training workshop? In the truck on the way to the demob centre one of the lads recognised me and asked if I remembered Snowy. Evidently he was sitting on the tailboard (a crime) on the way to the demob centre and fell off. I wonder. Did he fall or was he pushed. More likely thrown. He was very badly injured.

**A fitting end to my service.**

## **Back to Civilian Life**

**April 1<sup>st</sup>.** Now back home and I don't feel a fool. I returned to work and found, as I had worked as an electrician in the army, I would only have to do 3 months instead of 3 years to finish my time. This was good news. I worked with one of the electricians during the three months.

Then I went on sundries. A light switch here - a lamp holder there. Each was a half hour job. We worked a 5 and a half day 48 hour week. As we were on bikes it was no joke on the large area we covered. I was then away.

A street of maisonettes with my own mate. That was a good start. I really enjoyed the work. I hadn't worked on maisonettes before. Walking on joists and crawling in lofts seemed a lot better than crawling under Lorries. I did a variety of jobs including domestic, a laundry, the mortuary, (Very pleasant, although I had seen a lot worse on bomb damage) also a brewery and factories. At the brewery we were allowed 2 quarts of beer each a day. Neither of us drunk beer so the engineer, a red faced pot bellied man, got ours.

I thought my good work was the reason he always asked for me. Maybe it was the beer. One of the jobs was to change a light fitting in the barrel washing place. They had a static water tank high up on a stand. The water was very hot. We had to put a scaffold board across the tank and stand on it to work on the fitting with steam all round you. Have I mentioned 'elf and safety before? Another job was to install lights in an area which had an arched roof. Normally bending and setting conduit is no problem.

An arch is a different ball game. The setting blocks we made were no good for that. The way I found round it was to lay the conduit on the ground, stand with my foot near the end and pull the conduit up as I slid my foot backwards making an arch. The trouble was trying to get an extra bend on the end so that the fitting could be screwed on. The engineer told me another pair from our firm was working in the bottling room. Why didn't he do this job? He couldn't bend tube round arches.





**Getting Married**  
**April 16<sup>th</sup>. 1949.**







### **A record hot day for Easter.**

Clothes were still on ration so every body was wearing winter clothes.

When we saw the vicar, Rene was the Brownies Brown Owl at his church, (Rene's dad asked the little brownies calling at the door if they wanted Brown ALE.). She told him some of my family were coming from Scotland and they didn't kneel. He told her he'd have them all on their knees. We were not married in his church, but instead in St. Michael's Church. The Scouts I ran were any religion all welcome troop.

The Vicar and I had many good humoured discussions about him using the Brownies as a way of getting members for his church. When it came to the bit in the service where he asks if anyone has any reason we should not be joined together, he looked up, paused, and looked down then looked up again.

I looked round to see who he was looking at. When I looked back at him he had one of those pleased smiles on his face. When we came out we nearly died. There was an arch of Brownies and Scouts all grinning from ear to ear.

The reception was held in my Scout hall. It was so hot inside. Rene's brother asked me if the fans on the wall worked. I told him to turn the switch on. He came back and said he couldn't get them to work. I asked him if he turned the main switch on in the foyer. No, I'll turn it on. We were about to start eating when we had to go outside because we were too hot. Rene's brother had gone round all the heaters and turned **their** switches on which was for the heating. The cake was like the leaning tower of Pisa.

When we were about to leave, I told Rene to go to the toilet as I had opened the window and I, after a few minutes, would go to the gents and meet her outside. We knew what the family, scouts and guides were like. We shot down the road to the bus.

We spent the first night at Rene's office friend's house. They were recently married and had taken our case to their house. We had to unpick the confetti, from my chest, which was made from gum labels punched out on the office machine. The next morning we got the bus to Ilfracombe.

One morning, the plan was to walk along the cliffs to Hunters Inn, have our lunch, and get the bus back. Just one slight problem when we got there the bus didn't start till May.

On looking at the map we decided to walk through the valley of rocks, which were overrun with adders, to Lynton and get the bus from there. I can't remember why, but we caught the bus down in Lynmouth.

### **All in new shoes.**

By the way, I went back to "Horace Howes Rhythm Stylists". A mighty shock after George Elricks lads. The main thing, I was keeping my hand in and earning 15 shillings a gig.(75p) Inflation. I built a trailer to go behind my bike. Living!! Remember me building bikes from the tip? I bought a 1927 250 cc Ariel motorcycle for £5. I had to dig it out of a pile of sand. It had to be pushed all the way home.

After a re-bore and a pot of Japlac paint it was as good as new. Well, maybe not quite. Rene had bought a new plastic Mac. She folded it up and tied it on the carrier. We had a day out on our worthy steed. When we got back she took it off the carrier only to find it full of holes. The hot oil coming out the exhaust had burnt holes in it.

Some time later, after we were married, I bought a motorcycle and sidecar from one of the lads at work. It was a 1930 557 cc Ariel for £15. It also had to be pushed home etc. We had a house and a baby by then and my mum living with us.

I built a new sidecar using the base of the old one. It had a seat for my mum, a shelf behind on which I fitted the babies little arm chair. No, I didn't make the arm chair. A door at the back let me put the tools and spares under the seat and a bracket on the door held my guitar for gigs.



We were coming up in the world. A house **and** a motor cycle combination. The luxury part was 3 foot of garden hose with a tap connector each end. The bike was so noisy we needed an intercom. The lads at work called it Margo's coach. Margo was the Bexleyheath Coaches. (Zuker.)

Back to work. Queen Mary's Hospital at Sidcup was having an x-ray unit installed. The hospital was from the 1914/18 war. Wooden huts built, on a hill, like a spider's web. Each hut linked by a wooden path with a roof with poles supporting it. No walls. My apprentice, Charley, was born without hip joints. He was one of the first to have the operation to fit them. He was as mad as a March hare. We used one of the hospital trolleys for our tools and fittings. The times Charley came hurtling down a corridor, riding on the trolley, and couldn't make the bend

The firms blue eyed boy had started the job and moved off it. Flats started to spring up and he went on them. At Queen Mary's I found he had not correctly worked out the size the conduit (pipe) needed, which he installed, and it wasn't big enough. I went back to the office and told them.

The help I got was "You young fellows think you know everything". What about the changing cubicles? What changing cubicles? There are 4 with a door on the outside where they go in and a door on the inside where they enter the x-ray room. Both doors have signs saying Enter in green and Do Not enter in Red.

As they are controlled from the x-ray room they will require 5 wires per cubicle. I can loop the blacks (neutral). Where are they to go? That was **my** problem. Again this added to my knowledge.

Some years later I had a barium meal x-ray in the adjoining room. A bit different from the Florence Nightingale MKII I installed. It was still in use. Many years later, now in my eighties, I had an internal x-ray in the William Harvey hospital near Ashford. The places they push CCTV cameras.

Talking to them about the difference between my Florence Nightingale MKII and this one the young lady assistant said she knew it and after the new hospital. in Sidcup was built it was used in a part that remained as a drop in centre. She told me she believed it was in a store somewhere in Ashford. Maybe Florence will end up in a museum.

The next job I was told was handy, just diagonally across the traffic lights into Chislehurst. They had extended a bungalow out the back and the room was to be used for refrigerators. Any of the lads can run a ring main, why me? They asked for you. It was a bungalow that had been extended many times. You can tell by the roof and the brickwork. It turned out to be the mortuary and the fridges weren't for the milk. When I saw our boss again I told him I didn't know anyone there. He said it was in case I got the x-ray wrong. The building had started off as an ordinary bungalow and had been extended out the back.

When they extended the roof the loft became extended with it which meant it was possible to go from the front to the back without coming out as all the entrances had been left. Our pipe vice was out the front so, I measured the length of conduit, my apprentice (Still referred to as my mate as that was what we called them.) went outside, cut and screwed it. I noticed my mate was taking longer to do the cutting and screwing. I sneaked after him and found a pair of steps under the first loft hole and a pair of steps under the last one. He was going into the loft, through it, and down the other side. When I asked him why. He told me they had brought somebody in. I told him I had said welcome and mentioned the weather but didn't get an answer. They had started fridges in mortuaries. See, muggins again.

I have just remembered - we were NATIONALISED. The London Electricity Board. Woolwich took over and we became a branch of Woolwich. I will get back to nationalization later.

The next job was blocks of flats that our blue eyed boy had started and left. As the job got going I needed more help. Eventually I had 2 extra pair (Electricians and mates.) which meant I was entitled to a charge hands wage. I was a temporary working charge hand. (Back to the unofficial days.) One day one of the real charge hand's came down to the site. The boss wanted to know why I hadn't applied for the charge hand's job that was on the board. He said it was my job. I said Bill Fletcher will get it. At last recognition.



I applied for the job, didn't even get an interview and Bill Fletcher did get it, not working, just office. I just carried on. *Notice the hair, always hanging down my face.*

The working charge hand had to sort out other peoples mistakes. More for my knowledge file which had rapidly becoming a folder.

Having a free hand enabled me to try out different ideas. The Micks as we called them spread the concrete and the Paddies did the shuttering. Discrimination? Don't forget I was called Sparks. Anyway, the Micks were always chasing us to get conduit laid so they can spread the concrete over it. If you can imagine a roadway, made with pot bricks, (tile material) with underneath it there are various rooms and more rooms will be built on top. Four or more flats to a floor, normally six.

The conduit has to be laid with some bent to go down for the downstairs and some up to go up for the flat you are standing on. The distance between the bends plus an inch or two was what I thought of. The ones for the lighting, for the flat below, went down.

The ones for switch sockets, cooker, immersion heater etc. for the flat over went up. Are you with me? I won't confuse you with the mains and the landlords lighting. We made the pipe work and labelled them.

When the floor was ready we measured where everything had to go and installed it. We made a bow in the pipe so that it was the correct length. Simple - maybe. When they built the walls we found some pipes were not right in the walls. On checking the measurements we found the building had become longer. Now you thought they were all straight up.

On speaking to the “Brickie” foreman about it we found he measured from one end. We measured from the middle. Half an inch out per flat equals two inches in a four flat run. The majority were six or eight flats. The foreman told me he would have the walls built round our pipes. Sounds good in theory, in practice some of them were being bent out of their way.

When a conduit is in or up against a wall it has to be pushed further back to straiten it. It means having to cut a hole in the wall for the pipe to go back. You have to be very careful or you may snap it off. When they get pushed sideways it makes it very difficult to fit the box straight. The lugs on the boxes for the fixing screws were fixed. I altered a box so that the fixing lugs could move up and down. I gave the box to the maker’s representative. His company came up with a better slide and so adjustable boxes were born. I never got anything for the idea.

The mains ran up the other side of the stair wall. I spoke to the architect about it. I said I couldn’t bury an inch and a half pipe in five eighths of plaster and it would mean cutting into the cantilever stair. (I knew this was a no- no.) The consumer unit would be in the pantry.

He told me to fix it in the other wall and to have it facing the passage. I said the wall wasn’t thick enough. He told me to use the four inch box. When I said it wouldn’t work he told me I was being bloody minded, so I said OK. The four inch box is used for the semi-recessed units and has a three inch deep cover to accommodate the meter, the meter being fixed on a board inside.

I did as I was told and mentioned it to the chippy (carpenter) foreman. I told him to let me know when he was fixing the front door and I would take the cover off so their door would go back flat on the passage wall to allow him to fix it. They had difficulty getting the larger furniture in. The next block the units were fitted on the opposite wall. The architect's idea. This gave the tenant a short three inch shelf in the bedroom. Now who is bloody minded?

## Our First House

Rene and I managed to get a mortgage. It was on a new house. You had to have a licence for a new one but they were a bit cheaper to buy than a second hand one. I qualified, being an ex service man and we had one child. The three bedrooms, two living room, kitchen and bathroom. **£1775**. This was in the Crayford area next to Bexley. As I had worked for the Bexley Corporation before nationalizing they granted us a 25 year mortgage.

The mortgage was £6/10/1 (Six pounds, Ten shillings and a penny a month - £6.51) I earned £6/10/0 a week as a charge hand electrician, so we were in. As this was a new house, moving in wasn't easy. I had to put scaffold boards over a trench in the front garden which was a mud bath.

I carried a baby in her pram over the trench. Some things are helpful. It transpired that her dad was training to be an accountant, later to become mine. The baby became my company secretary.



**The vehicle outside is our Austin A60 van**

I “modified” to look like the Austin Cambridge car with windows in the side also, removable seats in the back. The garden wall was also modified. If you look up at the window above the van – I modified it to a large window with an opening window with fan light on the end. Next door only had a gate at the front.

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The floors had dark brown Marley tiles which showed every footprint. (Did I mention it was raining?) Being new we didn't have a path up to the front door. There was no road or path, they hadn't been laid, and we were up the hill in the cul-de-sac.

I had bought a new dining room suite, with a bow ended sideboard for £25; from someone I knew who had been jilted. (The cat loved to jump up and catch the runner I made in the army. Being bow ended the lot ended up with a crash on the floor). Don't tell my mum, the bedroom suite came from Jays Furniture Store for 2/6 (12.5p) a week. We made it.

The back garden was trying to come in through the French window and the hill was still going up. I decided to stop it was to build a retaining wall, better still coal bunkers to hold the garden back. How do I build a coal bunker? Back at the flats I spoke to the brickie foreman. He got his labourers to put bricks and a barrow load of sand in one of the flats. He taught me how to build a coal bunker. He used sand instead of mortar so the labourers could remove it.

