

## THE BEGINNING

It was early in 1957 when this story starts. I was married with one young daughter and in a ~~very~~ poor financial position. In fact you could say I was well on the down side of the Mr. Macawber situation. My in-comings were certainly not keeping up with my out-goings. Something had to be done. We decided that I would have to change my job, a job that I loved doing, to one that paid better.

Within a few weeks of this decision ~~being made~~ I received a phone call from a friend of ~~mine~~ saying that there was an opening at his place of employment for a driver of a lorry which was fitted with an hydraulic hoist. This was a new position ~~that was being~~ created to coincide with the company forming a group of men to carry out the operation of Industrial Cladding and Roofing. This new venture was intended to compliment their main products in structural engineering.

During my job interview I was informed that the work would necessitate us staying away from home weekly with us being able to come home at weekends depending on the distance ~~that~~ we would have to travel. We were not too happy about this but hearing of the financial benefits like 3 times my present wage, plus some expenses, plus profit sharing, plus knowing most of the work force (nearly all local men) there was no contest. I started the following week.

Day one began with an introductory course on the operation of this, what was then a very unique, type of vehicle. Today, of course, they are common place being used by Fire Services everywhere albeit in a much longer form. The vehicle was to be hired initially to make sure that it was suitable for the tasks we had in mind for it. Before day one was over I was informed that we would be off to Stanford Le Hope on the following day. Panic! Where was Stanford Le Hope? What was Stanford Le Hope? I needed a road map and I needed it fast.

My widest field of travel, up to this point, had been local beaches on days out and London as something very special. Panic struck again. What about clothes? Up until now clothes meant literally wear one and have one in the wash with one Sunday best suit. Now I needed a spare set of most things to change into. This had been installed into us by our parents and their parents before them because apparently if you had an accident you had to be seen to be wearing clean underwear.

I managed to borrow a dilapidated suit case but I needed to borrow some money for the other things that I needed. This was forthcoming from the only person in our family who was slightly better off than the rest of us, being middle aged and still single, my Uncle. He had made his money during the war in a munitions factory doing night work cutting the other workers hair while they operated his machine. He also ran a lucrative business selling Brylcream at exorbitant prices on the system of supply and demand. During the war, apparently, only Royal Airforce personnel were able to obtain this, much sought after, hair treatment. Hence their collective title of the Brylcream Boys.

Come the morning of the next day I said goodbye to my wife and my daughter and set off, case in hand to walk to work, feeling almost as apprehensive as Neil Armstrong must have done when he stepped down onto the moon. I met up with the other three men in the crew who all had different backgrounds. One, the Foreman, was a builder's labourer with some knowledge of roof tiling. The second, a van drivers assistant and ex soldier. The third a farm dairyman and myself now an ex motor mechanic. We wrapped our suitcases in a tarpaulin and stowed them in the tool locker on the back of the lorry then ,with all four of us crammed in the cab, we set off .

The exact route we took is not quite clear but I do remember going along the A30 and around part of what was then called the North Circular road and maybe still is for all I know. It was about one eighth of the width of the M25 with vehicles going in both directions on the same carriage way with cross roads, traffic lights and roundabouts thrown in for good measure. Eventually, towards the late afternoon, we came to the Stanford tuning in an area that looked more like Texas than Essex with oil refineries and huge storage tanks as far as the eye could see. It was towards one of these refineries that we were headed.

First things first. We drove down into the town area to look for accommodation. Not wanting anything dearer than working class accommodation it was common practice to go to the local Police Station where addresses were normally kept. This provided us with two alternatives. The first digs was able to offer three of us accommodation for the time required but one of us would have to go to the other digs. Having tossed a coin for it, and having lost, I proceeded, on my own, to look for the other address.

It was in a dingy back street off Main Street and was, to my surprise, the address of a Cobbler's shop. I pushed open the door to a loud clanging of the sprung loaded bell above and, by what was now the half light, saw a man sitting on a low stool with a last between his legs. He had squinty eyes and was nearly bald but with a cultivated long fringe to one side of is head that should, I imagine, have been swept over to cover his baldness but now, with his work actions, was all over the place. He was also considerably deformed and, in my now nervous state, I thought he would have looked more at home in the bell tower of Notre Dame than at the Last. He looked up at me, said "evening", and asked what I required. I explained that I needed digs for a few days and asked if they could put me up. "Certainly young sir" he said and I almost expected him to continue "there's room for one more inside". Instead he yelled out to someone, who was not visible, "We've got another one for dinner tonight Effel". After that he arose from the stool, went over and locked the door and said "it's closing time anyway, come on, I'll show you to your room". The room was situated upstairs, directly above the shop. The facilities were pretty poor, being an iron framed single bed and an old fashioned wash stand, but at least there was an inside loo. My room was also used as a storeroom for the Cobbler's leather stock and the smell of it permeated everything. Laying in bed that first night I vowed and declared that this would be my first and last trip away from home.

Telling the lads about my experiences the next day raised a few laughs and made me feel a bit better but I was very pleased to be going home on the Friday.

On the way home the traffic was brought to a standstill because of an accident up ahead. While we waited for it to be cleared we noticed a group of children having great difficulty trying to retrieve their football that had become wedged in the branches of a tall, young Poplar tree. It was obviously not strong enough to be climbed and no amount of shaking would dislodge the ball. We turned off, onto their road, to give them some assistance. Their looks of amazement and disbelief were something to behold when we set up our hoist, stepped into the basket and rose effortlessly to pick their ball out of the tree. After a little kick about, to loosen the joints, we took up our place again in the traffic to continue our journey home feeling happy to have helped the kids out. My wages had been delivered, before I arrived home, and this made me feel even better. Maybe, just maybe, we could get used to this situation, at least for a short time, to enable us to save a little money.

The incidents that follow are just some of those that came to mind during that short time. Approximately 36 years.