

HALCYON DAYS

By David Hutton

*Oh! me lads, ye shud a' seen us gannin,
Passin' the folks upon the road just as they were stannin'.
Thor wis lots o' lads and lasses there, all wi' smiling faces
Gannin' along the Scotswood Road to see the Blaydon Races.*

2012 was the 150th anniversary of the Blaydon races first run in 1862. How did I know that? Well in 1962, the centenary of the race, David Peacock, John Ferrier and I were Student Apprentices in Bristol District on four year, six month sandwich courses at Bristol College of Science and Technology, later to become Bath University. The time came for us to do our "Manufacturers Training" and we were sent to A Reyrolle & Co Ltd at Hebburn upon Tyne, just down the river from Newcastle for six months. We were dead chuffed to be sent there, as in those days Reyrolle was the "Rolls Royce" of high voltage switchgear manufacturers. The Bristol Corporation Electricity Department (BCED) had only installed Reyrolle switchgear and Parsons transformers and so we were quite conversant C6 11kV switchgear.



David Peacock and John Ferrier on the train to Newcastle

On Monday 2nd April 1962 we boarded the 10:30am train for the 8 hour journey Newcastle. The train seemed to stop everywhere on our journey, the first stop being at Mangotsfield just

outside Bristol! 50 years later it still takes 6 hours on the train with less than half the stops! At Newcastle we transferred to the electric train for the half hour journey to South Shields and then walked to our digs with Mrs Harris at 66 Julian Avenue.

We shared the large front bedroom on the first floor for the next 6 months and had a lodging allowance of £3.10s.0d per week and this was expected to cover any out of pocket expenses such as travelling to work and lunch. There were about 10 people staying in the house, so there was always a rush for the bathroom. We were provided with breakfast and an evening meal on work days and a lunch at weekends. The meals always improved when a new guest arrived and then deteriorated after a while. There was a potato shortage and so we ate a lot of pearl barley! Mrs Harris didn't do washing, so we had to take our clothes to a laundry and collect them a few days later - no laundrettes in those days. Mr Harris was a broad Geordie and it was very difficult to understand what he was talking about and so we usually nodded in agreement!

The next morning we caught the electric train to Hebburn and reported to Mr J P Bradford, Technical Training Officer. We were then given a training programme that gave us a week or two in all the various parts of the factory. We soon found that there were students from all over the world and from most of the Area Boards undergoing training. This resulted in a very good Student Society that organised very interesting technical talks and visits, such as to the new

Blythe "A" power station, now long gone. More importantly there were social events such as dances, trips and the Annual Beer Drinking Competition. We were soon introduced to "Newcastle Brown Ale" and its effects. Being presented with a greasy fried egg the next morning was not the best start for the day!



The Beer Drinking Competition

We soon found out that we were the poor relations compared with the students from other Area Boards who were able to claim lunch allowances. We were allowed two travel passes to come home for the 6 months and so came home for Easter (22nd April) and two weeks in August. We were encouraged to take our summer holiday in the north of England so as not to use one of our passes but we declined. Our pay cheques were posted up to us but when we tried to cash them at the South Shields branch of Lloyds they were not accepted. Apparently they were only valid within the SWEB area and so we had to open bank accounts to pay the cheque into before we could get our money.

The training was quite boring as we were never in a section long enough to be of any use and the workers were rather fed up of having a stream of different lads arriving every Monday morning. There was a kiln in one of the workshops and we would congregate round the back of it to chat and read newspapers. Importantly it was WARM. The contrast in temperature when we arrived in the NE in April was very noticeable. The daffodils were in bloom when we left Bristol, but they were nowhere to be seen on Tyneside. My

father had given me a long brown overall coat to take with me and I found that most of the workers wore the same. This made me invisible and so I could walk round the factory with a piece of paper under my arm and no one would take any notice of me. The offices dealing with protection systems and relays were better and David Peacock and I were able to do some research for our final year projects back at College. The scariest part of the factory to walk through for a young lad was the "Relay Shop". This seemed to be staffed by over sexed women and girls and stories abounded about their escapades on coach outings! Toilets for office staff and shop floor workers were segregated and you had to have a key to get into a staff toilet!

We took advantage at the weekends to get out and explore the NE - County Durham and Northumberland. We met up with Andrew Smith (SWEHS member and a member the Retired Engineer's Club) who was a student with the CEGB and went walking in the Cheviot Hills and out on Hadrian's Wall. This was memorable as we experienced horizontal rain and had to shelter behind the wall. The Romans must have wondered



David Peacock and Andrew Smith sheltering from the rain

what they had done wrong to be posted to the north of England. I was wearing my scout shorts and Andrew was in his kilt, so with a waterproof we just got wet legs. David Peacock however was wearing trousers and these became saturated and he had to wear them from Housesteads Fort to South Shields on the bus and train, a distance of some 50 miles. I had got involved with the local Scout Troop in South Shields and had my

uniform posted up to me, hence the shorts on the Wall. I think I still have the shorts! You will have to ask Andrew about the kilt!



David Hutton and Andrew Smith on "The Cheviot"

At Whitsun, we went up to Seahouses on the bus and stayed in a B&B and went over to the Farne Islands to see the Grey Seals, Puffins and other sea birds nesting. We used to go ice skating at Whitley Bay and this involved catching the Ferry across to North Shields and then a bus up to the ice rink. Most evenings we would go down to the Town Square for a beer and became so regular that when the barman saw us coming in he put the glasses on the bar!

A group of six of us hired a car and went up to Edinburgh to see the Military Tattoo and on the way back we stopped off at Bamburgh on the coast and had a swim in the North Sea! Not to be recommended without a wetsuit. The last big social event was a coach trip to Blackpool to see the illuminations and to drink more beer.

We came home at the end of September to start our last term at College and get ready for our final exams in March 1963. We'd had a great time and it was the first time that we had been away from home and fending for ourselves. I

don't think that we had learnt a lot, apart from the Technical talks and visits organised by the Students Society. Later on SWEB reduced the manufacturers training to 3 or 4 weeks. The sandwich courses were new to SWEB and prior to this, students studied for ONC and HNC supported by evening classes. When it came time for them to do manufacturers training they were sent away for an academic year and continued their studies at the local Technical College. This wasn't really necessary for those on a sandwich course.

After leaving the NE, little did I know that some 45 years later I would become a regular visitor? It's a long story, but my son and family now live in Hexham, some 20 miles to the west of Newcastle and my daughter and family live in Newcastle. On our first visit I went back to South Shields and the house at 66 Julian Avenue is still standing. A lot of "back to back" housing has been demolished to reveal the Arbeia Roman Fort. The railway line to Newcastle now forms part of the Tyne and Wear Metro system and sadly, the Reyrolle factory at Hebburn has gone.

It's a small world and the three of us are now members of the SWEHS Committee. Perhaps we were the original "Likely Lads"?