

Marketing Matters - Allan Preston



In 1959 at the age of 14 and in my last year at “Wolverhampton Road Secondary Modern School for Boys” I was considering what life had in store for me as a wage earner.

In those days school offered a great opportunity to learn practical skills in metalwork, woodwork, art and science. I enjoyed making things like boats, brass bowls, steel poker, screwdriver, centre punch and probably most memorable activity dissecting rats in Mr Jones’s science class. So with the emphasis on making things most boys left school to work in manufacturing, and there was lots of choice.

Walsall and the surrounding area was a power house of manufacturing industries particularly in leather and metal trades. Such large companies as Rubery Owen, F.H.Lloyd, Guest, Keen and Nettlefolds (GKN), Patent Shaft Steel Works, Garringtons and Talbot Stead all offered apprenticeships and all were only a bike ride away.

As a keen railway enthusiast I thought a job on the railway was for me but with parental guidance an engineering apprenticeship was considered more appropriate. My mother had worked for J.A.Crabtree & Co.Ltd. between 1926–1938 leaving the company when she married my father. She said it was a good company with a reputation for high quality products which offered a good apprenticeship scheme. So on a day in June 1960 I presented myself to the personnel office to obtain an application form to join the apprenticeship scheme. I completed the form on the spot and a few days later received a letter in the post inviting me to attend an interview with the apprentice training officer Mr Dickson.

I presented myself at the company with collar and tie and entered through the oak revolving door which lead into the company’s imposing oak panelled reception. I was asked to sit and wait for Mr Dickson’s secretary to arrive. I sat in trepidation of my first job interview next to JAC’s switches carved in the staircase newel posts. Within a few minutes a very attractive young lady descended the staircase and asked if I was Allan Preston. She took me upstairs from the comparative solitude of the reception into the main office corridor with lots of people in offices and the noise of typewriters and telephones all around. After a walk of several hundred yards we reached Mr Dickson’s office.

Mr Dickson was a nice friendly man who immediately made me feel at ease and even offered me a cup of tea from his silver tray. He explained the technician apprenticeship scheme was a combination of college, office and workshop based training and that after completion of the scheme you were able to choose a job most suited to your skills and interest. The only problem for me was that at 15 I was too young to join the apprenticeship scheme, so, I was offered the position of a probationary apprentice for the first year. This involved operating the print machine in the drawing office whilst attending Walsall and Staffordshire Technical College three nights each week. If at the end of the first year I passed the exams and received a favourable report from the Mr Middleton, drawing office manager, I would be taken into the Crabtree apprenticeship scheme.

A few days later I received a formal letter from Mr Dickson offering me the job and to start at 8.45am on Monday 8th August 1960.

On my first day I met Barry Goodwin who had also been taken on as a probationary apprentice and we were both assigned to the drawing office print machine under the supervision of Mr Martin. This first year was to prove a great education and experience in working life.



Mr Dickson



Barry Goodwin

The dye line print machine used light sensitive paper and ammonia and could be smelled immediately on entering the office from the tool room staircase. The machine was busy most of the time producing prints of new products and product modifications. These prints then needed to be circulated around the various manufacturing departments and offices involved in its production and costing. It was a large factory with many departments and our mentor and guide in the early days was Keith Watkins who at the age of 21 had just finished his apprenticeship. Keith seemed to know everyone in the company and walked around at Olympic speed clicking his fingers as we sped from department to department. There was always a little time for a social chat in places. Keith would make up for lost time by ascending and descending the many staircases around the works two at a time. The fire escape at the end of the office block was his speciality where holding onto the steel hand rails he could lurch himself over 9 steps in one single leap.



Keith Watkins

The twelve months probation was soon over and having received good reports from both the college and Mr Middleton, Barry and I joined the Crabtree apprenticeship scheme along with nine new apprentices. In September 1961 we all started a full time 32 weeks basic workshop practices course at Walsall College. This course was especially constructed by the college for Crabtree first year apprentices and along with academic lessons involved using lathes, milling machines, shaper, grinder, welding equipment and of course workbench tools. On completion of the course we all returned to the works to start our individual apprenticeships.

The apprenticeship involved working 3 months in each works and office department. This led to many friendships some even with girls. Many of which last to this very day in the form of marriage, here are just four from our apprenticeship group

Kate & Jon Rutter - Pauline & Malcolm Waring
Margaret & Allan Preston - June & Barry Goodwin

The apprenticeship lasted for 5 years and at the age of 21 I went into the circuit breaker drawing office under Tony Marshall. This was a small drawing office dedicated to the design of special panels and distribution equipment for building projects. One large project that I well remember was Western General Hospital, Hull.

