

## **A Dockyard Apprenticeship in the 60's      Doug Seymour**

I sat alongside my father at one side of the desk in the headmaster's room and the Education Department's Careers Officer occupied the other. "So what sort of job have you got in mind young man". I hesitantly suggested a Sign Writer and in a flash the 'not much demand for that job these days' and 'I don't think you will have much luck' comments brought me to a stunned silence.

My Father said, "Why don't you apply for a Dockyard Apprenticeship, your brother did one, it's a good apprenticeship and he is doing alright". Dad was correct; my elder brother had already completed his Ships Fitter time, been snapped up by the Merchant Navy (the 'Merch' as it was known), and was earning large sums of money. It was true that satisfactory completion of a Dockyard Apprenticeship would say as much for you when applying for your next job, as your own efforts at the interview table. After considerable deliberation spanning the blink of an eye, I blankly agreed.

It was the latter half of 1963 and weeks later, having passed the Dockyard Exam at 26th position in Portsmouth and 75th in UK, I was called for the selection interview which took place at Flathouse Quay, Mile End. A small cramped waiting room with an ever-changing blackboard recorded the remaining trades positions - and with it my dwindling chances of an Electrical Apprenticeship, as each candidate (in exam position order) emerged from the adjoining selection panel room. By the sixties the preferred route for a career starting with Shipwright and studying further to attain Constructor status had partly shifted to Electrical - as 'Electronics' was the subject that most young people wanted to know more about, or in more modern parlance had 'street cred'. With only 24 places for Electrical Apprenticeships I inevitably missed out and took an Engine Fitter & Turner place.

The Beatles and the Rolling Stones continued their domination of the pop charts and the US Surgeon General had stated that smoking may be injurious to health, but for me on the 13th January 1964 I was more concerned with riding my bicycle to the Gosport Ferry and then continuing my cold ride to Flathouse Apprentices Training Centre, my working and scholastic home for the next 2 years. This very comprehensive site provided the basic training requirements for Engine Fitters & Turners, Shipwrights, Coppersmiths and Boilermakers. In addition it included the Dockyard College (compulsory attendance for the first year) complete with its own laboratory, and a canteen for ever-hungry apprentices, many of whom demanded a diet based on pies, chips, beans and fried fish on Friday. For its time the entire Flathouse facility was extremely well equipped.

Introduced on that first day to kindly faced Mr Smith and the no-messing air of Mr Smythe in the Upper Fitting Shop we were issued with new black painted steel tool boxes which comprised, as best I can recall:-

18 files of various size and type (from warden to 12 inch bastard)  
An Engineer's square in a sliding top wooden box; 2lb Ball-pein Hammer;  
Chisel; File card; Protective goggles; Scriber; 12 inch steel rule.

Good grief I thought, we have only just arrived and they are showering us with gifts already!



The Upper Fitting Shop was effectively three separate workshop areas for the 3 groups at 4-month entry intervals. Thus the one upper floor catered for the entire first year of my chosen trade.

The Upper Fitting Shop at Flathouse Quay.  
(Picture taken early 1970's when bench chipping screens had been removed  
& new-coloured overalls introduced!)

The elation of new tools and the start of a 'real mans job' quickly gave way to reality and the entire group wielded hammer at chisel, with goggles in place, to fashion 2 rough flats, at 90 degrees to each other, on a piece of round bar. Thereafter we were permitted to complete the 'work of art' by filing the whole piece to a 3 inch by 1 inch square rectangle to a good degree of accuracy also employing an Engineers Square. The flying chips of metal explained the need for the Perspex chipping screens that were in place through the centre of the long, heavy steel, back-to-back benches. For the majority not yet at adult height the wooden slatted duckboards enabled us to attain the correct working height to the bench. Beside the skills gained with hand tools in those first few days many also learnt self-help First Aid to cover modified knuckles from a misguided hammer and the opportunity to achieve degree-level profanity.

At the start of the second week I signed my apprenticeship deed in the Dockyard. Being aware that this was a very important document I imagined that the whole deal would be endorsed by a wax seal (Correct! I was a little out of touch.) but when the clerk placed 2 red stickers at the signature box I felt somewhat let down.