Now to work out where to build. Two bunkers one end, one coal and one coke, (Fire and boiler.), one on the other end for wood and a flight of steps the same width as a bunker.

A wall to bridge the gap at the front. The bunkers and steps to be dug back into the garden with the wall spanning between the fronts of the bunkers. I'll have to have a flower bed between the bunkers and steps. A lawn with flower beds round the side and back.

Later, as the boys became older, I built six inch high walls round the flower beds and added a centre round bed. In between the beds was paved so the boys had a track for playing with their cars..

I concreted between the house and the bunkers, sloping towards the centre, with a slight gully for the rain to run off which later on, if you can stand the suspense, will prove to be a smart move. I now moved inside to the kitchen.

My next door but one neighbour worked at the Bricklayers Arms goods depot. He obtained old disused railway sleepers for us. He had them sawn into log length which was ideal for logs and chopping into fire wood. In the next street was a firewood merchant. He bought the sleepers and cut them into logs ready for chopping. That's where we got the idea. I asked the boss (It was a one man firm.) if he could saw the sleepers lengthways for me. No bother. Back to the drawing board (Apprenticeship night school has many side effects.) to draw up a FITTED kitchen.

The kitchen was to have base and wall units. One of our neighbours told me Formica had come out. While working in a cafe kitchen they had thrown out the stainless steel sink unit which had a double draining board. It was commercial gauge and weighed a ton. It wouldn't wear out. The sink unit base designed, now to the next wall's base. A cupboard, a refrigerator (Plan ahead.) and a triple cupboard.

If I made the triple cupboard top in three layers, the one on top of the cabinet could be thinner ply, the next medium and the top thicker. The middle one to slide out. 90 degree turn and slotted back in - we have an ironing board. Cupboards over the top where necessary. Oh, and a serving hatch. Now to work out the materials and we are in business.

The firewood man made a good job sawing the sleepers to the dimensions I gave him. With no workshop the wood had to be planed on top of the bunkers. I had a Black and Decker DIY (Destroy it Yourself.) small portable bench come vice. The assembly work was done in the kitchen or outside. The Formica top with the ironing board looked good and it worked. The cupboards painted to suit. With all these cupboards there was no need for the pantry which had the door in the kitchen. I removed the door and bricked up the doorway. I did plaster it! Cut a doorway in the hall under the stairs, fitted the door and made good. A handy cupboard. Rene complaining about the dust.

The kitchen now needed decorating. Have you ever had a good idea "*at the time moment*". A firm had produced American oil cloth in plain or tiled pattern Ideal. Plain on the ceiling and Tiled on the walls. The cloth was 54 inches wide and on a roll. One bought the length one needed. (Posh)

First, the ceiling. I had asked my neighbours, Messers Kedgley and Chapman (MY friend Horace from the Bricklayers Arms.) in to help. We were half way across the ceiling when the phone rang. The call over I went back to the kitchen.

The cloth was draped over the two volunteers, perspiration running down their foreheads and looking like Chinamen. (Did I mention the cloth was yellow - for the ceiling to give a sunny effect?)

These units gave me an idea. I knew most of the houses in the district. If I made individual kitchen units that could be fixed together and a top to span the lot. It would only need one or two fillets to take up any gap. Then MFI opened up. Another Idea down the drain.

## The Garage

Having built the bunkers I decided to look into a garage. The council turned the plan down. They only allowed castle front garages. This was not my first planning permission turned down. What about the one the builder built next door? I had drawn a mirror image of the garage the builders had built. I found a man in the planning office who would do my drawings. He was very competitive in price. Plans altered, **permission granted.**

From advice I received from the brickie I built the garage, with a pipe running from the little gully at the back, (Remember? Always look ahead.), under the floor to the front garden, It had a Castle front up from the doors then a corrugated uralite sheet roof to the back. Our house was in the cul-de-sac at the end of the road and was built back from the road. I built the garage and had a friend pebbledash it. In the rear end I built a bench with a vice. The bench top was an old front door with plywood on top. Honest - it looked good and worked and had a woodworking vice.

The front garden had to be seen to, so I continued the garage floor on down to the pavement with two herringbone panels, which I painted matt red, to make it look better and a sloping wall either side near to the gate.

These walls were very handy when working on the van/car. I drove with one wheel on the wall and the other on the drive. That tipped the vehicle up so I could slide under. That worked fine except one day Bob toddling down, to see what I was doing, closed the door with my hand still on the sill. He ran indoors.

The pavement came past the neighbour's garden and round to us, then along the front of our garden and round to form the cul-de-sac. That was why the gate wasn't on the end. With a border outside the window, a path, a small flower bed. A small retaining wall with a small flight of stairs in the middle. A level lawn, another small wall and a narrow path we were in business. Small flower beds to taste. I had a builders barrow which I filled with X number loads of soil, after work, to be dumped. Luckily there was a gap between the house opposite and the local park fence. The gap would be a drive down to some lockup garages yet to be built. I knew the builder and he needed soil and hard-core for the garages.

During this period the union called us out on strike. Evidently someone in North West London had been suspended. The firm was in two halves. Supply and Contracting. The supply side bring the electricity to the meter and the contracting side do everything after the meter.

At that time the supply side was Transport and General Workers Union and the contracting side was in the Electrical Trades Union. Evidently a mate, somewhere in North West London on the supply side, transferred to the contracting side as a mate and the shop steward demanded he transfer to the ETU.

He didn't like his attitude. He told him this was a union company and he was in a union. It ended up with someone getting suspended. All, not just that depot, called out on strike. By coincidence two brothers had just joined our depot. The strike and the meetings were dragging on and on. At home, we were getting shorter and shorter of money. At one meeting I said it was nothing to do with us and we should go back to work. One of the brothers told me afterwards that if I spoke like that again I would get a thumping. (I found out he was the doorman at the branch meetings.)

The union representative kept mentioning Sole Negotiating Rights and Unilateral Agreements. They got their rights and agreements I got ten shillings less in my pay. No mention of the man who was suspended.

I started getting band work from an agent. These were all American camps, mainly at Greenham Common American Air Base long before the ladies had their protest camp there. They were all supposed to be professionals. We had a gig at Scunthorpe and stopped on the way there for refreshment. One of the fellows mentioned the glasses and said how he liked them. The alto sax player said he was a rep for that firm and could get them trade for him. There was silence.

That night every time he took a solo they stopped playing - me included. One of the musicians told me that in this game you have to be able to tie your own brother on the line and go back and drive the train. That's what it was like. On the way back we stopped at an all night café. We were paid under the table so that you didn't know what the others got. I got home on Monday morning in time to get changed and go to work.

There was also, though not very often, sessions work on a Sunday such as recording ballroom music for Esquire Records. This was very interesting. When I started we recorded, in a basement, direct on to the master disc. One microphone and to adjust the balance we individually played louder or quieter. Being on guitar I had to sit on what was called a typists chair. A tall metal one that squeaked when I moved so I had to sit still. Try doing that while playing the guitar. We were paid £3/3/0 (3.15) for four numbers. We started using different studios. When we switched to BBC studios things were very different. After one session the music was played back to us. I asked the engineer how he did it. He told me they had installed a tape recorder and were able to play back what they had recorded. Another time, same studio, when they played it back the sax solo had echo on it.

I must mention here that the studio was in the Marlebone Methodist Church. High up in a room we called the Gods. On asking how he did it I was told (Honest.) they had a bath in the crypt which had a speaker on the shallow end and a microphone fixed in the plug hole. Later it was all done electronically.

The studio was where they recorded the Brains trust and Listen with Mother. I don't know which category we came under. They also had a tape they made of things that were said by a slip of the tongue in listen with mother.

Some of the tunes were new that we hadn't seen before. (Try that with the pop groups.) If you got it wrong you didn't get any more sessions - simple. By the way, we never knew who the other musicians would be.

As these were mainly professional musicians. I had to be careful as I had a day job. One of the sessions was for a Latin American dance studio. They required a tambourine in it. Besides being booked on guitar I also played anything you shook rattled or kicked.

Carlo the boss asked me to play the tambourine part. I didn't have a tambourine and Barry Morgan lent me one. (His dad was the agent I got work from. He also played for Edmundo Ross and did a lot of BBC work.) The problem now was I didn't know to play it. It's not like the Salvation Army. Lesson from Barry over – passed – ready to play. That was what it was like in those days.

Rock and roll started and that reduced the work and the size of the band. The normal big band was 17. Piano, Bass, Guitar and Drums comprised the rhythm section with 5 Saxes, 4 Trumpets and 4 Trombones. They started dropping the guitarist and one trombone. You will find today, there seldom is a guitarist on the road but still on the recordings. The trombone varies. I decided to take up drumming as a second instrument as I knew all the tempos and rhythms. One of the drummers I worked with taught me the rudiments.



I was advised to try Max Abrahams for lessons. He lived in a Mews in London. I telephoned him and he gave me an appointment. I had to do an audition to see if he would take me on. It seemed odd as I was paying him.

I got on well with the drumming and was able to read drum music no bother. After I had been having Lessons for quite a while we thought it time to move on. I spoke to Max about turning professional. He thought with the way rock and roll and bingo were taking over the halls now was a bad time to switch. He said the semi-professional work I was getting could be more than I could get as a full professional. I just put it down to me not being good enough and he was being kind. Right enough the work I was getting was good work. Support work at Epsom Baths was very good. We played till it was time for the main band to come on. After their session we came back on and played till they came back on. That was us finished.

We stayed on listening to some of the real good ones. On one session we were supporting the great Ted Heath Band. We were just about to hand over when Ted's manager crept up beside me. He told me Ronnie Verral, their great drummer, was on a session and been held up. Mr. Heath wanted to know if I would sit in till he arrived. I couldn't believe my ears. Play in the great Ted Heath Band. If I didn't think I was good enough and Ted Heath did, then that was good enough for me.

We played for I.C.I.'s Christmas function at Welling Garden City. Two nights running. It was the same procedure, first on - Billie Ternant - us - Billie Ternant.

We played for the cabaret. If they are the professionals why don't they do the cabaret? The reason, it's all sight reading. If we had fluffed it, it would have been what you can expect. We would have been the fall guys. We also did gigs as Victor Sylvester's Gig Band.

While we are on sight reading, Norman Grant's Ballroom Orchestra, as it was called, played for the Society of Ballroom Dancing Teachers annual function in the Park Lane Hotel in London. Victor Sylvester was the president so his main band couldn't do the job. At least that's the reason we were told. This reminds me of the time at Park Lane. The spokesman, for one of the team's, handed us the music just before they were due to dance. There was a breve, looks like an egg on its side, with a line top and bottom, on either side and a circle round it. We were told it had been cut out. (A breve is 4 beats. With a line top and bottom, an indefinite number. Such as a chord and/or drum roll.)

When it came to that part I could sense something was wrong. We are sight reading so you don't look up very often if you are in the rhythm section. I was on drums where the music is at your side. They had all stopped dancing and were heading in an orderly fashion to where they started. We had continued playing. They lost. We got the blame. Frank and Peggy Spencer's Penge team won. They always did at that time. We ran across Frank and Peggy a lot. She was very good and at contests. Instead of cruel criticisms she would give them helpful suggestions.

We also played for Ballroom dancing couples as the cabaret at dinner dances. Like good dancers, good actors and good musicians they were nice people. If they weren't up to scratch they didn't blame somebody else.

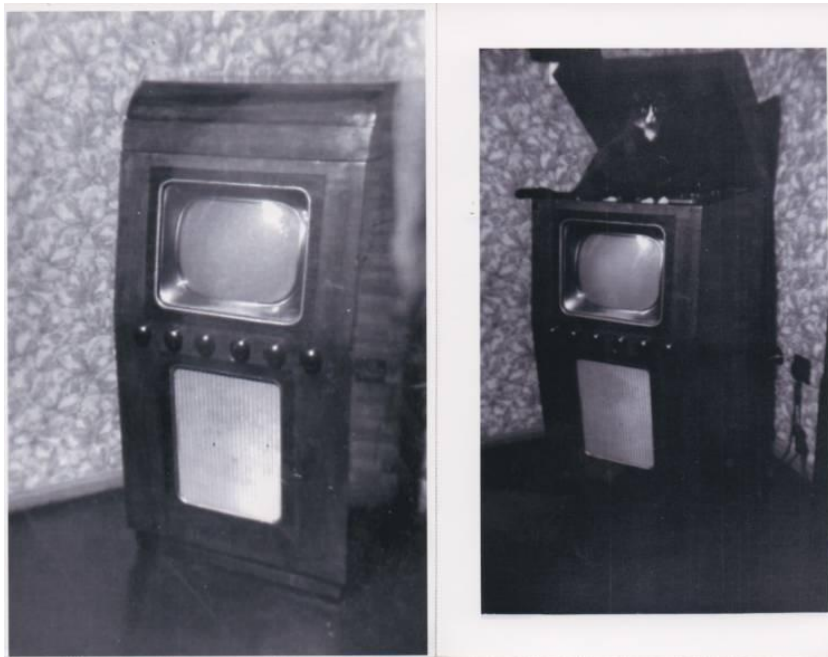
One couple, Henry Kingston and Joy Tollhurst, real name Fred Kemp which didn't look so good on programs. Fred told us the dances they would do, and the order, and we played any tune to suit. In their quickstep they could go from one corner of the floor to the far corner their feet hardly touching the floor. They were the British and European champions at the time. They always recognised the band and thanked us afterwards. We called them Fred and Joy. The ones who THOUGHT they were the greatest never even looked our way.