After a short time in the DO Jim Robbins the circuit breaker sales manager had received designs for the Crabtree exhibition stand at Electrex 1968 at Earls Court. He was not happy with the layout and asked me to spend a day or so to make alternative proposals. My design was accepted, the stand was built and I had the pleasure of attending the exhibition. This was a most enjoyable experience working with the sales force, spending time on the stand in London and staying in the 4 star Kensington Close Hotel.



Eleven apprentices, Allan Preston, Paul Griffiths, Malcolm Waring, Jon Rutter, Albert Cartmail, Peter Everitt, Joe Morris, Tony Barber, Barry Goodwin, Roy Atkins and Jim Parkinson.



Tools made at college on the 32 weeks basic workshop course.

Marketing Matters - Allan Preston



W. Leslie Jones

This lead to me being asked if I would like to join the exhibitions department under the supervision of Mr W.Leslie Jones. I grabbed the opportunity with both hands. This was the creative side of the business with photographic studio, commercial artists, copywriters and mailing section. There was even a mobile display unit which toured the country. One of my first assignments was to accompany Mr Jones who was arranging a series of circuit breaker lectures around the UK. I remember visiting a large hotel in Southampton Row, London to make the arrangements for the lecture and, as was usual, the hotel manager asked if we would like to take lunch (compliments of the hotel). The answer was always yes thank you, imagine my surprise when Mr Jones sampling the white wine rejected it on it being too warm! I learned a lot quickly from Mr Jones who was a member of the MCC and had a presence in any circumstance.



Madge Wheeldon

On agreeing the schedule for the lecture tour, invitations were mailed by Madge Wheeldon who was secretary to both Mr Crabtree and Mr Jones. Madge was always busy in the office Mr Jones was very demanding and a stickler for accuracy and detail. He was always immaculately dressed and drove a two tone Zephyr Zodiac convertible. His very distinguishable footsteps along the office corridors made lesser mortals keep their heads down. Yes I learned a lot from Mr W.Leslie Jones!!

Sadly Leslie passed away in 1972 at the time of the Ever Ready take over, and I was consolidated into the Publicity Department under the direction of Tony Lloyd (an ex-Crabtree apprentice).

Here in the publicity department I joined Cedric Sleigh and the team which included Ray Wynn, Paul Biddle, Derek MacNulty, Bill Davis, Graham Oakes, Eileen Wilson and the ladies of the mailing room. Our first joint project was Crabtree Contact Britain, an exhibition train that toured the country in the Autumn of 1972 (see page 143).



Cedric Sleigh



Ray Wynn



Derek MacNulty



Paul Biddle



Bill Davis



Graham Oakes



Eileen Wilson

From now on being part of basically an in-house advertising agency the work expanded into sales conferences, exhibitions, catalogues and print, advertising and press relations. There was a real buzz in the department at the time of the annual sales conference, lots to be done - booking venue, conference theme, conference music, invites, presentations, entertainment, the regional sales presentations all added to an air of excitement and expectation. Exhibitions also created much activity working with exhibition contractors, and works departments in bringing new products to the market. There were many overseas exhibitions in the Middle and Far East and the Hanover Fair which the company exhibited at for several years in the 1970s but by far the most important exhibition on the calendar was Electrex.



Crabtree stand at Electrex 76

Marketing Matters - Allan Preston

Electrex was a bi-annual exhibition and since it's inception in 1953 had been staged at Earls Court. This changed in 1976 when the NEC opened in Birmingham and Electrex 76 was one of the first exhibitions to be staged at the new National Exhibition Centre. At its height in the late 80's the exhibition was attracting over 50,000 visitors.

After a succession of management changes in 1986 I was promoted to marketing communications manager, under the direction of John Ellis sales & marketing director who had joined the company from JCB. John was a very dynamic marketer introducing "industrial theatre" to the company. With his uncompromising style many new initiatives were introduced the most visible being robotic dancers and magicians at the sales conference and at Electrex. This added excitement to the Crabtree stand not only for the visitors to the exhibition but also to the organisers who on many occasions called me to their office to complain that visitors were blocking the aisles whilst watching our performances – such is the price of success!

I continued working until 1996 when the company was subject to a management buy-out and many people were made redundant. Carl Kimberley (ex-Crabtree apprentice) continued where I left off and is still working for the company as publicity manager.



Graham Clark joins department as display technician



Carl Kimberley in the driving seat



Electrex 92 - The Crabtree Girls and James Hunt editor of Electrical Products Journal



Jenny Smith PR manager presents New York holiday prize won at Electrex 94



Electrex 88 - The Crabtree Experience, Shahid Malik and Lisa



The Sales force at Electrex 88 - The Crabtree Experience