

Life in the Drawing Office - Keith Watkins



Keith Watkins

Recollections of the Switch & Control Gear Drawing Office (SW & CG DO) 1955 to early 60s.

I started in the SW & CG DO at the age of 15 on Monday 31st Oct 1955. The newspaper headlines for that day stick in my memory, Princess Margaret and Group Captain Townsend had formally announced the end of their relationship.

The DO was on the top floor of the old office block towards the corner of Princes Avenue and Beacon Street. I remember dark green lino, cream and green walls and stark ceiling lamps with chains hanging down. Large and draughty metal-framed windows took up most of the external wall space. The chief draughtsman Ted Middleton had his own office partitioned off.

To produce a production drawing the draughtsman would draw on to paper with a pencil. To make a more permanent record and to allow multiple copies to be produced by the dye-line printing process, this drawing was traced in indian ink on to treated transparent linen. From this tracing prints were made for circulation to production departments.

Draughtsmen sat on tall stools at flat drawing boards with a T square and a setsquare. Each board had its own adjustable metal lamp, with these lit on dark winter afternoons the DO took on a cosy atmosphere. Apart from electric lighting and dye-line method of printing the drawings, I would not think DO practice had changed much in 200 years. No one would have comprehended that 40 years later the DO would contain only one little used drawing board and a host of computer screens.

Ted Middleton was in charge of the SW & CG DO divided into its two sections. Control Gear (CG) and the newly emerging Circuit Breaker (CB) section. Accessories DO was a separate office under Walter Morgan and Ernie Thacker.

Under Ted Middleton were, as I remember, the following:

Designer:	Harold Forrest.
Tracers:	Margaret Howes, Mary Jeffries, Jean Handley, Sheila Owen and Margaret Beech.
Senior Draughtsmen:	Jack Fisher (CG) and Vic Hewitt (CB).
Draughtsmen:	Carl Bullock, Tom Pritchard, John Littler, Peter Holford and Colin Brighton.
Typists:	Jill Whitehouse and Molly Flaherty
Print Machine:	Ron Durbridge
Office boy:	Keith Watkins.



Ernie Thacker



Harold Forrest



Jack Fisher



Vic Hewitt

I worked under Ron Durbridge (Mr D), he ran the print machine and compiled the part schedules. Ex RAF catering corps he was a touch crusty and would stand no nonsense but I grew to like him. Never have I seen anyone who could peel an orange in seconds as he could.

The print machine (for producing copies of drawings) was quite a fearsome thing by today's standards. In a primitive fashion it produced photographs of the tracings on to light sensitive paper. Each morning, carbon sticks had to be fitted into the two carbon arc lamps inside the machine, a hand-blackening job. Also a clean, dry linen had to be fitted on the roller that dried the prints after developing.

As office boy I followed on from Colin Brighton operating the print machine, filing and distributing the prints around the factory. Soon I was joined by Jim Capewell who, years later, went on to become a works department manager.

Some afternoons we would buy from the tea trolley huge jam and cream buns made by Mr Topliss the canteen chef, the canteen then did a full range of robust meals. Together with carpenters, plumbers, painters and maintenance men, Lincoln Works had an air of self-sufficiency. Everyone seemed to smoke and a regular errand was to fetch Woodbines, Players or Senior Service from Sid Birch in Control Gear Stores. A fair amount of 'underground' trading took place in the factory, besides tobacco confectionery was sold, motorcar and watch repairs were available and other little enterprises.

At the head of the office was the chief draughtsman's office, outside sat the secretary / typists; Jill Whitehouse and Molly Flaherty. Molly was Irish, dark haired, charming and tempestuous. Also adjacent to the office sat Harold Forrest, designer, with his metal framed half-moon glasses. An elderly, gentle, inoffensive man his engineering experience went back before the First World War to the Barrow shipyards.

Along the windows ran a row of drawing boards, tracers at the end where the chief draughtsman's office was, then the draughtsmen. Ted Middleton was rather strict about separating the boys from the girls, any relationship in the office was frowned upon. The office Christmas party was a cause for segregation, unlike the more riotous affairs that in the 50s and 60s took place in the works and in other office departments. Control Gear Sales parties were extremely popular where Bob Millard had a much more easy going outlook.

In the days when few people drove cars overindulgence at Christmas was common.