Back at the daytime job I was still doing the same. I was promised a bonus if I got the flats out of debt. I worked on this until, one day, I went to the stores. One of the mates showed me a requisition form. I told him Wally, the store keeper, had it all in stock. He said look at the job, the one I was supposed to be getting out of debt. He told me all the jobs running into debt were being charged to the job I was working on. This was at the weekend.

We were visiting Rene's parents that weekend. He was a wholesale and retail confectioner. I told her dad what was being done. He told me that sweets had come off the ration and he needed someone else. How about joining him. Rene and I discussed it and decided yes.







Digressing again. I built a television, called “The Electronic Televisor” from radar parts. I made the chassis and wound the coils. I made a frame up to fix everything to. I got most of the parts and valves in Tottenham Road in London. The radar units the bits came from were laid out on the pavement. On one occasion a large black car pulled up about two foot from me. I looked round and a little boy smiled and waved to me. When I turned back I thought I knew his face so I turned round again. There was Prince Charles with the Queen and Duke both laughing.

The cabinet was made from a packing case Rene’s dad had Polish sweets delivered in. (The walnut toffees were all candied. New labels were printed “Walnut Fudge”.)

The controls were fixed to mecano spindles and cogs. I built the cabinet to take a turntable, radio and the cat.

Back to work, I went in on the Monday morning and told the boss I was leaving. He asked if I was leaving now. We worked on one minutes notice either way. I told him I had intended to work the week out and hand over all the jobs I had running. A thank you for the work I had done for the firm. I hoped he would give Ginger Stevens the job as he had been with me the longest. One of the lads said to me he was sorry I was going. He had expected it for a long time and wished me good luck.

I joined the sweet trade. When I started with them I realised they were working a Noah's arc system. With sweets being on the ration their system worked well for them. I could understand them being quite happy with things as they were. I started reorganising their shelf system. Building new ones and modifying some. They had one employee, John, who was going along with them. He was also using it to his benefit and not the firms.

They started late. By the time the orders were got up it was midday or so before the deliveries could begin. This meant some of the shops were closed and the owners had to open up to receive their goods. I was getting in early and as I had seen to a lot of the shelving I started getting up some of the orders. It didn't matter how early I got the orders up they were still being delivered late.

The firm bought a new small van, A Morris minor five hundredweight. This was ideal for smaller runs and I was back early. I then tried to organise the office side. It was a case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand was doing. They didn't even have a filing cabinet. I bought an ex-army wooden one and started filing the paperwork which had been stuck on a tall spikes from wooden blocks.

I stuck it out for around two years. Rene's brother, who was next to Rene worked as representative. He had been a boy soldier then regular. I had thought for a long time that I would be better off selling electrical equipment than installing it. I spoke to Henry about it and he advised me to join Hoover as they had a marvellous sales training system, so I left the sweet business.

The small van I had already converted. Putting windows in the side and a coach seat, which came out, in the back. (A smaller version of the one in the photograph.) A section of the floor hinged up behind the coach seat and with a well formed over the prop shaft, made from aluminium, we were well off. No pun intended.

We took my mum back to Scotland to have a holiday with her brothers and sisters. My mum took me away from poverty and I was determined, with Rene's backing, to look after her as long as she lived. On one occasion we were travelling through the Lake District and it was like a cloud burst. The water was coming down the hill across the road and down the other side. We pulled into Gretna Green for a break. My mum was with the two boys in the back.



She told me her feet were so cold it felt like they were in a bucket of cold water. When she got out the wells were full of water. (You can't be right every time.)

`A motorcyclist came across the car park wearing wellingtons. There was a hole in the toe and as he walked water spurted out. It looked like a whale. We had many happy trips to Scotland. We went back a month later to bring her home.

## **Joining Hoover**

Joining Hoover meant going away to one of their schools for six weeks. They sent you to one where it wasn't practical to go home. It was high pressure all week and on Saturday it was tests, one to one, not written.

I soon noticed that anyone called into the office after the test wasn't there Monday morning. I managed to complete the six weeks and joined the Bromley district which included where we lived. It was a job I never liked. We serviced the appliance we had been asked to do and, if it was a cleaner you tried to sell her a washing machine or vice versa.

I didn't like pressing people into buying. They brought out a scheme where a service rep. worked in conjunction with a sales rep. The service rep getting a third of the normal commission. One day, Ben the sales rep. and I (Bill & Ben the Hoover men.) were giving a demonstration of the new Hoovermatic on a stage in the Methodist Church hall. To a hall full of ladies we did the demonstration. One lady said she didn't think it would do a double blanket. Ben said it would.

The lady lived near and went home to get one. She used detergent so we did the same. We used whatever powder they used. Then if the wash was cleaner it had to be the machine and not the powder. Ben was lashing the powder in and ignoring my plea to stop. We had massive sudsing. (Mass foaming) It was coming out of ever hole and crack. (Sudsing advice. Soap and detergent don't get on. If you get sudsing with one, wash you hands in a bowl of water with the other powder and pour the contents into the machine, they will kill each other.) I wonder why we didn't sell a single machine.

If I had a service call and sold an upgraded machine I didn't call the sales rep in. I just completed the sale. We got on well that way and if I had too many service jobs he would help me. All unofficial. One day I had a call to service a cleaner. A man answered the door, which was unusual. He seemed to act strange. I told him the cleaner needed new bearings and would have to go back to the workshop to be done. He said he couldn't be without the cleaner so I told him about our trade in scheme. He went for that. I went to my dealer and picked up a new cleaner.

On going back to the house I found the customer was discussing something with another man. I went in the other room and assembled the cleaner. When the caller had left I demonstrated the machine to show it worked alright, I was then asked to go in the other room to do the paper work and get paid. There was money and papers on the table.

The customer signed the paper and paid me for the cleaner from the money on the table, I couldn't help noticing the paper was an insurance paper. He had just paid me with his wife's insurance money. He told me his wife had died. The paperwork couldn't be cancelled. I felt ashamed. I had just sold a cleaner to a man who went along with everything I said while in shock. I went straight home, phoned the office, and quit.

## **Back with the sweets**

Rene's dad asked me to go back with him as he had rumbled John and sacked him. Some long time later, Rene's dad called her two older brothers and me to a meeting. Her younger brother was an officer with BP on tankers. He wanted us to take over the business. We agreed I would remain working as normal. I had been calling on customers and getting orders so I was used to the business. After the meeting the eldest brother said if the old man had made a living we would make a fortune. I told him not be so sure. The "Old man **was** the business".

The shop was the old type with living quarters and extra floors above. Wilmot moved in with his wife and daughter. He had the place redecorated complete with a new kitchen and bathroom. When he bought a typewriter I asked him why a typewriter when we don't write to anybody. He said Olive, his wife, wanted one. I went to his dad and said his son was going to bankrupt us. He didn't reply. I could see the writing on the wall and started looking round.

Parkinson's were advertising for a rep. for their electrical division. I only knew them as a gas appliance company, cookers etc. I called on the "shop boy" I had taken over from when I started work.

We had remained friends ever since. Been called up and demobbed. When he came back to work, I don't know what happened but, he didn't finish his time and he became a meter fixer fixing the meter on the board between the supply and the consumer. He later went to work for the local electrical wholesaler.

I asked him about Parkinson. He told me they were going in for spin dryers. He wanted to know why I was enquiring about them. I told him the situation. He told me about his situation at work. His boss was overcharging the customers and being unreliable. They had no opposition.

The customers had been on to him about starting up on his own which he said he couldn't do, but I could as I had more or less been running the confectionary business. He reckoned I could start it, get it going, and he could join later. When the business was running well. I thought about it and discussed it with Rene and her dad. I went back to Ray to let him know I would do it.

I went to the bank I used with Hoover and told the manager what I had in mind. He would lend me £250 if I got someone to guarantee the money. Rene's dad would. Now to find the premises. We tried a disused pub called The Star. The council wouldn't give me planning permission. Wally Monk, a car electrical shop had changed to a greengrocer and they had pulled out.

I went to the landlord and arranged to rent it. It was two shops with what they, jokingly, called maisonettes. It was built when Noah gave up sailing. I called it air conditioned. You could get your hand between the window frames and the brickwork. £5 a week - collect £1 each from the tenants. I'll come back to them later.

I was still working in confectionary until it got round to Christmas Eve. A very busy time for that trade. I was late finishing when Wilmot said I wouldn't need the van any more. He had found out I was looking into the Electrical Wholesale business. I caught the bus home. Rene asked where the van was. I said I had left it at work and made some excuse.

She knew something was wrong but didn't say anything. We had to get over Christmas for the boys. This was the deciding time to start on our own. I bought the small van from Rene's Dad for £250 which I paid him ten shillings a week. (50p)

## **STAR ELECTRICAL WHOLESALERS.**

When I went into *our premises*, I found Star gift stamps and banners. We had to decide on a name. I thought of various names then I thought about the Star pub and the Star gift stamps. The biggest Electrical Wholesaler was called SUN Electrical, so it dawned on me that Star came just before Sun in the trade directories. Yes

## **STAR ELECTRICAL WHOLESALERS.**

That was us. We were in business. A good point was that we were next to the pub car park which had an outside toilet. Number 1 **AND** 3 Erith Road. Sounds good.

We had two shop fronts, both shops with a door on either end. I built a partition, about four feet from the wall which ran back to about the same from the back wall. With a four foot trade counter to the outside wall.

**(Remember the four foot counter.)**

Wood shelving the rest of the room, the other room would be shelved later. A kitchen table and a wooden box to sit on and that was the inside done. I painted the Facia Board on the front of the building the sign would be written on. While I was painting it wasn't ending up the way I thought. I asked the builder opposite what was wrong. The paint was FREEZING. This was something else for the knowledge file.

Ray tipped a rep. that I was opening up. He came to see me and told me he would supply me with cable and about a London wholesaler who would split his discount with me. The only trouble was I had to pay cash with order. Things were looking up. The news got round the reps. like wild fire and customers were coming in. Things were looking good.

My band money fed us and paid the mortgage. The firm was growing. Keeping ahead of the money wasn't easy. Rene was doing deliveries for me. When she delivered the customers came to the van, when I delivered I had to go through the mud to their hut. One Saturday morning I had a lot of deliveries arrive almost together.

The milkman's boy arrived for the bottles and to collect the money. There were cardboard boxes everywhere. He was a cheeky monkey. He told me it was time I had a clear up. I asked him if he could do it better.

He came back after his round and cleared up. He did this every week. Some weeks later his mum wanted to know if he could have a proper job and was there any future in it. That was in 1960 - Now 2011. He has just retired, (Permanently Sick.) PS. I had to get him off school in between terms.

One day Ray turned up in a panic. His boss had found out about me, so Ray wanted to join me straight away. This wasn't what I had planned, but he was in such a panic, the first of many, that I said alright.

After all it was his idea me starting up the firm and I remained loyal to him for that. One of the customers came in on Saturday mornings and paid cash. We had half each as our wages. Three electrical shops we knew asked us to install circuits for either a cooker or a fridge which they had sold. We went to the address, after work, and I knocked at the door, Ray remained at the gate. I told the lady we were supposed to do the job tomorrow. Unfortunately we had an emergency job to go to and didn't know how long it would take.

Normally I could see through to the kitchen and there was the appliance we were supposed to install a circuit for. When she looked disappointed I said we could stop and do it now if that was alright with her. Naturally she said yes. We even got a cup of tea. This worked every time.

Rene had been doing deliveries in the small van. I bought a second hand larger van which had a column gear change. I showed Rene where it was and off she went. She couldn't find reverse to come back. She drove up to a filling station, went in the way in and out the way out learning fast!

Ray's father-in-law came to see me, one Harcourt Bailey. He had retired and was looking for a job. Any job. He didn't want much money. He was bored so I took him on as our van driver. He was very conscientious. One of our customers went broke owing about £200. This was about what I started with. Harcourt offered to lend me the money to be paid back when I could afford it. I decided, without telling him, he would have a job for life.

When the insurance company wouldn't insure him to drive I got him doing returned faulty goods.. Later on he started having breathing problems in the winter. He had the winter off, but still came in to see the staff every week. When he took his cap off to speak to me I knew it was time for him to come back to work. He walked most of the way.

One time I told him his family were worried about him working in the warehouse as he might get hurt. He said he would die quicker at home in the chair than in my warehouse. I asked him if he was starting now or coming back in the morning. He came in all excited one day. No one will ever see the progress in their life that I have seen in mine. I saw the invention of the Auto Cycle Engine. Had a motor cycle which I carried a small bag of sand to sprinkle on the belt when it slipped.



Last night, on the T/V, I saw a man step on the moon. He told me the family wanted him to move into a retirement block of flats. Ideal for you, I told him, no garden or decorating to do. He said he knew that. The trouble, **“The block was full of old people”**. He was over 80 at the time. He remained with us till he died at 84.

Back to the tenants. The old lady never had any money and the younger tenant wanted to pay in services which you can guess at - so - no money, or service, from them. We were getting short of space. A cloud burst saved us. The roof leaked and the old lady came to me about it. I told her to go to the council to fix it. I put a hole in the ceiling and a length of our channelling from the small hole to the gap between the window and the wall to let the water out. The council called and condemned the “Maisonette”. I asked him about the one next door. He condemned it as well.