Apart from the vehicular thoroughfare that ran through the centre of the site, every other available space not required by Fitters, Coppersmiths and Boilermakers at the main road end, and Shipwrights at the harbour end, seemed to be occupied by motorcycles. These ranged from a 50cc Suzuki to 650cc Triumphs and even a 700cc Royal Enfield Constellation. Due to the lack of funds among apprentices, most could not afford the bolt on goodies for their machines, so many bikes were very cleverly customised using, dare I say, Government materials and the acquired craft skills of their owners.

Those first 4 months gave us all a good level of skill with hand tools, divided as it was between a monthly 40 hour test piece and making our own tools including callipers of various types and a substantial filing plate. Just about every time I started my test piece I would commence with great care then lose my patience and finish with an acceptable mark. At least it enabled me to get on with making tools.

The second four months was witness to the Admiralty's ability to keep abreast of change in that all measurement was Metric and woe betide anyone caught by Mr Groves attempting to employ imperial system devices which we had been using for the previous 4 months. As a break from the constant tool and test piece life a two week period called the 'G' course gave exposure to casting and patternmaking skills in the steel foundry and pattern-makers' shop adjoining the corner of No.2 Basin. It also gave us a brief look at a small corner of the Dockyard and what our futures might hold.

The final 4 months of that first year was more of the same - filing/scraping test pieces, and making a range of spring-backed callipers. This repetition was once again broken by a trip to the Coppersmiths shop to learn a little of the ancient art of 'Tin Bashing'. The manufacture of a sliding top box to house our Engineers Squares was a gentle reminder of how lucky we were to be Fitters. The box did work but not without constant modification of bends. All I can say is, thanks to the quality of Dockyard materials. In essence after a year of this sort of bench work, there was very little we could not create by hand and the contents of our tool boxes.

As with all dedicated apprentices, the claxon sounding the days end also sounded the start of the Clocking Shed Race. The sight and sound of a couple of hundred pairs of youth-powered flailing boots on tarmac in a sea of jeans and donkey jackets, was not a sight or race for the faint-hearted. On a fairly regular basis a neck-and-neck personal race was decided by the well-timed push in the final few yards to tip your opponent into the side of the corrugated steel clock shed. The resultant boom would create immediate ejection of the virtually sprung-loaded gentleman 'Recorders' from within. Well, we were apprentices, mindful of long traditions to be maintained! Free spirited we may have been but all instructors were addressed as 'Sir' and rowdy behaviour whilst queuing Friday lunch time to get paid would incur the wrath of Mr Smythe using the threat of no pay until the following Monday to quell any clever ideas.

The first-year wage was 2 pounds, nineteen shillings and five pence, but collecting my first pay packet at the end of the second week, enabled a wage rise to be paid and I came away with 3 pound 3 shillings and eight pence. Quite pleased with my unopened packet, I arrived home where my Father allowed me my moment of opening pleasure before saying, "You need to give your Mother 2 pounds of that". With Old Holborn Tobacco at 5 shillings and sixpence an ounce, and a pint of beer about 1 shilling and nine pence (yes I know I was too young to drink), it was obvious that the financial good life was not going to be for me. The collapse continued when I realised the need to

keep back 5 'bob' for the weeks ferry fares to carry me and my trusty rusty bicycle.

Invariably I would buy an ounce, instead of the ounce and a half, of tobacco I needed for the week - later selling my soul for the price of 5 Woodbines or Players Weights on the following Thursday.

With the start of my second year and a wage of 4 pounds 4 shillings and eight pence, machine-tool skills began and the Turnery below the Upper Fitting Shop was home for 4 months - in which time we learnt to cut threads of most forms, changing gear wheels to achieve this, grind tools for all applications, use steadies, produce eccentric shaft journals and gain other tricks of the trade from Mr (Gus) Gardner and co. There was of course no intent or indeed the wilful manufacture of cigarette lighters, fire pokers, special bolts or spindles for mate's motorcycles nor other use of Admiralty material for such underhanded activity. Our helpful labourers included Frank, a sort of wire-rimmed spectacled walrus with oil-impregnated flat cap and the customary donkey jacket who cleared the swarf and issued material. He was complemented by Fred - a skeletal-framed gentleman appearing to have exceeded full retirement age by at least a decade - who he ran the Tool Store. Keeping our machines in clean order was our responsibility.

The next 4 month slice was the General Machine Shop where we learnt to manipulate the vagaries of all other known machine tools at that time, including the Shaping and Slotting machines which have long since ceased to exist. Mr Sparrow and Mr Farmer (who single-handed may have stretched the world's tobacco stocks) ably assisted our endeavours and controlled behaviour well in what was an extremely dangerous environment if rules were not followed.

