

Thank Heaven For Smelly Toilets!

Memories of Working at Merriott Mouldings

(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)

David Gibbs

The first member of my family that is known to have worked at Tail Mill, back in the weaving days, is my maternal grandmother.



She might well be one of the bonneted ladies in either of these early photographs, but I have no proof of that.

What I do have is her bonnet, similar to those worn by the more-familiar Lancashire mill workers.



A close look at the lower photograph suggests the Merriott girls might also have worn clogs just like they did in Lancashire.



But it's many years later that I can be more positive about working at Tail Mill, when other family members worked there and when it was my turn to make my way down Tail Mill Lane.

At various times during the war years and just afterwards, when Tail Mill accommodated a London company specialising in the then somewhat new technology of compression moulding of bakelite, my father Arthur and my sister Florrie worked there.

My father worked in the department that accurately weighed the moulding powder into small tubs in preparation for loading into the moulds; my sister in the finishing shop removing the excess bakelite, known as 'flash', from the moulded items. The photograph below is of workers at the factory in 1948, about to travel to Bristol for a theatre trip. The group includes my sister, Florrie.



It was a couple of years later that I worked there, in January 1950. It was my very first job. I didn't stay long, just a few months, thanks to the smelly toilets.

I was due to leave the Technical School in Yeovil at the end of the autumn term, 1949. I wanted to be an electrician. There was no particular reason for this. My knowledge of what might be involved was limited to the construction of a few simple circuits as part of my schoolwork. Nevertheless, an electrician is what I had decided I wanted to be.

Career advice at school, or elsewhere for that matter, was virtually non-existent. The only advice I remember hearing was that generally proffered by most male adults of my acquaintance. *'Learn a trade, son,'* they knowingly advised. But what sort of trade? And where? Unfortunately, no one seemed to have the answer to those questions. You were very much on your own. Choosing a trade wasn't really an option. Getting a job, any job of which you were capable, was the order of the day and jobs for young people were no easier to come by back then than they are today.

But I firmly believed I was capable of becoming an electrician, so during my final term at school I set out to fulfil my ambition. My chances of success were limited but I didn't know that. There were at the time two electrical establishments of which I was aware, both located in nearby Crewkerne. In South Street, there was an electrical shop,

name of Prests if I remember rightly. One Saturday morning I went along. I propped my bicycle on the pavement edge outside the shop and went inside. I was the only customer. A man appeared from a workshop at the back. *'I want to be an electrician. Do you want an apprentice?'* I enquired. No, he did not.

My next port of call was the shop of the South Western Electricity Board in East Street. I asked a lady shop assistant whether SWEB needed an apprentice. She must have been a kindly soul and I now presume she took my name and my address and passed it on to the personnel department. I presume she did this because I do not recollect writing to SWEB but I do remember getting a letter back from their head office in Taunton saying there were no vacancies.

There my quest to be an electrician ended. I knew of nowhere else to try. Some weeks after this, the same week as my schooling came to an end, my father had arranged for me to see the foreman of the tool room at Merriott Mouldings.

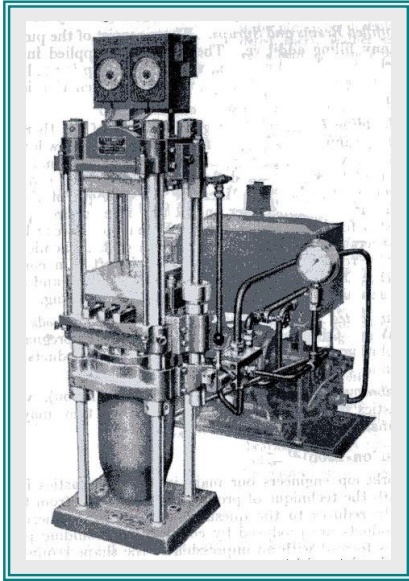
The headcount for the tool room was three skilled toolmakers and a trainee. My father had heard they needed a replacement for a young man who was about to go off to complete his National Service. One Saturday morning, with my father, I cycled down to the factory and met the tool room foreman, Ron Vickery, outside the factory gates. Still standing astride our bicycles, my father talked with him for just a few minutes - I don't think I said a word - and the job was mine. I started on the following Monday morning at a wage of £1 per week.

The principal role of the tool room personnel was to maintain the steel moulds in which the plastic parts were formed, and the general repair of equipment around the plant. Much of the work I found myself doing in support of their activities involved the use of machine tools - drills, lathes, milling machines, grinders and the like. Such machines were not new to me; I had used them at the technical school. My skills developed quite nicely and for a time I quite enjoyed the work. I soon settled down and forgot all about being an electrician.

My recollection of the factory in general in those days is not particularly favourable. I remember I used an entrance door not far from the boiler house, and not far from the boiler house was a bicycle rack where I parked my bicycle.