We now had the whole building which was detached. An upstairs room was turned into an office which was upgraded with a dining room table as the desk and a couple of chairs brought from home. We badly needed MK (Originally meant Multi Kontakt because the plug legs were gripped.) as a supplier. The rep wanted us as the contractors he called on praised us for our service but the firm said we were not established.

The rep arranged for the boss man to visit us. They came on a Wednesday afternoon. Our premises, before us, had only been used for retail that normally closed on Wednesday afternoon.

When they arrived Ray stayed on the counter and phoned me on our intercom (Ex army.) with fictitious queries, Rene kept opening and shutting the front door which had a bell and making tea or coffee.

June, Ray's wife, was at the phone box phoning us as upstairs we could hear the phone ring and I was putting our case to MK's boss. They took us on. MEM followed, another must. Wylex and V&E still held off.

The boss of Ray's old firm tried his hardest to put us out of business. Ray came in one day in a panic. He's got a big sign on his van saying they have the cheapest cable in the district. We will have to reduce our price. **No we will not.** Nobody trusts him. He's committing suicide. He had a branch in Lewisham and when he became bankrupt. I bought the premises from him, but not the business. I didn't want somebody moving into a ready made business in our territory.

## **R&B Star (Electrical Wholesalers) Ltd**

We continued to expand and our accountant (Ernie), who was a neighbour of ours at home, told me we should become a Limited Company. He remained a good friend. I tried putting Ltd. after our name. No good, turned down. Various attempts then "R. & B. Star (Electrical Wholesalers) Ltd." I told Ray it was Ray and Bill Star. Really it was Rene and Bill; one day I hoped it to become Robert and Brian (Our two boys.) **I wanted a family firm.** They accepted that.

This expansion made matters worse regarding space as we expanded even more. I put plans in for a building out the back which the Council turned down because it was a permanent building, the area being up for redevelopment. I put in plans for an ex army portable building.

‘This was turned down because it violated local bylaws. (Ring any bells.) (2011 The building is still there just as we left it over 50 years ago.

Across the road the Woolwich Equitable built their head office, computer block and branch office. I went past there yesterday. It is now all empty and derelict due to a merger.

Farther up the road a lampshade manufacturer became bankrupt. A leasehold property, plenty big enough for us. After talking Ray into it. He was sure we could stay as we were, I started negotiations. We were coming up in the world. I had a second hand Mini AND the firm had TWO vans. When I went into a cafe I looked at the menu reading the food first. Before I looked at the price first to see what I could get. Our solicitor, (Bert) was a friend of Rene’s dad and quickly became mine, was very good when it came to property. The owner of the property wanted £800 a year with 5 year reviews. Bert told me to offer him £1,000 for 21 years. This meant going from £5 a week to just under £20 plus more expensive rates. He said with inflation we would benefit from it. The owner agreed. Some years later I sold the lease. It meant we had traded there free of charge. Good old Bert.

Both Bert and Ernie said to me, at different times, you are the only client I have who does what I tell them.

My reply was, I would be a fool to pay you good money for advice and not take it. I had the same problem on lighting schemes. They would reduce some part and tell me it wasn't what they expected.

Ernie, our accountant got on to me for not getting paid enough. He told me the Inland Revenue would never believe I was getting less than an employee. He opened a file called "Undrawn Remuneration". (Ray got the full pay.) I had never heard of it. It certainly came in handy later on. I firmly believed that if you haven't got it you can't sell it. The money was going into stock. This was proven to be necessary later on.

The business doing well and our boys growing we decided to move to a bigger house in Old Bexley. During looking for a house I told Rene not to look at the house from her point of view but what I could do with it. Just as well because the Bexley house I wanted was snow cemented in yellow with light blue paint work. The hall had grey walls and a red ceiling. I won't mention the other combinations - I don't want you being sick. It was three stories at the back and two stories at the front. The front being the same as the neighbours. It was owned by a University Professor who also reviewed books. At work I was paying the dustmen 10/- a week to clear our rubbish. I had to get the dustmen to remove the rubbish left behind.

As usual I did a lot to the place. We had a long back garden going down to the railway. I built a cedar workshop at the bottom.

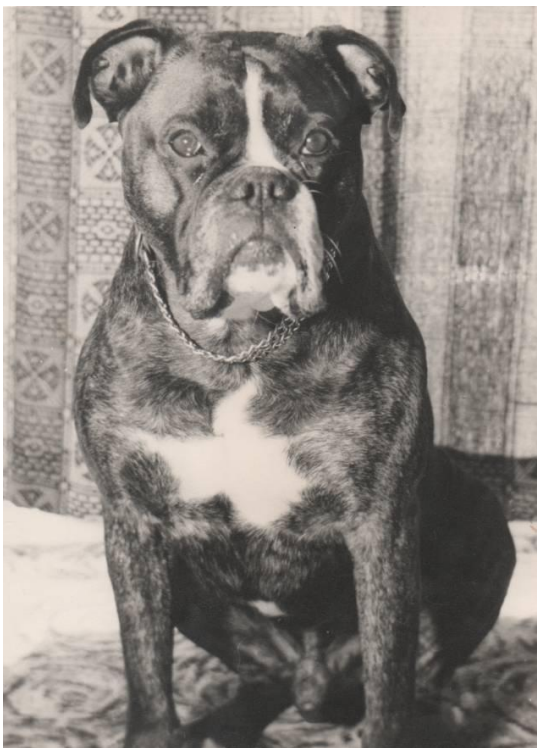
It had a bench, cupboards and fluorescent lighting. I found I was being pestered with midges. We supplied one of our

customers with lighting equipment to catch tsetse flies in the jungle for research. I asked them for advice and I was told to have a yellow light added to the lighting. It worked. More knowledge.

I extended the garage as we now had two cars. The back of the garage had double doors (Remember thinking ahead.) The front was a tip up door. While I was at it I laid a concrete pad at the back where I could stand a boat, If ever got one. In fact afterwards I did build a Mirror Dinghy followed by a GP 14, a bigger sailing dinghy.



At the end opposite the kitchen were brick built cupboards. One for my musical instruments and one as extra storage for the kitchen. All drawn for me by my draughtsman, now friend.



**The Boss**

I had (Notice - **HAD**.) built for me a sun lounge. (Successful businessman now.) The end facing the garden was made from glass sliding doors. The floor was covered with green Hugo Hogs Hair tiles to make it look part of the garden. You are now convinced I'm mad.

Having five in the house and one toilet seemed the norm. I thought it could be improved. As the front door was set back from the front of the house and had a window round the corner, I thought I could built a toilet from the front door to almost the front of the house.

Never build flush with the front. Always come back four and a half inches, a brick width. The flush one looks an afterthought, a recessed one part of the building. Plans by you know who. The side window out and the front door in the space. We now have a downstairs toilet.

Being three floors. With rear dormer windows it was possible to walk into the loft from the landing. I built a train layout for the boys in there. Any time there was shouting coming out I knew the Boxer dog wanted to play.

Later we had another little boy who was doomed from the start. His heart and lungs were coupled up all wrong and he died at ten months. The medical staff at the hospital were amazed we had kept him alive so long. We overheard a nurse ask the specialist if he had seen a case like this before. His answer was not alive. Some time later just after Stuart died. We were having our Sunday lunch, when Bob said mum, ask dad if Brian and I can do something or other. I said what this is, mum ask dad, ask me. Rene said you are never here for him to ask. You are either at the warehouse or playing in the band. We need you here.

When we were about to get married you told me you would have to keep on the band work so that we could have or own house and maybe a car. When we don't need the money you will pack up the band. We have a house, you have a Mercedes and I have a Hilman Imp, all new and we are not short of money and we have a holiday home in Norfolk. I thought about it. The business was bigger than I ever dreamed of and I did have a brief time with Ted Heath's band.

I went out to the cupboard and rounded up all my band instruments etc. and carried them up to the loft where I couldn't see them. I telephoned the lads I had deputising for me during Stuart's illness. Work was my way of coping with our loss. Afterwards I knew what addicts must go through. Saturdays was the worst as there is always something going on that requires a band. I had the next Saturday off and we went to London. I asked the boys what they would like to see. The answer was Dr, Shavago. If you have seen it you will know it starts with a little boy's funeral. Sob, sob. So much for cheering us up.

I now digress. We were registered for purchase tax and had a regular visit from them, every quarter, to check our books. I got on well with the regular inspector. He appreciated our simple system and the cooperation he got. On his first visit I told him I didn't do the purchase tax, only the system we used. If it's on our invoices, see Coral, or if it's on collating the tax and filling up your form, see Rosa. I only sign the form, without checking it. I trust the ladies to get it right, and I sign the cheque.

We had one visit from another officer who, after his check, said it was all very nice. You must be dishonest somewhere and I'll find it. I told him I was going out and he better be gone when I got back. He was. That evening I went to see a friend who was a customs officer. The bottom of our gardens joined and his children were ages with ours and at the same school. He told me I didn't have to put up with that and dictated a letter for me.



The letter was to the Comptroller. It told the story of the officer's visit and went on to say I wouldn't allow him in the place again and if he came I would put a table and chair in the yard and take any paperwork he wanted out to him. Any other officer would get our full cooperation the same as the regular one. I received a telephone call from someone who invited me to go to London and discuss the matter over lunch. I told him I had a business to run and didn't have the time. However, if he had time to come down to me I would take him out to lunch.

I didn't hear any more from him. Many moons later our normal officer came on his usual check, only this time there was a much older man with him. Our man wouldn't look at me. It turned out that the older man was what they call a surveyor on his last call before retiring. The officer I complained about was his friend. The following Monday four officers from the fraud squad moved in. I was very pleased. Wait till they want cooperation. The boss man asked me for something we did a little of and something a lot of. I gave him washing machines and emersion heater thermostats. The immersion heater didn't have tax but the thermostat does. (BOTH have VAT.)

He came back to me two weeks later and said they could only find one washing machine and hundreds of thermostats. You asked me for something we do a little of, we can't do less than one and when an estate is rewired it can be a hundred thermostats called of when required.

He said can't you be a bit more reasonable, so I said Vent Axia wall fans? A week later he was back. We find you have sold X number more than you bought. I just said so it looks like they fell off the back of a lorry - prove it - and walked out. A week later, again on a Friday, he was back. We still make it the same. Did you phone Vent Axia. No. If you had they would have told you they had a fault on the motor struts and they sent us a repeat order for us to replace any come backs.

They, along with other suppliers trust us as they know we are honest. As they came in free we didn't book them in other wise we would have invoices and credit notes galore and your people would want to know why so many purchase tax credits.

All the invoices were marked free of charge. You must have thought that I bought them of the back of a lorry and gave them away. I must be crazy. The reason we got the fans up front is simple, they trust us. I was an electrician and have fitted these fans. Normally if one is faulty the electrician removes it, brings it back to us, we send it back to the supplier who then decides whether to repair it and/or replace and send us a new or repaired one. We then notify our customer, who notifies his customer, collects it from us and installs it. In the meantime his customer has a big hole in their wall.

We give our customer a free replacement straight away. I know why a product has failed or if it was broken. Another example is immersion heaters. Can you imagine being without hot water for weeks?

The customers have given us the title of **“The most honest and reliable Electrical Wholesaler in the country”**. That is why we keep expanding. On the Monday I noticed Ray was still there. I asked where our friends were. I was told they hadn’t come in. Four men four weeks. How much did that cost **US the tax payer**. Normally Ray came in at 8 am and the customs men at 9 am just as Ray was leaving.

One of our friends (Ron) joined us to do any maintenance. As we still grew he installed an upstairs floor. This helped a lot. We needed a bigger office so I asked him (I never TOLD anyone what to do.) if he could make a prefabricated office so that we could pull the old one down and install the new one, complete with wooden floor, which would be on a concrete base. (The old one was a shed outside.), This to be installed over a weekend when the office was closed. We could put a ladies toilet in the space that was left between the office and the warehouse. We had more ladies now. Not much to ask. No problem. He built the sections with cedar wood complete with windows and door. Friday afternoon I asked the ladies to pack up and go home. Ron and I Dismantled the old office cleared the site and installed the pipe work for the toilet. We got that part done in time to go home to bed. First thing Saturday morning the concrete arrived with the correct slump. (Amount of water.) We pushed the floor joists in the concrete as we went, Roger having treated them. (Remember Roger, the milk man’s boy?) The sheets of flooring we had to screw down so as not to disturb the joists.

No power screw drivers then. We assembled the office. I had a band gig to do that night. On Sunday, while Ron saw to the toilet, I did the wiring for the lights and machines including the telephone exchange. We worked together on the desks. The system I used was to go against the wall or window with a continuous run so that heavier machines could be slid round. They didn't have to pick them up. Vinyl floor covering which looked like planks of wood complete with the grain.

The surface was completely smooth, not only for the machines to slide over but, writing on paper with a ball point pen. A Formica top and a ballpoint pen don't go together when writing on a piece of paper. I wallpapered the room. We worked on finishing just in time for the ladies arriving. They got quite a shock.

We were still growing and I wasn't in the best of health. I had been suffering for some time with ulcers. The sun lounge was finished. I installed a kidney shaped pond in the garden end of what was to be a patio.

