

“In 1942 money was short, so my mother decided that I had to make my own way in the world and the most likely local facility was the Dockyard. In those days the Dockyard was an institution that would last forever and the Civil Service a secure, respected, pensioned vocation. It had its own examinations for entry and promotion, whilst the Dockyard School was considered a university of technical knowledge.. I was therefore to go to a prep school that specialised in the required entry examinations. My mother went to see a Mr Payne who was head master at Mile End House School known to all as Oliver’s. Don’t ask me why but it was (the building still is for that matter) right opposite Charles Dickens’ birthplace in the old Commercial Road and could have connections with some of his stories I suppose. Anyway, the term fee was £4.0s.0d i.e. £12 a year and Mr Payne thought that I would need to be at the school for a year and a half before I was ready to sit the Dockyard Entrance Exam. There were only two chances to sit because of age restrictions, and usually about 200 candidates. My mother could not afford that and insisted that I took the exam at the first opportunity, just two terms away. Mr Payne finally agreed as long as I was not an official entrant from Oliver’s so my expected failure need not be recorded in the local press.

For two terms another pupil in the same position, and I, studied hard at school and in the evenings. Helping each other we became friends. School was brutal, teachers used canes of various sizes and any mistake or other fault was punished on the spot with whacks across the hands or one’s back made with some ferocity. I saw one boy thrown threw the flimsy wood partition that separated the classrooms. That was how it was then and most private schools were the same more or less. Oliver’s was a ‘crammer’ school and parents accepted that ‘thrash’ and ‘success’ were synonymous. I sat the exam in April 1943 and in July heard I had passed in the first 15 on the Portsmouth list, only beaten by one other pupil from ‘Olivers’, my friend. All the others from Oliver’s were below us which made our mothers proud. Of course the advert in the evening news did list us giving credit to Mile End House School for the success. I reckon that if I’d stayed there longer I would as like as not, failed.

Then things moved rapidly. I went for a medical and was not too good at the eyesight test and will never know whether the Surgeon Commander was being serious or not when he asked me if I could read a newspaper without glasses. As I could, I passed. Then we had to line up in order of exam merit and state what trade we wanted, as there were only a certain number of vacancies in each. The first three were advised to take Shipwright as it was thought certain they would gain scholarships and go on to the Royal Naval College to become Constructors. Those after were advised to take Electrical Fitter as this was thought to be the plum trade. The other trades, Engine Fitter, Ship Fitter, Plumber etc. were for those further down the list. Now I was not the slightest bit interested in electricity but loved engines, so I decided to be an Engine Fitter. The first three candidates dutifully said “Shipwright”, the next two “Electrical Station Fitter” and the rest followed saying “Electrical Fitter” till it came to my turn and I opened my mouth to say “Engine Fitter” and heard myself saying “Electrical Fitter, please”. Too late then to change – my career had been decided. All that remained was for me to accompany my mother to the S.E.E.D (Superintending Electrical Engineers Department) Main Office to sign my indentures, which I did on the 23rd August 1943 before starting work. The indentures make interesting reading –

I was not to 'contract marriage during the period of this indenture; nor be guilty by word or action of any immoral, indecent, irregular or improper conduct or behaviour in any respect whatsoever, but shall and will demean himself at all times with strict propriety and submission to his superiors' etc, etc.

My first task was to learn bench work at a factory (Evans) in Goldsmith Avenue, which had been taken over because of the loss of facilities in the Dockyard itself due to bombing. Here I learnt general bench fitting work, metal work, turning, etc. The Chargeman, Mr Coyde, was strict - we had to call him 'Sir' - and our Instructor was kept very busy, but the war effort was helped along by the many ladies and girls, all of whom were most friendly. Lunch - it was our dinner - we ate at the local Victory Canteen in Milton Park. Food was scarce so mash potatoes, (reconstituted, dried) turnips and sausages were normal, with corned beef, Spam or fish cakes as a treat. We were given free dinner tickets as youngsters in training and this helped out the food situation at home no end.

I cycled from North End to Milton every day, because although we had two days release to attend to Dockyard School, this was at the Teachers Training College, also at Milton. The college had been taken over as a hostel for nurses and the rooms we used were the dining rooms. At 9am two rows of trestle tables would be cleared of breakfast, blackboards erected and classes began until the stroke of twelve when we were thrown out and cloths laid for the nurses lunch. At 1.30 we came back until 4.30 and so on. The rooms were on the ground floor with lawns and flowerbeds outside which were pleasant in the summer. There was little skylarking with the nurses as they were 18 upwards whereas we were 15 or 16, and at that age two years was an unbridgeable gap. After six months we were sent to No. 2 Electrical Shop for work on armatures and motors.

In 1944 I was sent to HMS Dryad at Southwick to work on the navigational training equipment. This was General Dwight Eisenhower's D-Day headquarters and full of activity. It was a godsend to my mother as I was taught many things other than electrical work. We were taken there from Cosham in an old naval lorry every morning at 7am. The first thing we did was to hunt for mushrooms in the fields and check the piano wire rabbit snares laid the night before. Dinner times we picked apples and blackberries or grapes from the old vine if in season. Wire traps were used to catch pheasants which were then traded for eggs or chicken or anything else going from the naval galley. There was hardly a day I didn't take something home to eat which was a good thing as food was still very short

Once a week there were Trade Lectures to attend in the Dockyard. I suppose apprentices are apprentices always, with the same warped sense of humour that must be traditional. Early capers included using a large nail to fasten a match box to the wooden floor - some idiot would kick it and be lucky not to break a toe - and making the windmill whistle. This latter joke employed a tin pea-shooter shortened by half, soldered to the top of a Coleman's Mustard tin, (one of the oval ones) blowing onto a small windmill with about 12 tiny paddles. The victim was shown how to do it by blowing into the pea-shooter mouthpiece and if you blew hard, it made a loud whistle. The victim then had a go and perhaps made a whistle too, but would unwittingly walk away with a pitch black face to everyone's concealed amusement. The reason was that the pea-shooter mouthpiece had been divided with the bottom half having a small

opening into the tin. In the tin was a quantity of powdered lampblack (like very fine soot) and just below the windmill was a minute hole in the tin lid. Blowing through both vents in the pea-shooter sent lampblack up to the windmill and on to the victim's face without his knowing it. Of course one didn't choose a victim who wore glasses. When the trick was demonstrated, only the top vent of the pea-shooter was blown through, the lower lip or tongue covering up the bottom half. There were many other tricks we played but woe betided us if we were caught. All this went on when we were supposed to be learning how to grind twist drills or scrape bearings.

For me, 1942/43/44 were years full of new experiences. Much of it was sheer hard work. Emergencies came and went from air raids to D-Day. After the landings battered landing craft were towed back to Portsmouth and all hands set to work to make them serviceable again. I remember going out with a small gang to repair the steering gear of one such craft. This mostly involved a lot of banging with a large hammer. Being an apprentice I was excused things like week end or night work but a lot of men did a twelve hour shift, went home for a meal and then did other duties like the Home Guard or Air Raid Wardens."