Regrettably there were times when The Engineers Arms on Flathouse Quay and another converted terraced house south of The Air Balloon were not the best source of refreshment on a Friday lunch time but I did not indulge in that sort of thing.....well, not all the time.

In this stint of learning we were also 'invited' for 2 weeks to learn the basics of gas and electric arc welding. Mr Bryant, an exceptional welder, taught us both skills, and these, having been acquired, were put to good use. After torment by another apprentice randomly squeezing shut our rubber hose gas supplies, making us think we had faulty equipment, it was decided to repay the kindness. As he went to the toilet one morning, having heated a piece of plate steel and placed his pie on it to warm for morning tea break, we swung into action. To ensure his food was secure we quickly welded a steel box around its entirety and awaited his return. Arriving back he said words to the effect of: "Goodness gracious me, you appear to have spoiled my chances of eating my pie." He first attempted to melt the welds with a gas torch then mechanically with hammer and chisel saying: "Well I am vexed" - or something like that. As the gravy began to flow from the entombed remains, and the air turned an even darker shade of blue, he reluctantly accepted he would have to go hungry.

There were more scientific pursuits during lunch breaks. A friend, whose interest in pyrotechnics was, let's say advanced, made from steel conduit tube a single-barrelled gun which would be loaded with a ball-bearing and ground match heads as the propellant. Early experiments achieved a fair distance into the harbour until eventually the barrel split. Our friends, the boilermaker apprentices were consulted for a sample of solid drawn boiler tube. As you can see we also had acquired engineering materials knowledge from the constant trade notes lectures. The new MKII gun was jammed as usual into the piles of imported timber on Flathouse Quay and the projectile could just be seen touching down in the harbour.

Creativity knew no bounds. Whilst serving a short spell in the Turbine House a wooden hand-operated working model of a sleeve-valved steam engine was bravely turned by one of us while a dart, made of gas welding rod and a flight crafted from a Rizla filter tip, was placed in the conduit tube barrel of the compressed air gun and fired from a distance of about 6 metres (20ft). The winner was the one who could pin the wooden piston at Top Dead Centre or closest. Good stuff that compressed air, able as it was to pass a dart through two thicknesses of quarter inch ply. Dangerous? Of course not! And did I invent the flight which gave a perfect seal, not me! I thank the good lord that we lived through that time.

Lunchtimes for many were spent waiting for ever to be served in a motorcycle shop like Burnett's in Eldon Street, treading the torturous path to the counter of the fishing tackle shop, The Bird Cage in Arundel Street, or using whatever transport was available to get to the new Ambassador Lanes Bowling Alley at the other end of the same street. Those who needed more money and excitement appeared on Friday morning with small suitcase to catch the train after work and continue their income at Butlins Bognor Regis for the weekend.

More fun was yet to come as our merry band engaged the final 4 months of our training centre time welcomed by Mr Thorogood and Mr Grant. By this time our wage had risen again to 4 pounds 14 shillings and 8 pence which naturally meant we could do with even more. The Engine Stripping Shop was crunch time to learn the remaining skills except this time we did the explaining to the instructor - regarding the method of operation of any parts in a Diesel engine, steam reciprocating pump, petrol engine or compressor. A wry smile from 'Sir' as you stumbled through the finer points of a thingumajig was followed by: "No, think again, I will be back in 5 minutes!" The second time around you would have already found the correct answer or the correction would be prompted.

The trade notes continued as did the expansion of our pranks. A new spanner would be carelessly left (read planted) in the centre of the workshop clear area and attached to a very fine copper wire taken from an old coil winding, the other end of which was connected to the output of a magneto. When the victim picked up the 'prize', one of the plotters would spin the armature of the magneto whilst the remainder kept a 'corner of the eye' watch. The result was 'shocking' and could have passed for a new dance craze.

We had indeed progressed from offering rolled cigarettes laced with match heads to the harnessing of the technology we had become part of - such is the product of increased knowledge. In 2 years we had developed from school leavers to youths with enough skills to start the next more important part of apprenticeship, and to apply some of those - with no small thanks to the patient instructors who no doubt saw much of their younger days repeated by some of us. As January 1966 approached it was time to take our place behind the real Dockyard walls and play a small part in its huge history.

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