When it came to paving it the next door neighbour to one of the ladies in the office, where I parked my car, said he was a professional pavement layer so I got him to do the job on the Saturday morning. When I got home I found he made a dreadful job of it. I dug it all up, got washed and changed, and went out on a band job.

The following morning I made an early start on relaying the slabs. It was a very hot day and I was drinking a lot of limeade. After lunch I carried on and had to stop. I went back indoors and asked Rene to phone the doctor as I felt really ill but couldn't say what it was.

She knew I had to be bad to make such a request and phoned the doctor. He came and said I had to go into hospital. Our warehouse was the one side of the traffic lights and the Fire and Ambulance station the other side. We didn't supply the general public, the fire, ambulance and police were the exception - you never know when you may need them. The ambulance arrived and the voice said to me "We will soon have you in hospital POP." I was drifting in and out of consciousness. I could hear all that was going on but couldn't answer. I half opened my eyes - POP - he was the oldest ambulance man in the station. I thought I must look rough.

Queen Mary's hospital Sidcup. (They took me to the maternity by mistake.) I installed their x-ray unit. (Florence Nightingale Mark II.)

After examination and a Barium Meal x-ray, (Next door to Florence.), they found the ulcer had bored through. With more pushing and prodding a week had gone by. The specialist spoke to me about what was causing the trouble.

As Rene and I never had mass arguments it must be work. He told me I could go home if I stayed off work for six weeks. After two weeks I thought I better get back to work or I'll have no firm to go back to.

The first day back at work I went to the bank as normal. When I was paying in I was told the bank manager wanted to see me. He told me I was well overdrawn, way past any limit he could let me have. He let it go for my sake. I had to clear it by the end of the month otherwise he could lose his job. It was that serious.

The first thing I did was to get the cheque book out. Ray had written checks as though money was going out of fashion. He had no idea what he was doing.

One of the reps. had pestered me for YEARS to take on his cable and accessories, I wouldn't because they supplied Woolworth and none of the customers wanted Woolworth cable and accessories. Ray gave him an order for the lot. To add to the problem he paid on a pro-forma invoice. (Before the goods are delivered.)

Ray had no idea what he was doing. I saw to all the money coming in and going out. I got on to him about buying from this firm. He just shrugged his shoulders. I told him he would have to sell that lot. He didn't sell any.

We had a charity who I gave the odd toaster or iron to for their sales. I gave her a few coils of cable and some accessories. They went down well so, that's where the lot gradually went.

I telephoned two of our biggest suppliers and told them the situation I was in. They both agreed to give me an extra month's credit, less the two and a half percent settlement which was a lot of money. This brought us down to a figure the bank manager could manage. I promised the firms I would clear it as soon as possible.

This I did by reducing the stock level which was against my way of working. Remember me saying - if you haven't got it you can't sell it. Another problem was Ray was supplying customers who were on the stop list. They had found out I wasn't there. I did clear the over draft, the suppliers credit and rebuilt the stock. It took time.

We were still growing. An end of terrace house, opposite us, came up for sale. Again no planning permission but I got round it. I phoned the planning office one morning and told them I was in trouble. We are taking on more staff and I have to interview them in the gent's toilet. She laughs and said you want the cottage. I told her it would still look like a house as my mum would be living upstairs. (My mum would have a fit if she found out.) She said in that case nobody will know you are there if you are not a nuisance and neither will we.

When I went in I found the water had been leaking. I asked Roger, he always had his nose in, to get the doodle bug, a paraffin heater with a blower. He lived a few doors away and I asked him to keep it going over the weekend. (Years later Roger, married, bought the house.)

I fixed the leak and went home Thursday afternoon to Norfolk. We had moved to Norfolk due to my health. Explanation later. On arriving home I found the new kitchen units had been delivered. I stripped the old ones out except the sink unit. The following morning, Friday, In the middle of the floor, I built the new sink unit complete with taps and with plumbing which would mate up with the original. (It is easier to work on a sink if it is away from the wall as you can get at the taps.) I had a panic call from Ray. The police were looking for me. Not him, ME. Two lengths of hose pipe connected the new sink to the installed plumbing, a bucket under the sink, and strict instructions to Rene to empty the bucket every time she let the water out. EVERY TIME.

I returned from Norfolk to the warehouse in Kent via the police station. An old lady had been knocked down outside our premises and they were asking if we knew who she was. Ray didn't stop to find out what they wanted. He assumed it was to do with the cottage which he reminded me he didn't agree with. They found out who she was. If only Ray had spoken to the police I wouldn't have had to come back. There must be a medical reason why some people can't stand anyone in authority.

Some time later a smallish two storey building came up for sale in an alley behind the shops in the Broadway. G.E.C. had stopped supplying trunking. The director at the factory outside Gravesend telephoned me and asked me to go and see him.

He told me they were stopping trunking and would I care buy the lot at a favourable price along with some other things that were stopped. I did. I bought the building and we used it as a bulk warehouse for the trunking and any overflows. It became a pest. Not everything being put in there was listed. Not like today with computers. The biggest offender was Ray. He told someone to take goods down there and seldom made a note of it.

Later on I got to hear Lex was closing their heavy goods repair depot in Crayford. It was a two unit building (10,000 square foot) with an office (1000 square foot) out the front. Ideal for us to grow into. We wouldn't need to move again. Sell the bulk warehouse to someone who wanted first refusal. I spoke to a couple of our larger suppliers about using us as a depot. Their rep. would get the orders and pass them to their own office.



Their office would telex the order to us and we would deliver it in a plain van. They would pay us a storage and delivery fee. I had this at the back of my mind for ages. The Lex garage was set up for Teletext.

My son Brian had been an apprentice on the stores and sales side with a large car dealer and his brother Robert (Bob) had been an apprentice mechanic with a Mercedes distributor. Bob could run the depot side and look after the vehicles. The Lex garage would do nicely.

Brian was already running the Lewisham branch. I spoke to Ray about it. He said he didn't believe in families being in a business.

On the staff were Rays father-in-law, brother-in-law, nephew and his mother did our cleaning at that time. His father joined us later. According to him none of the customers would come to us in Crayford. Crayford is now part of the London Borough of Bexley. We are on the Crayford side of the road that divides Bexleyheath and Crayford.

The nearest electrical wholesaler is Footscray or Lewsham. Miles farther away. Ray liked fishing so; I said to him, you like beach casting? Yes. When you arrive when the tide is out you go down to the waters edge and as the tide comes in you move up the beach or you will go under. You can't stop the flow. Yes. We don't have reps. the customers are coming to us therefore we have to move up or we go under. *No, we don't have to get any bigger.* As with other things I had to speak to his wife about it. She agreed with me. Lex agreed to sell the lease to us subject to planning permission. (Change of use.)

Bert, our solicitor did the paperwork. He told me he had put "I trust there will be no objection to the change of use" hoping they wouldn't notice. No guessing - they did object. I telephoned the planning office, who by now knew of me, and asked for a meeting with the head planning officer.

I got a half hour appointment on Friday at two pm. The planning officer didn't want a warehouse with a couple of men and a fork lift truck in that size building. He said what number he wanted. He wanted a factory there. I pointed out that the factories needed spares when things broke down. The factories rely on us.

I named Vicker Armstrong as one. They were the largest factory in the district. You want X number of employees. We have X number of employees. I thought this was supposed to be a trading estate. Still he argued. I said I had started work at 14 with the Bexley council and since I started up my own firm they had turned down every application I had put in. The trouble was they were jealous because I had got on and they were still stuck behind their desks. They leave me no alternative but to take them to court for victimization.

I left at five o'clock three hours into my half hour appointment. I had to go home as I was suffering with a vicious Migraine. Guess what? I got a phone call Monday morning to say he would back my application. The business completed we were ready to move in. Having paid the money to Lex, and received the keys, I went down to survey our new, to us, warehouse.

*Nothing is impossible.*

There were bolts and brackets sticking out of the floor and walls where equipment had been. We were very busy so I decided to clear the place myself. Removed the bolts and brackets, also the pipes from the compressed air system they had. After filling in the holes and making good I had another look at the floor. It was very patchy for my new pride and joy. It seemed massive so I decided to paint the floor. After measuring the area I went to a decorating shop in Bexleyheath Broadway, I knew the fellows in there, and told them I wanted to paint the floor.

As I hadn't painted a floor before they advised me on how much paint and undercoat I needed. I bought the paint along with a large paint roller (2 foot) and headed back to the warehouse. I always made it a practice of asking someone who knew what to do rather making a lousy job of it myself.

Things were really looking up. I made a plan of the shelving and all the materials had arrived I got Ray and Roger assembling them with strict instructions to follow the plan. NO DEVIATION. I will build the wooden cable rack. Then crash, bang wallop.

We were put on a three day week during the miners strike. Having an upstairs floor put in at Erith road meant they had no light in the warehouse during the off period. Crayford had a half glass roof. Ray was off again, I told you we shouldn't move. If we hadn't moved we wouldn't have been able to see what we were doing. I had letters run off on the duplicating machine, (No computers then.)

We notified the customers telling them we would be closed on the Saturday as we were moving and wouldn't be able to serve them. I told them our new address. On the Saturday morning we had just started when I saw two or three vans pull up outside. I went out and told them we couldn't serve them as we had started removing the goods. I was told they were not after goods; they had come to help us move. (These are the customers who won't come to us in Crayford.). Half the staff loaded the vans which the customers vans transported - half the staff unloaded and stocked the shelves. It went like clockwork.

Rene had been supplying them with tea and food and as we finished late I took them all to a Chinese restaurant.

The three day week had to be seen to. The planning people tried to say we were retailers as we took cash over the counter. You could have a light over the till for security reasons. We operated half the week as alleged retailers and the other half as wholesalers. I moved the till onto the trade counter. No three day problem.

The trade business could be a problem. I telephoned the factories we supplied. They all moaned. I reminded them that they were always complaining about not having time to move machinery or install new systems. (I made it my business to get to know who their electrical engineers were.) Now is your golden opportunity to do those jobs. They went along with it. The result - we did more business during the three day week. It brought in factories we hadn't supplied before.

## **WE HAD THE STOCK. (Told you.)**

From then on we were in the big league.

***(The three day week broke a few suppliers. It made us)***

I built the trade counter three feet, maybe one metre, **longer than Sun Electric**, who had the longest trade counter in the country – **now?**

Ron fitted a shop type front behind the trade counter shutter, with two large windows and a door. This gave us security at night, looked good during the day and was impressive. Eventually we had to put in another floor.

While we are on Sun Electric and stock. One of the authorities who had odds and ends from us sent a van to Sun Electric, who had now become ITT, to collect goods. Anything they didn't have he obtained from us on his way back. One day Peter on the counter brought me a requisition form to look at. I told him we had all that. He said he knew - there's nothing crossed off. I spoke to the driver.

His view was that he had to go to them then come to us. He found he could come to us and get everything.

Why go over there. That's why we were still expanding. (At the time of writing they are French owned.) I had to tell the two firms who we were going to deliver for that we no longer could do it. It worked out well as they were well behind on production.

## **The move to Norfolk.**

I would like to explain my moving to Norfolk. I had gone to see our GP again as the ulcers were playing up. He told me if I didn't stop working twenty five hours a day, eight days a week he would sign my death certificate and give it to my wife. I felt he meant it. I spoke to Ray about us working half the week each. I would do Monday, to Thursday and he would do Friday and Saturday morning. He had a house outside Deal besides his Bexleyheath town house. We moved to Norfolk to a bungalow in Horning which is on the Norfolk Broads.



Some time before we had bought a small riverside bungalow In Potter Heigham on the Norfolk Broads. I called it a Wendy house. Called Melrose. I even bought a sailing boat, A Hurley twenty. This was where I escaped to do my thinking.

I got away from the phone. In the winter working on it I was assisted by swans, mallards and moorhens. I felt completely relaxed there. (The ulcers didn't bite.) Especially being a country boy at heart and I could work on the bungalow.



There was a boat house, which had been converted into a room, with a bathroom attached. The boys sometimes brought their friends with them. The problem was it was giving the Elsan toilet overtime. One week I took a urinal back with me and installed it in the bathroom complete with water supply. I attached a plastic water pipe to the outlet, rowed the mirror dinghy out to the centre with weights on the end to sink it.

Some time later I was washing a paint brush out in the urinal when a holiday maker, who was on holiday next door, called to me. Look there's bubbles coming up in the middle of the river which look oily. It's just something decomposing and the methane is rising. Quite common. I noticed that as we were on the way up there I could feel myself relaxing. On the way back I noticed I was getting tenser.

We soon settled in at Crayford and business kept expanding. Ernie, our accountant, recommended we go in for electronic book keeping as our hand system wouldn't be able to cope. He recommended Olivetti. Their rep. and Ernie worked out a system for us.

I bought the hardware. Had the continuous stationery printed. We got all set up to go. With Cathy in the office using our normal system and I picked eight various accounts. At the end of the month my dummy run was the same as the old system. The customers were notified and the new system explained where it would affect them. We were ready to go.

Go we did. After three weeks Cathy told me she was behind and couldn't possibly complete by the end of the month. It was one week behind. I realised we would be two weeks behind the second month and so on.