Just inside the entrance door there was a clocking-in machine: take your card from the rack on one side, place it in the slot at the front of the clock, bang down the handle and the time was stamped on the card, remove the card and place it in the rack on the other side. The reverse procedure applied at knocking-off time. I worked from 8.00am until 6.00pm, Monday to Friday. You were allowed to be up to three minutes late, otherwise you lost fifteen minutes pay. Many is the time I raced into the yard, threw my bike against a wall and rushed to clock in before the three minutes grace had expired. Deed done, I would then go outside again and, naturally for a fifteen-year-old, take my time to park my bike in the cycle rack.

The long workshop in which the clocking-in machine was located was also the main moulding shop. Right down its length were ranged rows of moulding presses like the one shown opposite, back to back, about twenty-four in total I would think, of various sizes



and capacity, each with a workbench alongside. Shift work meant the presses were always in operation. The atmosphere was warm, humid, and noisy and stank of bakelite powder.

The products I recall were in general non-descript, components in an engineering product assembled elsewhere. The colour of these items, as of most items produced in bakelite, was invariably dull, predominantly brown, black or dark green, although I do recall seeing bright-red sauce bottle tops.

Before I worked there, they also made ashtrays and a moneybox that included a slot for a photograph; like many a village family, I suspect, we had examples of these items in our home.



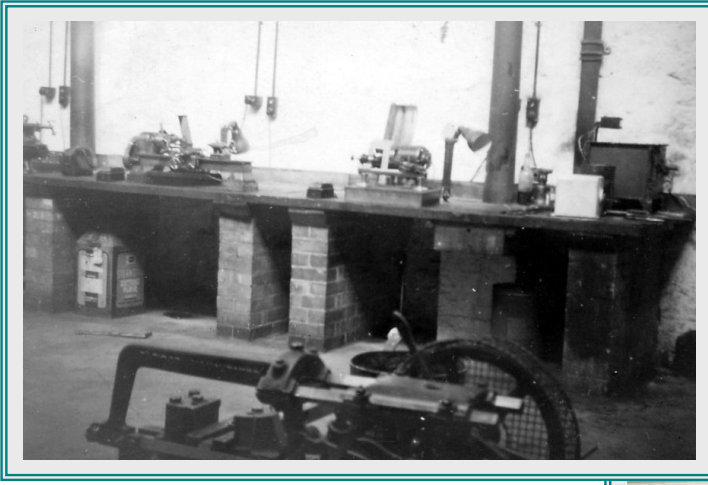
Apart from the main moulding shop, there was another workshop running parallel. This was the finishing shop, manned mainly by female workers, busily putting the final touches to the moulded parts, in particular removing the 'flash', the excess material formed as the two halves of the mould came together.

There was also a small canteen that served ham rolls, the rolls being freshly baked and delivered from the Laurel Bakery at the top of Tail Mill Lane. They probably served other food too, but it's those delicious ham rolls that I remember. I had one most mornings, when we had a ten-minute break. We had a similar break in the afternoon.

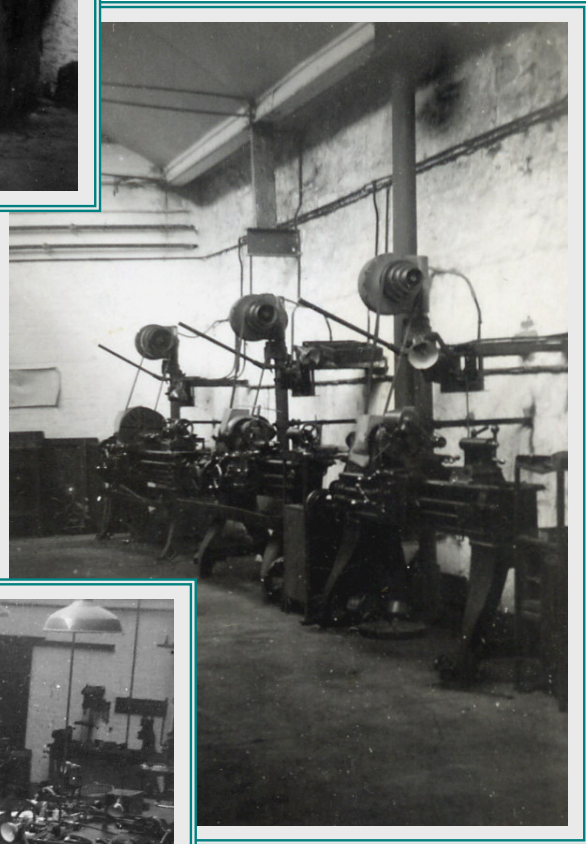
Many of the buildings, though, at that time were empty and unused, vacated when DH Bonnella Ltd moved out. I recall my route to the canteen took me across a vast workshop which we simply referred to as 'Bonellas', which I presume had been occupied by that company during the time they were at Tail Mill.

By comparison with the other working parts of the factory, the tool room was a haven of tranquillity. Not a bad place to work at all by the accepted standards of the time

although it must be said that the machine tools, shown below, driven by open belts from overhead motors, were not exactly state of the art even by 1950 standards.



This is how the tool room looked shortly before I left. I had to clean all of the machines every Friday afternoon.