The first time I had too much to drink was the Christmas when I was 16 years old and was given liberal amounts of whisky in CG assembly. The fact that I had drunk far too much hit me as I cycled down Denmark Hill with Roy Spencer on the way home.

Anyway, I got home and was admonished. After the festivities it fell to Jack Speed (chief cashier) to tour the offices after closing to turf out those (usually couples) still left.

About 1956 the new parallel motion drawing boards, with fixed straight edge, started to arrive. They were mounted on cast iron brackets made in the Crabtree foundry enabling the slope of the board to be adjusted. About this time too SW & CG drawing office changed position a little moving to the end of the block with the chief draughtsman's office being just above the old Crabtree sign. The accessories drawing office moved too and was now positioned adjacent to us across the corridor, some early open planning took place and the partitions to the corridor were removed.

Draughtsmen, like computer programmers today, were in demand and there was a



Bob Millard



Jack Speed

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steady turnover. One of the new arrivals was Bob Bayliss in his twenties and recently married. With him, the typists and the tracers I had hilarious times. Bob was soon to acquire an old Ford 8 and it seemed that half the spares for it came from the Crabtree maintenance department. As office boy I was often down there cajoling and trading for nuts, bolts and bits of metal for this car.

After a year on the print machine I was given a DO apprenticeship, I think the last one since these allowed no practical experience in works departments. Some years later I was allowed 12 months of workshop experience. Besides still helping on the print machine I was now doing simple component drawings from the designer's and draughtsman's sketches. Ted Middleton instilled into me the importance of plain, clear letters and numbers.

Two of the designers Ted Coleman and Gordon Jelley together with technical director Tom Wintle had offices on the other side of the factory making communications difficult. To incorporate all design and draughting in one modern unit plans were laid in 1958 for a new design block to be built in Lincoln Road. Within easy reach of it would be the allied departments of the chemical and electrical laboratories and the model shop.

Under Ted Middleton I did the furniture and equipment layouts for the new offices, he had the tracers working on an interior colour scheme, this new venture was a matter of great pride to him. Whilst

it was under construction he would send me over to check on things. I was a sort of 18-year-old clerk of works. You can imagine the effect this had on the elder and experienced company tradesmen working on the building. I was severely ragged and on one occasion tied up.

By October 1959 we were ready for the move. The ground floor of the new block was given over to extra factory space. On the first floor were the technical director and designer's offices; the top floor carried the CG, CB and accessories drawing offices together with the chief draughtsman's office and a smart new print machine.

The walls were almost entirely of large metal-framed windows of clear glass – a heat conservation nightmare. I believe Mr Crabtree bought the frames as a cheap job lot. Beyond the factory there was a view across the Arboretum and over fields up to the old airfield and the Beacon. Having been used to frosted glass, to have such a view was a novelty. As with many glass buildings of this period it was incredibly hot in the summer. When opened it was a showplace, much of the furniture had been made in the Crabtree carpenters shop. I seem to remember the colour scheme finally approved as being light grey lino, yellow walls and blue ceiling.

Outside Tom Wintle's office were showcases filled with prototype models of Crabtree products made in the model shop. He had a carpeted double sized office as befitted his status as technical director. Rather tall, a touch corpulent with a deep voice and a good head of white hair he was a man of presence, every inch a director.

One of the jobs that new intakes to the apprenticeship scheme were put to was to work on the DO print machine. In 1961 the running of the print department was taken on by ex military man Jack Parsons. A great character with a penchant for



Tom Wintle

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comic verse and horse racing he was well liked by the lads who worked for him.

At one point for some reason there were four lads about 16 years old working for him in the print department. In order of their arrival these four took on the titles of Senior Senior, Junior Senior, Senior Junior and the lowest of the low Junior Junior. Having achieved the rank of Senior Senior the holder kept the title permanently. Thus today Allan Preston is still addressed as the Senior Senior.

Others will have different views, but for me, I remember the fifties and sixties as happy times with a busy factory – before the coming of Ever Ready. The company seemed to reach its zenith in 1962 with the Queen's visit. With Mr Crabtree in his office at Lincoln Works there was a feeling of security and permanence.



Senior Designers 1971 - Fred Watkins: Accessories, Frank Ridge: Control Gear, Bernard Perry: Circuit Breakers.



Tracers 1971 - Bev Jackson (Squasher), Shan Collins (Dango), Janet Worrall (Ju-Ju)