The customers were notified it was a disaster and we would go back to the old method. We were always honest with the customers. What could I do? I looked in the bought ledger file and pulled out all the statements that looked like electronic book keeping. I telephoned all of them stating who I was and could I speak to the person in charge of their book keeping. I had no bother speaking to the right person. When I told them our problem the common answer was "Welcome to the club." It made me feel better as we were not alone. They all told me what they had done and I made careful notes. Not one suited us.

When I went to night school before and after the army service the teachers were helpful. Where English was concerned they didn't say much. Dyslexia didn't seem to be known then. The maths teachers, on the other hand, wanted me to give up the electrical world and train to be a mathematician as I found it so easy.



Mathematicians would become very necessary. I didn't fancy sitting in an office doing sums all day.

gave our current problem a lot of thought. I always liked doing problems in metric. We had gone metric (Or decimal.) in our money so why not use metric to suit. I decided to use the metric 10 as the base. Everything would be priced as the cost of ten. That way our dozen, 12. became one point two 1.2. Twenty five 2.5. We would have our ordinary numbering on the left of the invoice, as we have now.

Then the goods description followed by the metric quantity. Then pricing as a ten unit and the line total plus the purchase tax column. This way you have quantity 8, metric point 8, price per 10 £20, total £16 plus tax. The machine would be able to do the calculations. Olivetti could alter the program.

When their technical rep came he told me he liked my idea. It was very different from the normal but it worked. The machine was controlled by using a magnetic striped card similar to credit cards in use today only on paper.

Before he left he copied the program onto the magnetic cards and gave them to me saying this is the complete program so if you need to move any of the columns etc. you will find it easy. Sometime later Olivetti paid me, around what I paid them, for the rights to use the system. It went in the till. The system was working a treat when the government altered the tax to two rates. There was no way I could get two rates in the columns I had.

More brain racking. I worked out a formula where it was possible to start with the gross total, (not printed), enter the two tax rates, get two tax totals then the gross total. This collated at the bottom. The customs people never spotted it. Another problem cropped up that I had to solve.

I was getting a bit fed up with having to sort everything out and when I did Ray still stuck to the old way. It was coming up to Christmas that I told Ray he would have to take more responsibility and be responsible for sales and the general warehouse side. When we started Ray had a rented terrace house. He told me he would have to think about it over Christmas. I knew that would mean bringing June into it.

After Christmas, he had talked it over with June, and decided as I was killing myself, I wasn't going to kill him. He wanted out. I told him to contact an accountant friend of his and ask him to meet Ernie to work out a settlement. He was registered as a partner then a director so I knew he was in for a good amount. The amount was vast. Half down and the balance at monthly intervals over ten years.

I thought it unfair; I had done all the running of the firm. His job was a trade counter assistant, that's all. Still, it was his idea and I would remain loyal to him. When he left my ulcers went with him. A short while later I found out he had sold his Jaguar car. He couldn't afford to keep it. It was less than a year old. A rep came in and told me he had seen Ray at Dover ferry. I told him he was a friend of a ferry accountant and often went to France.

No, he was directing traffic. This went round the trade like wildfire. I was going broke and flung Ray out. (He had thousands.)

I had to deal with a council where they needed a large number of electric fires, all the same, to be drawn off when needed. They were going to rewire an estate. If a neighbour found some one had a better looking fire than they had it spelt trouble. When I put the order in for the fires the manufacturer was very suspicious and it took a lot of persuading to get them. I got our customer to let them know I was sound. I got the fires and everything settled down.

The next thing another rep. had seen Ray at the ferry. I said he was working for the customs and excise. No he was changing the bulbs in the toilet. I thought I was doomed. Talking to Ray's brother - in - law years later he told me Ray was pleased with the job because he had a brush and pan with his name on it. Honest, it's true.

He died about 4 or 5 years later. My contract was with Ray but June received the money to the end of the ten years although we had no legal obligation to do that. I said I remained loyal. That's not what some people called me. **Bob had taken over during this period.**

## Our move to Norfolk.

Now on the brighter side. Back to Norfolk and back in time. You may remember the doctor threatening me. Things were getting worse. We had a friend coming to our riverside Wendy house for the weekend. We stopped in Wroxham to get some shopping, my favourite pastime.

While Rene was shopping I looked in an estate agents window. Everything seemed to be under offer or sold. A lady poked her head round the door and said "Can I help you?". Being me I asked her if they had anything for sale. She asked what I would like.

I described the following property to her.

A large bungalow on the main road on a slope going down to the water.

A double garage.

An acre of ground with a boathouse at the bottom.

The garden tastefully laid out etc.

She said you better come in and produced a photo and a description of the property I had just described. I could not believe it. It was exactly what I had just described and at the right price.

When Rene came back I told her about it and how I would still be able to go to Crayford. I had thought it all out. She thought I was mad. We arrived at our Wendy house at Potter Heigham. ( I was hoarse.) By coincidence our guest was a builder from Wiltshire where Rene was evacuated. He had injured his back and stayed behind while Rene prepared lunch and I took his wife and son for a sail.

Rene showed him the photo and the particulars. He agreed with me. His garden in Wiltshire has a Church and a gate house in it, also a Bailey Bridge which was for a job. It ended up stretched along the front of his house covered in paving stones. From there you got a beautiful view of his garden. He widened a small stream into a large pond. We thought alike on getting round problems.

We really did like what we saw and decided to go for it. The boys were keen for us to have it. Back home we told the boys about the bungalow and we thought about moving there. They thought it was a good idea but they didn't want to go with us. They both had girlfriends and work where they were. Rene and I talked it over and decided to look over the place. We made an appointment and went to view it.



**These pictures were taken, after our alterations, when we decided to sell and move back to Kent.**





**This is the seamaster 20  
The Robertson Broads dingy is on the slip.  
A Broads design, built a 100 years before this photo.**



**This picture is the part of the front garden  
Under the grass are hundreds of daffodils**

The warehouse in Lewisham had been a Findlays tobacco shop. The first floor rooms had high ceilings. I got Ron to build an arrangement that consisted of two wardrobes with one end against the wall and back to back. The doors facing the opposite walls. A floor on top of the wardrobes with single beds. This left a space under between the wardrobes and the wall for them to get at their clothes. Steps at the other end of the wardrobes to get up to the beds. There was still room for their chairs and the T/V etc. It was a large room. Bert, as usual, did all the legal work and we moved. Cheisman's, the local department store, had a bedroom display of German fitted bedroom furniture.



It was exactly what we needed. Asked if they would deliver to Norfolk the answer was yes. When we placed the order he told us the display was about to be dismantled and would we care to buy it at a reduced price. We did and they delivered. As some of the furniture was going with the boys and some for us most of the Norfolk furniture was new.

It was snowing the day we moved and I had already had a cold. When we moved Bert went with us.

He was suspicious of the sellers and he wanted to make sure they had left. It was a good job he did. We had to pay for the oil in the heating tank before the solicitor would release the keys. On entering, all the light fittings were gone, just bare wires sticking out of the ceiling. The washing machine taps and all the carpets. Curtains and pelmets had gone. I looked outside and the garden ornaments were missing. I told Bert they had left the lawn.

Bert wanted to sue them. I said no. I could fix things. By then my cold had turned worse. I put a string across the bay window in a small bedroom and hung a sheet over it. In the morning Rene had to send for the doctor for me. When we viewed the bungalow I felt I should have bought an entrance ticket. It was laid out like Buckingham Palace. We didn't sit down in case we dented the cushion. The silverware was blinding.

The doctor arrived. I was lying on a new divan which still had the plastic cover on it and I was in a sleeping bag. He told me I had the flu. I said I had to go to London on the Wednesday. He said you might get there but you won't come back.

The boss doctor arrived shortly after. Not to look at me - just the bungalow. It was written on his face - What have the Browns done to the neighbourhood.

The heating wasn't working and the drains blocked. I had to get out of bed. The heating on but I couldn't find the manhole cover for the snow. Eventually cleared, the drain not the snow, (I had brought my drain rods with us.) and back to my sleeping bag.

I had brought my tools and all those things that might come in useful. Believe me they did.

Mr. Brown had a building business as well as being a surveyor for the people who guarantee new buildings. (I can't think of their name.) He had become bankrupt. We were pestered with phone calls from people he should have visited as a surveyor. I met up with some of his staff. They told me what a so and so he was to work for. Tighter than a ducks rear end.

I told them I had found the exchanger coil in the hot water tank at the top instead of the bottom so greatly reducing the hot water. They told me they did it deliberately as he thought he knew it all. In fact he knew nothing besides being dreadful to work for. We treat our customers and staff how we would like to be treated.

The Hurley sailing boat had been replaced with a Sea master cruiser. The Hurley had to have the mast lowered to get under the bridges. I had adapted it with a bracket and rope pulley. Trying to do it without the boys required a lot of effort to lower it without being catapulted off. Getting it back up was easier. Moving to Roseberry in Horning, with a boat house, was a treat.

All the piling at the waters edge. including the inside of the boathouse, needed replacing. I got a local firm, Sonny Amis, to do it. I asked him to make sure the hole in one part of the piling was the same in the new piling. By the look on his face he thought I was crazy. It was for the King Fishers and the small branch sticking out had to remain. That's where they landed to check if all was clear. They then entered the hole. Smart birds. They didn't want anyone or anything to see where they lived.

With the help of a retired civil engineer, he built docks and railway yards all over the world; we built a retaining wall to hold the garden back. Like Harcourt he was interesting to talk to. He travelled all over the world by Flying Boat often with Sheikhs. The wall was built with large paving stones with rods anchored way back in the bank. It pays to have people who know what they are doing. The area from the water, round the boathouse, back to the retaining wall I paved. (The easy bit.)

The boathouse needed a lot of maintenance. It periodically started sinking and had to be jacked up. The doors were large and needed repairing. I got the piling contractor, who was working further along the dyke, to leave his barge where I could stand on it to work on the doors. It never moved so I was able to remove the doors, cut the bottom off to clear the water at high tide, and fix them back on. Before I had to struggle against the water to open and close the doors. While I was at it I fixed a bracket to take a pulley so that I could get a rope through it to open and close the doors. All the jobs were done at the weekend as I was still going up to Crayford.

The next job was a greenhouse for Rene. There was a small one attached to the back of the garage. They were installing new type windows on the new houses. There was glass in the usual place with glass underneath where before they had a wall. As they were being fitted in semi-detached houses they were available in left and right hand. The same arrangement for the front doors.

I bought them all from Boulton and Paul who made them in Norwich. The centre one was the type they used for straight runs. I fitted a centre, with a left and right hand either side. The returns to the garage were a left and a right hand with doors in them. A plank of wood the length of the side cut diagonally from corner to corner, we have a piece of wood, to go from the garage to the front wall.

This formed a slope for the roof. A neighbour, who has a glass works, fitted the roof with wire meshed Cathedral glass. The side panels had clear widows either side of the door which were the usual front door arrangement. A bench from one window along the front to the other window was for the plants. I had bought trays to place along the top with a gutter along the front. Special covering for the trays, going into the gutter, the water level adjusted to suit - bingo - an automatic watering system.

DON'T LIFT THE PLANT POTS or the capillary action stops. (The gully is to feed the trays with water and not to drain them.) It worked a treat, especially when we were away. The back, against the garage, had a different system. Against the side window was the intensive care unit which had its own heating and misting equipment. It's similar to the unit they put premature babies in.

The other end, from the window, a longer home made unit for the getting better. It went up near the ceiling with a plastic curtain on the front. It had its own heating and a SPRAY system. All automatic. Why is it every time you open the curtain to look inside the spray comes on? Between the two it dropped down to the bottom rail for the tall plants. Ventilating to suit. Rene was pleased with it and wanted more.

The next one was free standing adjacent to my workshop. The instructions said to lay the parts out for one side on the ground and leave the bolts loose. Done as per instructions. When I picked it up it fell apart. They couldn't have heard of finger tight. This one had a path down the centre stopping a border width from the end.

Automatic watering, a light and a wall fan in the end. The ventilating was automatic. When I fitted the fan in the end, the steps slid off the end of the path and I went through the end wall. Not hurt, just felt a twit. Where was health and safety?

Digressing - Jack, the civil engineer, was the father-in-law of Fred a manufactures agent who called on us in Crayford. He lived in the next village to us. Fred told us about him and we became very good friends. If I wanted something done he understood what I wanted. It was the same the other way round if I was doing a job for him. He got two of his gang (He helped the council out when they ran into trouble.) to dig a trench for me from where my shed was down to the boat house. A plastic pipe to bring the water up from the boat house and cable for the switch line to operate the pump.

The ball valve in the tank worked the switch for the pump plus cables for the phone and intercom.

Jack had one or two car accidents. I persuaded him to give up driving and go by bus or taxi. He was very methodical and made a note of his expenses. At the end of the year he happily told me he had made a profit. The third greenhouse was one that I cut in half long ways. With an extra ridge it became a long lean-to leaning against the boundary wall a path width away from the No. 2 greenhouse. It had the same auto water and air flow plus the water tank for the water from the boat house.

If we turn to the garden now we will find it was very formal. The bungalow, if you remember, is called Roseberry.

It was laid out with formal oblong beds full of roses. The gap between the beds was a one foot wide grass strip. Can you imagine cutting the grass especially the edges, Pruning the roses took days and the cuttings won't die or burn like other plants plus a blood transfusion. I decided to get rid of the lot and fill them in, for now. Half way down the garden was a rectangular pond with cherubs spitting out water, Farther down still was a row of cypress trees with trees either side of the garden.