As far as my job went, for three or four months things went along fairly well until I began to realise that it was a dead-end situation. I felt I was capable of better things especially when I had to spend over a week working on my own in a small brick building, quite close to the pond, in which there was a finishing machine, essentially a continuously

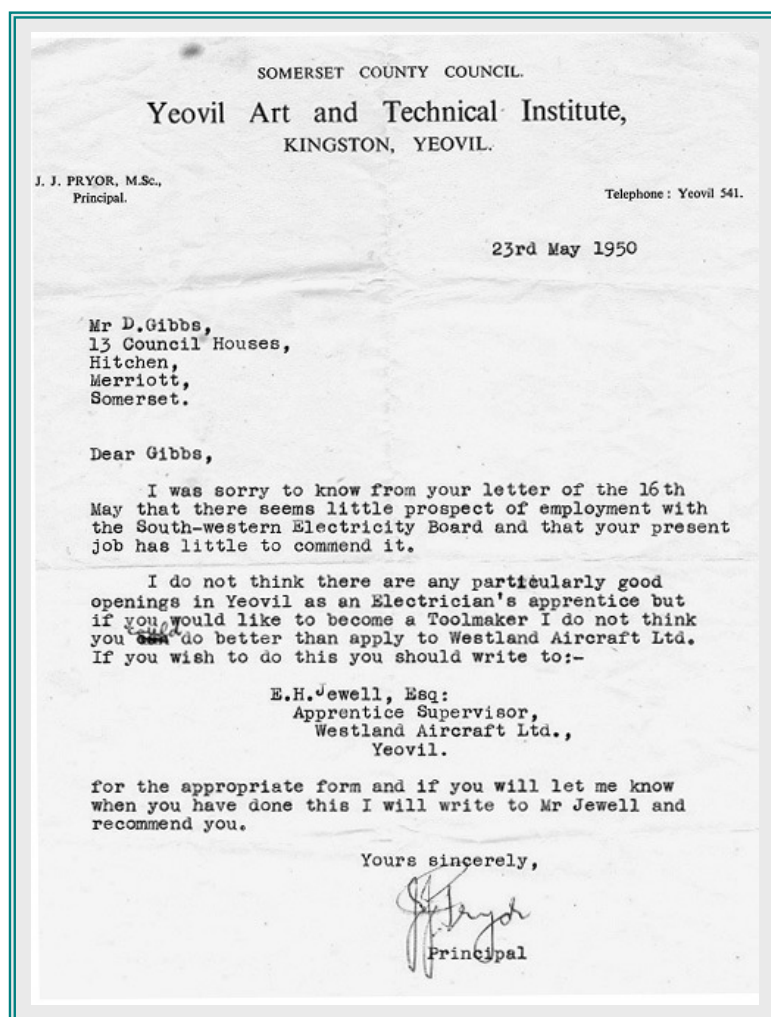
revolving belt of abrasive emery cloth and on which I had to reduce the thickness of box after box of an oversize item by a very small amount until it closely fitted into a gap gauge. It was a dirty and dusty task for which I had no protective clothing, not even a pair of goggles. Above all, though, it was boring and sole-destroying for a young lad.

About the time that my discontent was taking root, to make matters worse the foreman ordered me to pour water down some very old, long-disused toilets that were close by the tool room. They had no flushing facility and were beginning to smell as a result of a spell of warm weather. I refused to do his bidding. He shouted at me, incandescent with rage. I still refused. I knew this was pushing my luck and that I would almost certainly lose my job. That evening I nervously told my father of the situation, fully expecting him to be absolutely furious with me. Not so. *'Thees did the right thing'*, he said. I could not believe my ears.

The next morning I was on the carpet in the office of the Managing Director, Mr Weeway. Fifteen minutes later, I went back to my workplace having been severely reprimanded - or so he thought - and threatened with instant dismissal if I ever again refused to do something when asked. I wasn't at all upset by this as I knew we would soon be parting company, but I planned that it would be my choice, not his. And there

was no way that I would ever pour water down smelly toilets, not that I was asked to anyway.

At this time I decided to write to my old head master at Yeovil Technical School, J J Prior: could he help me find a job please? He wrote back a few days later to suggest I apply for an apprenticeship at Westland Aircraft Ltd and that he would recommend me. This I duly did and a short while later I attended an interview with the Apprentice Supervisor at Westland, catching the bus to Yeovil and then walking to the works at Hendford. That afternoon I was offered a five-year craft apprenticeship.



At the end of the week, with great delight I handed in my week's notice at Merriott Mouldings, clocking out for the last time on the following Friday after less than six months service. The following Monday, at 8.30am, I reported for work at Westland.

From that moment I never looked back as I journeyed through the world of engineering from shop floor to design office, to lecturer specialising in production engineering - a subject that includes plastic moulding processes, as it so happens - and finally to technical author. And my journey began in the tool room of Merriott Moulding. So, although it was not a particularly fulfilling experience, and for me was never likely to be, I do have reason to be grateful for having once worked there and, in particular, to thank heaven for the smelly toilets!