

“I Didn’t Want to Do it!”

(Fielding & Platt – 1971 – 1975)

I really didn’t want to do it. I didn’t want to be an engineer.

It just seemed to happen; it was “*what boys did when they left school*”.

And, generally speaking, boys became engineers or some other ‘manly’ occupation like carpentry, plumbing or brick-laying.

I did eventually follow the chosen path, but first, I had to endure four long years at Messrs Fielding and Platt; and if it had to be endured, it turned out to be a very good place to do it.

At the time the Apprentice Training School was on the second floor, (or was the third?), of a relatively new block on the left as one entered the main factory gates.

I was one of a fairly large group of apprentices and fundamentally a fish out of water. However, I soon learnt to swim.

In the main, they were a good bunch; yes, there was a bit of peer pressure and the establishment of some kind of pecking order, (and I can honestly say that I did little in the way of pecking!) It was fairly testosterone charged with a good deal of posturing and strutting; just archetypal teenage lads.

I never developed any particular friendships but we all got along amicably enough to work well together.

The trainers – the foremen, Barry and Roy, were skilled, experienced and uncompromising; they would brook no nonsense and both were committed to high and exacting standards.

We were all put on a programme of induction, during which we were tested on various machines and equipment; lathes, capstans, grinders, milling machines, and so on and so forth.

There were numerous ‘theory’ sessions in the small classroom and a regular day at the Technical College. This, I hated!

I’m still not absolutely sure how or why, but my forte seemed to be welding; and so it was decided that this is where my future lay, and who was I to argue? To be honest, I was a risk on the lathe and lethal on the milling machine. So I could just blow myself and everybody else up welding!

The factory environment was just so **sensory**; the smells, the sights of men about their craft and the constant activity. The sound – the noise, often intense and omnipresent, frequently left your ears ringing. Of course one of the most significant ‘aural stimulants’ was the very colourful language.

The smells were particularly memorable – hot, steaming swarf soaked in an endless stream of suds oil, the surprisingly delicate scent of industrial

hand cleanser and thick clouds of tobacco; almost everybody seemed to smoke. I dallied for a while and deeply regretted it.

My new home was to be the dismal, murky looking fabrication shop; a tatty, cavernous barn of a place, just across the road from the new, light and airy fitting shop; the jewel in the crown of the company. One stood in stark contrast to the other.

The atmosphere in the fabrication shop was positively unhealthy; the pervasive gloom, sulphurous stink and incredible NOISE were overwhelming. It was stiflingly toxic!

The constant hissing of the gas cutters, the roar and thud of the forge, the clatter of the sheet metal workers and the crackle of the arc welders; all contributing to the foul smelling and noxious fug.

It was a very dirty job in a grim old place. Today, I'm sure it would breach a whole load of health and safety regulations; risk assessments didn't exist.

I well remember washing my hair each night – I had some then – and seeing the pool of black grit in the bottom of the basin. My overalls were never clean and hands were frequently engrained with grime.

Of course, the point of all this was the acquisition of knowledge and the attainment of a skill. This would not have been impossible without the

generous help and support of the journeymen. They didn't always share their experiences or demonstrate their expertise willingly; apprentices could be a nuisance and an impediment, but they were a necessary evil. As many would ruefully observe, they, themselves, had been apprentices.

They had their fun because it was the done thing to tease, berate and cajole apprentices and this they did – relentlessly.

I do not want to sound trite or patronizing but the guys were good, hard working people; straightforward and uncomplicated. They were blunt; outspoken and frequently uncompromising. But they had a strong brotherhood and sense of integrity.

They were also prodigious pranksters; playing silly jokes that lightened the dusty gloom. The air was also liberally coloured with their extremely coarse banter and earthy repartee. Now that **was** an education!

Experience, further understanding and appreciation have shown that I was fortunate to have my place at Fielding and Platt, but I just did not see it at the time. I was not initially aware of its reputation; it's standing as one of the finest heavy engineering companies in the country.

Even my father, an ardent "Dowty Man", acknowledged this status.

I had four short years at Fielding and Platt and it would be too easy to regard it in a negative light. It was a catalyst and empowered me to go where I wanted to be. I did not come away empty handed.

For whatever reason, there are some particularly enduring memories. The dawn walks down to the canal in early summer. Having completed a busy night duty, we would “sneak out” and take a breath of much needed fresh air. We walked at the canal side by the old warehouses, tired and weary but content; it was quite heavenly.

I also recall accidentally setting fire to a fitter’s overalls; he was less than pleased. He was holding a mounting bracket in place with his foot as I welded it. His overalls were rather frayed at the ankles; they caught flame very easily. Fortunately, I was able to douse the flames with his mug of tea, which, thankfully, was not very hot. Sadly, this also peeved the fitter.

Then, there were the rats and mice that thrived and proliferated in the shabby old shed, making the most of the bits and crumbs shed by the obliging workforce

Also vivid is the image of one old welder who would sit in the corner eating sandwiches the size of house bricks. A thin man, nearing the end of his long working life, he looked as though he lived on lettuce leaves,

but the way he consumed these gargantuan snacks was quite remarkable.

Finally; I will always remember the little brown envelopes cut at the corners to reveal the precious notes therein, so that one could check that one had received the wages they were due. It was an exciting time because of the keen anticipation and, in many cases, desperation for those who were well and truly “skint”.

Fielding and Platt was an accident, but, I am pleased to say, not one that did any real harm or damage.

Some 38 years later, during the course of casual conversation, I mentioned to a colleague that I had served as an apprentice at Fielding and Platt. His immediate response was acknowledgement of its reputation and eminence. I must admit to a subtle feeling of pride and a slight feeling of guilt as I’d not really acknowledged the significance of my short tenure with company.

Gordon Tozer – written September 2012.