On now to the boat house and water. We were completely shut in. Removing the trees from across the garden opened up a lovely view. I had to leave one tree till the chicks had flown the nest. I'll come back to the garden.

On the other side of the bungalow from the garage I built another garage. This was to take the garden mowers and equipment.

While buying the garage, (Assemble It Yourself,) and when I bought the green houses I ran across a jobbing builder who I got to put the concrete base down for the new garage. He told me his brother, who was one of the city's landscape gardeners, had left.

He wanted his own business and was looking for customers. I asked him to tell his brother I was thinking of moving the pond up outside the French windows. I had thought of a two pond with a waterfall between them. His brother, John, turned up with a beautiful drawing of a paved patio with twin ponds.

John made a beautiful job of his design. All curves, no straight bits. This was what I had in mind for the garden - no straight bits. He taught me how to get curvy flower beds. You throw a hose up in the air and see how it lands.

If it is not quite right, kick it till it is or pick it up and throw it again. He made a beautiful job of the patio. The ponds were to have a bird bath with a fountain in the top one and a waterfall between the two.

Between the green houses and the new garage is a Wendy type small building. The previous owner used as an office and I turned it into a small workshop. I installed a pump in the workshop which would work the water system in the ponds. I found the fountain sent the water too high because of the amount of water needed to work the water fall. This caused the wind to blow the water out of the pond. I put a tee in the base of the fountain and reduced the amount of water going up to the fountain. The waterfall then had sufficient water.

I noticed some people looking at the fountain spray and the amount of water going over the fall. The pump pumped the water to the top pond and it returned from the bottom pond. Being in the workshop the noise wasn't heard outside and also protected it from the weather. John also did a lot of redesigning of the garden and I worked to his plans. We often came home to find another bush or tree there.

A lady had a shop in Wroxham. Her father, who had been the gardener at the "Big House", was selling small rhododendrons and azaleas for the church. I spoke to her and it turned out her father had died and they lived in a tied house and had to get out for the new gardener. The law states that anything he planted remained his property. These plants he had developed himself. I asked her if she had any more.

She asked me to go to her house and pick any thing I wanted. I phoned John and arranged to go with him to the garden. He was one of those very quiet men. He walked round, puffing his pipe, and said everything was good and ideal for me.

She asked a very low price so, I bought the entire garden. John arranged the time of year we would dig them up. This we did over a few months. Some of the rhododendrons and azaleas John had never seen before. We had some moments working out how to get them home. A near neighbour a few houses along died and her house was to be sold. It had the equivalent of a plot size alongside the house which she had as a fruit and vegetable garden.



A house was to be built on the site and John got the job to clear the garden. We were forever finding new bushes and small trees in our garden when we got home from Crayford.

One tree was big so I borrowed a raft from another neighbour. We got the tree on the raft, branches out the front in the water and the roots with soil out the back in the water. I got my boat out and towed it along, gradually sinking, the water soaking the branches and the soil round the roots getting wetter. Again - *Nothing is impossible*.

One day John got me to go with him to a house way in the country. There was a statue of a man with a hat on smoking a pipe. The garden was over grown. John knocked on the door and told the man, who answered it, that the statue was in the wrong place. How much did he want for it? You can see him in the third picture down of Roseberry.

John's Morris minor traveller nearly died on the way back. He was right; again, it looked very good in our garden. We called it "The Thinker" just like John. He's now in our son Bob's garden at Maltmans' Hill Farmhouse near Ashford. We visit him regularly.

Back to the workshop - The floor gave way in one corner. It was where mice had built their nest and extended it over time. I found a firm in Norwich who were dismantling the London prefabs. I worked out a design for a workshop using the sections of a prefab. I went to see them and bought the necessary sections with windows. I wanted to be able to swing an eight by four foot sheet of wood round inside the workshop.

The door was to be a garage door which I had to build as it wasn't a standard size. The idea of a double door was to be able to repair a dinghy or build a new one. The cabinets inside were Boulton and Paul's kitchen furniture.

These were arranged so that my main saw bench was opposite an opening window. Ideal for sawing planks of wood. Me on the inside, in the dry, Rene on the outside holding the plank as it came to her and walking backwards as it grew. Keep it straight - you're jamming the saw. Why do you think I had an intercom? The outside of the workshop has crazy paving.

Oh! I did work out the workshop size before the base. That seems to be the back done, now for the front garden which had a hawthorn hedge and rowan trees on a small bank leading down to a grass verge then the main road complete with bus stop.

A high court judge lived in the village and if my mum was standing at the stop he would stop and give her a lift. Anyhow, I got John to remove the hedge, I'm no fool, and other vicious plants. Later I altered the layout. Surprised?

I removed all the standard roses and altered the shape of the drive in. The gate was in the middle and the garage was on the left hand end. They had an odd arrangement where the drive was wide and bent up to the garage taking you away from the front door. On the right of the garage is a white door complete with letter box and bell push. This led into corridor between the bungalow and the garage to a door at the back. The back door.

A path wound round in front of the bay window to a varnished front door. (No letter box.)

As the bungalow protruded forward, this door was at a ninety degree angle to the white door. The result - everybody came to the white door. They normally came in through the indoor passage, into the kitchen stopping to lean up against the peninsular top in the kitchen.

I put a car width drive up to the front door from the white door, with a curve at the beginning, and that stopped the calling at the white door - except our friends who preferred standing by the peninsular nattering.

The left bed looking out from the bungalow was filled with heathers bought in Scotland. We bought them for their flowering time. This meant we had heather in bloom all year and a natural mix of colours. Selected trees were also in the bed. One, with a religious name, before the leaves came on.

One year they had a long rainy spell and the farmers couldn't lift the potatoes in time to plant Daffodils and Tulips. A farmer friend sold the bulbs in aid of the mentally handicapped. We bought a load of them and planted them in the right hand bed, again with trees. This one had grass with the daffodils growing through. The tree in the corner by the bank was a large chestnut. There were bulbs along the bank and masses in the back garden. After we moved a neighbour phoned to say the new people were planting bulbs in the garden. They must have got a shock when they bloomed.





Going back to the back garden, it was mainly bushes and shrubs plus flowering trees. Many came from the garden I bought and a lot of unusual ones via John. All beds had curves. We had a number of oak trees which produced little ones from the dropped acorns.

We hit a drought spell and our garden was suffering. I called on a firm called "Right Rain" the other side of Norwich. I gave them the dimensions of the garden and the height the slope came up to. They suggested running a pipe each side X feet in from the side and the number of sprinklers required. The same as a golf course. The length was three hundred feet with a thirty foot lift. The pump needed was a multi stage one. They suggested I ran one side at a time. I used one of our mains intake boxes. You see them on the front of houses for the electricity or gas intake.

With one time switch to control the pump and one to control the valve on each run - we were in business. The only people with grass. (It rained every night after two o'clock when the water penetrates farther.)

*Nothing is impossible.*

The workshop is working well. Ask the grand children. My Pony stables and dolls houses for the girls and garages for the boys. Glenn had a Night Rider car with an aerial. He wanted the garage door to fly open when the car came out like the one on the television. I had to make the garage tall, to take the aerial, and narrow with doors back and front. The hinges were made from inner tube as they had to swing both ways and return to the centre. Don't throw any broken toys away. Granddad will fix them. A wonderful time for me.

When I built the wardrobes for the smaller of the main bedrooms, I had a gap between them. I built a low bunk bed, the captain's with a little ladder, for Glenn. Later I fitted the room with an en-suite shower, toilet and basin.

Being on the other end from the main bedroom it had a small side window. In the main bedroom the bedroom furniture from Chiesmans fitted a treat. Later on my glassworks friend installed UPVC double glazing in the bedrooms.

While we are in the bungalow - I must let you know what I had been up to. A boat yard friend let me use his band saw and other machines so I helped him when he needed it. He built his own boats. I learned how to use fibreglass. His boat yard was a death trap.

Wander leads down the boat slip with 5 and 15amp 3pin plugs. I said I would rewire it and only charging him for the materials. I used all plastic conduit and weatherproof fittings.

When it came to changing over to the new system I got them to give me half their tools and for them to make do with the other half. I rewired the tools. When they went to their tea break I changed over to the new system and swapped the tools over. When they came back they couldn't believe they didn't have to stop work. Only one problem - the neighbouring boat yard wanted his done the same.

Photography had been a hobby which had to be shelved because of the business. I remember when we were first married I did the developing and printing on a board on the bath. The family banging on the door to get in. Rene complaining that her face flannel made her face sting. I thought about having a proper photographic set up somewhere. I knew of an architect who I could speak to.

The bungalow wasn't built in the conventional way as on an estate. Viewing from the garage end, next to the garage was the kitchen with a bedroom behind it, next came the dining room which had a flat roof. The flat roof had a glass dome, the front of the dining room having a bay window.

Behind the dining room was the lounge again with a bay window looking down the garden, all big rooms. I had the parting wall removed which made an even bigger room.

The next in line was the entrance hall which jutted out to take the front door looking back towards the garage. Continuing along the front was a toilet. Behind the toilet and hall was the bathroom with bath, basin and a walk in shower. (Later on I turned the toilet into an office, as I now had a computer, and moved the toilet into the bathroom.)

Behind them a bedroom with the window on the side next to our neighbour. This was my mum's bedroom. Next, going back towards the garden was the main bedroom with a large bay window and a small window on the side. Not exactly conventional, was it. All bedrooms had wash hand basins.

I thought about extending the garage roof over the flat roof on the dining room to meet up with the roof over the bathroom. Beside the passage from the white front door to the back door was the oil tank, behind a wall and between the garage walls. If I removed the tank I could get a stair in its place to go up to the new rooms up above. I said it would go in the gap with a turn at the bottom and a turn at the top. This would bring you up in the centre of the ridge. Plenty head room. The architect said no.

I went to the builder, who would get the job if all went well, and spoke to the joiner. He said JUST. To me just is all I needed. Stair possible what about the rest. A big rectangle to work on (Remember to "look at the other end"). Across the end I could have two rooms. One a third wide and the other two thirds. Two thirds for developing and printing and one third cine or any other small electrical job. Now the length in the photograph section. All done by computer today.



A long sink made from fibreglass to put the wet dishes in and spare bit at both ends. The sink would be let in the top leaving the over lap to put anything that cropped up on, Better leave a gap under for a small fridge.

Now to the other side. Floor cabinets, all kitchen type, they have a kick at the bottom for your toes, for storage with a top spanning the lot to take the enlarger, timers and printing papers etc. Each room to be wired to take switch sockets and lighting including a darkroom light. The doors two foot six inches in from the outside wall. An extractor fan in the roof of each.

The large room that was left would be a multipurpose room. The grand children, they were multiplying, to play in when it rained, also a long seat by each door which could be used as a bed for the children. (See, the two foot six in from the wall.) No windows. From the outside it still looked like a bungalow.

The oil tank out and gas installed, plans passed, the builder could go ahead. Once the roof was on I could get on with the inside.

The loft will run round the rooms making it easy to work in and store things. I ran boards round close to the bottom of the roof one to take the electric wiring and one for the water pipes. The wiring I did in two circuits, one in white cable and the other in grey. Both the lighting and ring main. I always think of whoever may follow me in years to come.

The hot water pipe was taken from the hot water tank right round the loft back to the tank. Pipes for wash hand basins were dropped down from this ring.

I put a circulating pump in the system. The hot water arrived at the tap or showers in seconds.

When we moved in the shower, being at the other end from the hot water tank, you could almost make a cup of tea waiting for the hot water to arrive. The hot tank lay on its side as there was no room for it to stand up. The heat exchanger is to one side of the tank. It had been installed with the coil at the top so little hot water. I had to turn it round and reconnect it.

We had a contract with the gas board to service the boiler and the system. (When we were away at work mum was left on her own and this was a security in case it broke down. On the inspection of the new system they wanted the pump fitted on the return to the tank and fitted it there. This robbed my photo sink of the hot water pressure.

When they went I put it back. The same system is used in the central heating. I've never found out why they do that, Look at logically. If you are pulling the water back to the boiler/tank any leak in the system will suck in air.

Hence the water hammers in the central heating. The other way round and it will push the air out and you will see where the leak is.

I had to fit a flam vent in the heating system, at the highest point, because not only the knocking, one radiator didn't work. A flam vent is a small unit with a float and a needle valve in it. Air in the pipe, the float lowers releasing the needle valve. When the pump stops the air escapes through the needle valve and fills the water up.

Getting back to the photography - I had started doing cine' 8mm and I got really interested in it. My farmer friend, (Daffodils and tulips), let me do a documentary on potatoes. All the different types and what they are for, such as Smiths crisps or chips, or boiled etc. and the diseases they have. I went from the seed potatoes through ploughing and planting, through aphids and the farmer's friend, Ladybirds, to picking and cooking. I had joined the Association of Amateur Cine Photographers. I learnt a lot from their meetings.

The annual meeting in London to see the results of the contest was good. It was sponsored by the Daily Mail. We were asked to look after the leading lady of the winning film. We were with her for two days and when asked about her roll in the film she told us she did what she was told to do. She found the filming being shot out of sequence was very confusing.

At the dinner, after the showing, I ask her if she was happy with the outcome. She was even more confused. The BBC Look East organised an annual Amateur film contest. The final was held in our cine facilities.

