

My Life at Crabtree's - Andrew Noakes



Andrew Noakes

My life at Crabtree's started in February 1965 at the age of 23. I parked my invalid carriage near to 'Gate A' in Beacon Street and with the aid of my stick walked to the gatehouse where the gateman, Les Barber, dressed in black commissionaires uniform with his army medals proudly displayed greeted me.

I enquired if there were any vacancies in the factory, he did not know but directed me to the personnel office a short distance up a flight of stairs. A sign on the door said 'knock and wait' which I did. After a short period the personnel officer, Miss Kath Rodgers came to the door and invited me into her office.

I explained that I had been employed by the Walsall Electrical Company for the past six years, involved in the manufacture of electrical measuring instruments and transformers and was now looking for a change of work. She explained that there were no sitting jobs available at the present time but telephoned the Control Gear Assembly foreman to come to the office to meet me. A few minutes passed, then in rushed a small man in a white overall.

"Andrew" he said what are you doing here?

It was Mr White who was a close neighbour in Aldridge and I used to play football with his son when we were young. He said that there were no jobs available but to come with him down to Control Gear Assembly to see the type of work performed and see if there could be a chance of work somewhere, so off we set. Mr White although small walked very quickly I could not keep up with him so he slowed down. Eventually we reached the Control Gear Assembly it was a large shop with hundreds of employees, mainly girls, involved in all types of assembly work. In the centre of the shop were a row of test stations where all products underwent final test before being packed. Mr White introduced me to Geoff Mills chargehand of the G10 Relay production line and after a short discussion the two men agreed with a little reorganisation there would be a soldering job available for me. I had done this type of work in my previous job so after completing the necessary job application form I was taken on.

Working at Crabtree's was to be the happiest time of my life.

On my first day I arrived at 8am to be met by Mr White who had reserved a special car parking space within the factory and right outside my place of work. This was to be my personal space for the next 28 years.

My place on the G10 line was waiting, and after a short period of supervision I was soldering metal tags onto coils fitted into the relay. Geoff Mills was very friendly with me as were all members of the G10 line. The first day went really well and fast and after a week or so I began to get to know many of the people around me working on other products. The B15 Contactors and Starters was the largest production line, thousands were produced every week there were also push buttons, pilot lights, limit switches and the largest product in the Crabtree range, J Contactors and Starters. Most of these products had coils fitted and there was a large coil winding section at the end of the shop. With such a large workforce involved in different types of assembly good organisation was essential.

Mr White was always rushing around the assembly lines making sure there were no problems, and if there were he would go into overdrive to eliminate them. He had a shop foreman Joe Moore who was invested with the responsibility of ensuring the two 10 minute tea breaks were not exceeded.

At 9.55am each morning around 10 food trolleys would be seen rushing from the



Kath Rodgers



Jack White

works canteen laden with all sorts of hot sandwiches for different destinations in the works. Joe Moore would ensure everyone was in line to meet the trolley at the main entrance to the shop at 10am. A bell went at 10.10am to signal restart with Joe doing the rounds. The same was repeated at 3.00pm with a fantastic collection of cakes and jam doughnuts which were extremely popular.

There were about 2,000 employees at Lincoln Works and there was a big family atmosphere in many of the shops especially the ones with a large female presence. I remember when it was someone's 21st birthday, and in Control Gear that was quite often. At 12noon work would stop for around one minute in the section where the birthday girl was and all workmates would bang their tools on the workbench and sing happy birthday. This would have a contagious effect all around the shop and would end up in a real din much to the embarrassment of the birthday girl! This was affectionally termed as "banging'em off!"

In 1971 the G10 range was superseded with the introduction of the new T range. I was transferred to the repair shop with Norman Simonite charge hand with a staff of eight. It was a small self contained department below the assembly shop. Here we would receive production coils in need of rectification and also any customer returns that needed repair. *(This was in the days when a repair service was offered rather than today's throw away society)* This shop was of particular interest to Mr Jack Crabtree as it gave a measure of product performance both on the shop floor and in the field. He would make regular visits to inspect returns and on occasions have a cup of tea. We often shared an amusing tale or two. A further two years passed and I was on the move again back upstairs to the J range section with Jack Thomas charge hand. Here I was responsible for producing nameplates that would be fitted to pushbuttons in metal enclosures.

Over the next ten years I had several further job changes one was located near the parts stores. There was a door in the corner of the shop near the stores which was always kept locked. It was visited fairly often by Mr Crabtree usually with visitors to the company and Mr White. This attracted my attention and I asked Mr White what was behind the door? He explained that it was the Crabtree museum and out-of-bounds to everyone except Mr Crabtree and the board of directors. I asked if I could have permission to see inside. A few days later he came to me with the key and my wish was granted. We entered the museum and I was amazed to see all the ruby glass lampshades, light switches from the late 1800's and all sorts of plugs and sockets all immaculately presented in glass showcases. It must have been the best and most complete display of electrical switch gear in the country. I was told it was started in 1926 by John Ashworth Crabtree (founder of the company). Mr White had to drag me out I could have spent the rest of the day in there it was truly amazing and left a lasting impression on my mind.

Mr White retired from the company in 1982 and my work continued in Control Gear Assembly moving into the inspection department and then onto the coil winding section. I must have had more experience than anyone in the production of control gear.

In the late 80's I noticed a lot more activity in the museum and took the opportunity to find out what was happening. I was told the museum was being dismantled some items were going to the Birmingham Science Museum others to the Walsall Museum, the remaining items were to be scrapped. I was amazed again,



Joe Moore



Jack Thomas

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and for the wrong reasons this time. I could not see all these products that had been so lovingly collected and displayed being scrapped. I asked Bob Glover the technical director if I could have the products that were being scrapped. He agreed and arranged for them to be delivered to my home in Aldridge where I dedicated my garage to Crabtree's.

In 1993 I was presented with a gold watch for 25 years service. My presentation took place in Lincoln Works reception between Mr Crabtree's famous light switches carved into the two newel posts of the staircase. Later that year I was confined to a wheel chair and two years later I retired from the company.



Andrew (second left) with other members of staff who in 1993 received their gold watches for 25 years service.



My retirement has given me the time to get my Crabtree museum into good order. I had showcases made and started collecting memorabilia from Lincoln Works as reorganisation occurred. When the works finally closed in 1997 I made several visits to the empty site thanks to Brian Barker last man in charge. It was really depressing to see the empty spaces where only a few years earlier had been great activity and urgency. But it was like a magnet to me, a place that had meant so much and so many friendships made. I collected yet more memorabilia including catalogues, adverts, old share certificates signs, all manner of things that would have been lost in the demolition of the works in 1999.

The year after the demolition of Lincoln Works The Crabtree Society was formed and I became a founder member and keeper of the societies archives.

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Note from The Crabtree Society

The Crabtree Society are indebted to Andrew for his diligence and foresight in collecting all the memorabilia from Lincoln Works. This collection will remain as a lasting tribute to the company.

Without Andrew's collection it would not have been possible to provide such a complete story of J.A.Crabtree & Co. Ltd. of Walsall.

Thank you Andrew.



Andrew meets Susan Crabtree at the Society AGM in 2001



Always on the lookout for old Crabtree products. This magnificent collection of brass dome switches were discovered at Autolycus, an antique shop in Bishop's Castle, Shropshire. They were duly purchased by Andrew and are now part of his collection.