I could project standard and super 8 mm. The 16 mm I asked the BBC to transfer them to video which was viewed downstairs on our T/V. Rene, as usual, provided the food. I found the judges views very interesting and I learned a lot. The trouble with that is when I watch films today, I find what's supposed to be art, would never have been viewed as art by the judges. A lot of film you can't see because it is filmed in the dark.

## **Norwich Branch**

Having seen to the bungalow and the garden. I spoke to Bob about having a branch in Norwich. I heard of a small wholesaler wanting to sell up. Bob left it to me to see to it. I spoke to the owner and met him with Bob. To cut a long story short we came to an agreement. His “warehouse” was an old wartime surface shelter in a council yard. No windows with plenty of locks on the door. “For security”. His stock we wouldn’t give away let alone sell but, we had to sell it in the beginning.

What we wanted was his firms name, Grove Electrical, being known in Norwich. We could change things later, which we did. The first thing was to move on to a trading estate next door to the Comet service department.

Things were slowly creeping on. I shelved out the warehouse, built a trade counter and cleared the place up. The boss man was on an agreement to remain on the firm in the hand over. Originally three years. I had another Ray.

He had been suffering from a cold so, one morning, I told him I was worried about him. I thought for his sake he should quit. He agreed. Phew. He came complete with his employee, Jack. He was out calling on shops mainly selling off the van.

The orders coming in by phone I delivered in Rene’s mini estate. One of the Crayford fellows wanted the job as manager of this new branch. He moved with his family. He saw to the callers and other things. I did the stock control. I found we had run out of one make of fuses and had loads of another make.

I was working from the invoices. I spoke to Jack about it. He told me that they sold one and booked it out as the other because of the price. They had always done that.

We got another lad from Crayford and Jack realised he wasn't able to work to our system and left. Phew and phew again. We took on a young lady rep and things improved, including the sales and we were selling our type of goods as well. We changed the name to R&B Star (Electrical Wholesalers) Ltd. I was called out one night as the warehouse was on fire. Petrol had been poured through our letter box and set on fire. A lot of the petrol landed on the burglar alarm and set it on fire. Fortunately this brought the police out who called the fire brigade. No structural damage just smoke, smut and water. The police thought it was a dissatisfied customer. The door was alongside Comet's service depot, so they thought it was a case of mistaken identity.

I brought a van down from Norwich to Crayford weekly transferring stock both ways. On one visit, using a V/W van, the accelerator cable snapped on the way home. The engine being in the back it made things difficult. I had to coax it along. I couldn't go to the warehouse as it was in a valley. I would have got in but not out. We had now passed midnight and in Wroxham where I was stopped by the police.

I explained the trouble and they told me to drive on. I asked them how I was going to get over Wroxham Bridge, a humpbacked bailey bridge as I was hoping to pick up speed on the slight slope this side.

When I reached the bridge they were waiting for me and pushed me over. There are a lot of nice people living in Norfolk. I first crossed that bridge about 1950. It was put there temporary to be replaced. It's still there. Sometime afterwards, because I had moved, it meant a director from the firm had to visit the Norwich warehouse. Later Bob came to an arrangement with Derek, the manager, to take over the branch.

During our time in Roseberry Ernie, our accountant, told me to buy a more expensive car. I told him I already had a Mercedes and was happy with it. Ernie told me to buy a Rolls Royce for tax purposes. I didn't want a status symbol and bought a new Bentley only to find out it was a bigger status symbol. My mum asked me if I would ever be satisfied with new or better things I was buying.

When I took home a plastic carrier bag with our name on it she asked me to take some home for her to send to her brothers, sisters and friends in Scotland. I had become mister Tesco.

We had a firms outing to the Isle of Wight and Rene and I went some days earlier to check things out. We were in the queue, at Carrisbrooke Castle, to get admission tickets when one of the staff rushed in shouting "we've got a new Bentley in the car park". Everybody was looking round, including us, to see who it belonged to. Nobody suspected us.

On a holiday, from Luton to Madeira, we found our room to be over the kitchen although we had booked a balcony with sea view. I went down to the reception and had a word with the manager.

He apologised and said we would be moved in the morning. The following morning - no move, another promise. The next morning we were moved to a pool side room. We could have room service free. A toffee nosed holiday member with us asked how I got it. I said I just asked - no extra cost. He held parties, for the other members of our group, on the patio. We were held up waiting for him on departure while he was arguing about his bill. As we passed him at Luton we gave him a toot and "Queens Wave".

In 1987 Rene and I moved back to Kent. A village called Postling outside Folkestone. We wanted to be nearer the family. Our 15 years in Horning were marvellous. I could relax there although I seemed to be working harder.

I always believed, and still do, that hard work never killed anybody but stress will. I believe I proved it. (We sold the Bentley before we moved.)





#### **No.4 Court House, Postling Court, Kent**

The Postling House was part of a converted farm. Back to where I began. A bit different inside though, with water, electricity, and Propane gas all laid on. We were next to the Church grave yard.

The residents were quiet but the bells were noisy which we enjoyed. Water came out the bottom of the hill, which was behind us. Back at home with the hills and water out the bottom. Again I was able to work on the property and garden. I had trouble building a workshop. All because it was a listed building.

They wanted the roof to be pitched towards the house. I said that would make a valley gutter and we had overhanging trees from the churchyard. The reply I got was - we know. Ron had started on his own so I called on him. We made the whole roof a gutter.



We were on the end of the barn. That had been the shop. The conversion was very good. An “L” shaped lounge leading into the dining room. The dining room, with a gap for the entrance hall and stair, a room which I turned into a utility room with sink, washing machine and freezer etc. On to a downstairs shower room and on to a nice size bed-sitter for my mum. She had a nice outlook to the entrance of the community, also handy for the toilet next door so she didn’t have to go upstairs. Through the wall was the workshop. The other side a passage, kitchen and breakfast room. The passage led, through a door, into the workshop, all very handy for me.

Up stairs we had two main sized bedrooms, a small bedroom and bathroom. All with sloping ceilings. I fitted fixed in wardrobes to follow the ceilings.

The garage was a double open fronted farm cart shed which had a door into the workshop. All very handy. Our address - No. 4 Court House, Postling Court. Sounded good.

We had a listed phone box, a listed letter box and a village hall, No shop or bus service. We had to get the car out to change our mind. We were there six years when my mum died. We decided it would be better to move into Folkestone as we were now sixty six.

We went down to the harbour to look at some fishermen flats over a long garage. From the back window you could almost touch the cliff. The rooms were quite small. When we left I asked Rene if she noticed anything odd about the place.

There were no doors on the rooms and they used narrow beds. You couldn't open and close the doors with the furniture they had in there.

**We left and went up the hill and along the Lees.**



They had just built a block of flats there looking out to sea.

**The view from the kitchen window.**

I said this is the sort of flat we should think about. We then went for the car which was parked outside the estate agents office. This seemed a coincidence so I went in and asked for the details.

Just what we could do with. Large lounge, with one wall nearly all glass sliding doors facing the sea.. This was on the first floor. Easy to escape in case of fire. (Somebody burnt the toast early one morning and all the upper floor residents were puffing and blowing to get their breath back.)

One large en-suite bedroom and one medium bedroom plus a bathroom which gave us one each.

To add to this a large kitchen. An MFI bridge over the bed head with wardrobes either side. A DIY wardrobe along the wall at the foot of the bed with mirror doors. A smaller built in one and a Porto Cabin for Rene's clothes in the car park. The garage was in the basement and stretched the length of the building. The Address - 16 Carlton Lees, the Lees, Folkestone. We were there 16 years.

We found we were free to do what we wanted to do. In the past we had various holidays to different countries. We had to go to Mallorca partly to do with business. We were so taken on with the place we bought an apartment there. When we could manage it we went for a couple of weeks in the winter. We moved twice to more suitable apartments. I was able to work on them which suited me. On the last one I took modified kitchen units out. They were MFI flat pack that I modified to the Spanish system. With the cartons turned inside out I told the customs officer, in broken Spanish, that it was wood for the kitchen.

He muttered something which I took for O.K. and passed me through. My knowledge of Spanish was limited to food and builders merchants.

A Brit we knew out there told me I spoke in the past tense. I told him they deliver in the present tense which suited me. We had arranged for a cousin to have a holiday. When we arrived at the apartment our electricity had been cut off. That was it, we sold up and rented.

We got to the stage when we couldn't book any holidays because we seemed to be taking it in turn to have medical problems. It was decided that it would be better to move to an assisted living complex. Laurel Court, built by McCarthy and Stone, in Cheriton which is part of Folkestone. This is where I am writing this autobiography.

I have just remembered the time I painted the floor in Kennet Road. Some months afterwards the paint was flaking up. I heard the electrical maintenance contractor for Atlas Paints in Erith at the counter. I asked him to have a look. He told me he was on the way to the factory and would ask one of the chemists if he would have a look at it. A short time afterwards I received a phone call from the chemist asking if he could come at 11 o'clock. I said yes and he turned up, took some scratchings and said he would let me know.

He phoned at 3 o'clock and told me he found the trouble and was sending me X gallons of solvent and X drums of paint. I had to sweep the floor, don't get it wet, and apply the solvent with my roller. Let it dry overnight and apply the finish the following morning. Let him know in a couple of months how it's going.

The job was perfect and I forgot about phoning him back. When I remembered I phoned him and apologised for not calling him sooner.

I thanked him and told him I hadn't received the invoice. He said he was the boss and I wouldn't get one because since he dealt with us they never lost a days production and it was his way of saying thank you.

## **Conclusion**

Looking back there were good times and bad times the same as anybody else. We stuck together and supported each other especially losing our two boys. It is something you have to experience to understand.

As far as I am concerned, I achieved almost everything I set out to do. I firmly believe work and gaining experience is the only way to success. I have been told I was lucky to which I reply – try working 25 hours a day 8 days a week and you will be surprised the luck you get.

At 6 or 7 years old, when I found we had an electric light, I said I wanted to put electric lights in people's houses. When I heard Henry Hall's music – I wanted to play music. I did both. In the army they sent me to Northampton Collage of Technology where I was taught:-

**Nothing is Impossible.**

**Most successful?**

**I got my Family Business**

Bob owns and runs the business assisted by his eldest son, Andrew, who is now a phd. (He lets me call him Sir Doctor.) and his young son Struan together with:-

Brians eldest son Glenn and his eldest daughter, who is an accountant, and who is bringing up a family at the moment. Added to them is Andrew Sharpe who is Bobs son-in - law which equals 1 son and 5 grand children.

Best of all Rene has put up with me through good and bad times. After a panic at work a customer said to Brian your dad never loses his cool. Brian said try coming home with him.

Driving along in my Bentley I passed the shop boy, on his moped, who took over from me. I gave him a toot and wave. We met up at the warehouse. He asked me what shortcut I'd taken.

We went back over the times we had when we had to work in the cooker workshop. Under health and safety the cleaners we used would be banned. Poor old Percy sitting by his coke fire smoking roll ups coughing and spluttering.

Getting each other stuck in the dumb waiter by pulling on the brake between floors, which we used to transport the cleaned cooker parts from the cleaning floor to the assembly floor. It was only just possible for one to get inside the lift all hunched up. The tricks we played on Len who was in charge.

He mentioned how the business had grown and said I'd never altered over the years whereas another shop boy, who followed him and never qualified, now works in an office and speaks with a posh accent. I told him I will **never** alter.

**Please turn over**



**This book is dedicated to  
my Dad who gave his life for his  
family and never saw how I got on.**



I am so pleased to know that you are celebrating your Diamond Wedding anniversary on 16th April, 2009. I send my congratulations and best wishes to you on such a special occasion.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be "Elizabeth II", written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath.

Mr. and Mrs. William Robertson

**16 th April 1949**







**This photo was taken at Tara's wedding in May 2003  
I don't have trouble with my hair falling in my eyes.**

**Addendum on next page**

## Addendum

When we were just getting our new house in order I was called up for the Korean War. I had to go to Colchester. Z reservists were available for life. The workshop had a Mechanist Sergeant Major as the workshop officer and I was the NCO plus an assortment of tradesmen.

The MSM was a fair ground proprietor and wasn't very pleased at being called up again. He was easy going and left most things to me. The barrack blocks were back to back. We were the only ones in the back. When it came to the roll call the first morning the MSM told us not to make a noise. Workshop and MT drivers don't have studs in there boots so we could come to attention quietly.

We had to go to a field where a Bedford 15 cwt truck was lying on its side. We were supposed to be under fire and had to recover the truck. The lads did it in no time. It bouncing as it landed on its wheels. The REME corporal said that was no good. We should have had a check rope on it. They showed us how. To cut a long story short. Their check rope was the wrong way round so it tightened instead of slackening as the truck came up. The super structure on the truck was broken and torn and they pulled one of the petrol tanks off. I said to the corporal – you realise you are all dead. The noise and time you took would have allowed the enemy to have come from miles away. It didn't dawn on him the lads had done it all before.

They then sent us, the Workshop, to Thetford for manoeuvres. Workshops don't do manoeuvres. It was pitch black. We had to dig a trench to join up with the officers, already dug for them. The other end of our trench accidentally. In the dark, hit a stream and flooded the officers trench. After a month they sent us home to be sent for later. The only notification I got, a long while later, was to tell me I had been transferred to the REME during the reorganization. Was Fred Carno included???