

## Recollections of Marconi Broadcast Division

### 1. Contracts

During the third year (1959 - 60) of my student apprenticeship, I spent three months at Chelmsford in the **Contracts Section** of Broadcasting Division. The Contracts Office was located on the top floor of Marconi House - the impressive five story building in New Street opposite the Apprentice Training Centre. I don't remember there being a lift (at least not one that I had access to), and from memory, the stairs to the top floor "wound up" inside the curved glass windows comprising the SE corner (thank you Google Earth) of the building. I think the Managing Director's Suite was on the 4th floor. If there was a lift, it probably only went that far! Despite being just one floor above, I did not move in those circles! I believe Marconi House was built just before WW-2 in 1939.

Chief of B'cast Div. at that time was **Doug** (Mr to me!) **Smee**. Sales and Contracts sections were located on that floor adjacent to his office on the corner over the stairs. Sales were headed by **Tom Mayer** (who I believe subsequently become MD of Marconi Communications Systems), and Contracts was headed by **Gordon Williams**. At the time, it appeared to me that there was "friction" between Tom & Gordon. Tom gave me the impression (with some justification) that Contracts exaggerated the complexity of what had been sold, and Gordon (with even more justification) felt Sales would underestimate what was involved, and never allowed enough money to cover what was actually called for to satisfy the customer's expectations (easier to sell if the price is reduced, especially when another section then has to come good with what had been promised!). I never forgot this, and subsequently throughout my career, always tried to involve both sales and contracts in pricing system quotations.

As an aside, many years later when I was working with Amalgamated Wireless Australasia (AWA) in Sydney, one of the Sales Engineers who worked in Marconi B'cast Div. in the fifties (**Joe**) joined the Sales Section of AWA. The Australian Broadcasting Commission (as it was then called) had a tender out for the design, construction and supply of a multi-channel Outside Broadcast Recording Vehicle. Joe must have reasoned that it would only involve us in buying a truck chassis, having a coachbuilder come up with a suitable body, buy in the electronic and mechanical hardware, wire it up, pass it over to the ABC and collect the money! Unfortunately, our quotation was accepted, and Joe bundled together the documentation and handed it over to AWA Engineering (**after all, hadn't Keith Thomas worked at Marconi and would know all about O.B. Vans!**) The O.B. Van was eventually built and accepted by the ABC, but by far our greatest difficulty and expense concerned the acoustic noise from the air-conditioning unit and the sound isolation within the vehicle itself. Joe had priced in an air conditioner as used in railway carriages, but this application involved the vehicle being driven to "events", parked in busy streets and used for live multichannel recordings and mixes - all of which was spelt out in the tender requirements. **Tom Meyer had taught his staff well.** But I digress!

One of my jobs during my stay in Contracts was to go through and source all that was necessary to fulfill an order we had for a new TV studio complex in Singapore. I can remember when going through all the sales documentation (to find out what I had to do), that an amount of money had been included in the quotation to "grease the palm" of some Asian luminary to ensure our quote received "fair" consideration! When I queried this, I was (correctly) told this to be a fact of life in doing business in that part of the world! This came as quite a shock to my innocent mind!

On one occasion I needed to go to the disused airfield in Rivenhall where Marconi had leased a hanger and where they assembled, tested and commissioned TV Outside Broadcast vehicles. The one for Singapore was being built there, and I needed to review

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and report on progress. The only company vehicle available at the time was Mr Smee's shiny black **Humber Hawk**. We were given permission to borrow this on the understanding that it was filled up with petrol before returning... no problem Sir - good as done! Unfortunately, when it came to do just that, we could not find where to put the petrol! So, said shiny car was returned with even less fuel in the tank. Fortunately, Mr Smee was out when we got back and we were baled out by one of the blokes in Contracts who went and filled it for us... turns out that the **offside rear light reflector** could be unscrewed to reveal the illusive orifice! Ever since, whenever I came across a Humber Hawk, I inspect that reflector in remembrance of that scary incident!

A particularly memorable occasion was when I was asked if I would like to accompany some of the contracts staff to "**Thames Television**" studios in London - would I ever! This was the first time I had been to a TV studio, especially to the "sharp end" of the business. I learned all sorts of things which would be obvious when pointed out but would otherwise never have thought of in a million years. Such as the studio floor having to be almost perfectly flat (to within a few thousands of an inch), as otherwise as cameras were moved around while "On-air" the picture would jump all over the place - no long zoom lenses, picture stabilisation or camera cranes in those days! It was on this same visit to Thames that I first saw a colour television picture. I had to look down a long tube onto a rectangular display which would be no more than 2 inches by 1.5 inches. The extra dimension of having colour more than made up for the relatively low resolution when compared to the same image on a monochrome display. **Surely, this was the future!**

I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the Contracts Office. Morale was high, the people working there were friendly and always patiently took time to explain to me anything I didn't understand. Names that come to mind from those days include **Vince Power, Cliff Collett, Ron Jones, Jack Elliott and Brian Everett** (who might have been in B'cast Sales). There were others too, equally encouraging, but 50 years later, regretfully, their names escape me.

## 2. TV Studio Equipment Design & Development Labs, Pottery Lane

After finishing my academic studies in Loughborough in 1961 I was sent to Pottery Lane, to the TV Studio R & D labs, where I stayed until emigrating to Australia in May 1964.

There were a couple of young girls (or "young women" in these politically correct times) at Pottery Lane, one of them was secretary to the studio equip engineering manager, and the other worked on the telephone switchboard. Forget their names but the secretary (in the flesh) was really gorgeous, whereas the switch girl just looked okay. Those were the days when colour television was in its infancy and our colour television cameras were at the cutting edge. Whenever a "model" was required for checking faithful scene reproduction (particularly skin tones), the "girls" were naturally pressed into service. The surprising thing was that the nice one still looked nice, but the other one came up much better on camera... always looking stunning! She was a weird girl however... according to rumour she filled the quiet moments on the switch by phoning up people taken at random out of the phone book saying "she was calling on behalf of a Funeral Parlour, and asking when it would be convenient for someone to come around and measure up the deceased". Must have got her kicks out of the reaction!

One tale I have never forgotten about Pottery Lane: the car park was outside a chain wire fence enclosure. To get inside from the car park you had to pass by the uniformed "gate keeper". When I was there, the gate keeper was a particularly miserable "Little Hitler"... nobody came or went without his authority (the gatekeeper at the palace is always more regal than the Monarch). On one occasion, the company had the good fortune to employ **Henri Miskiewicz** (I hope I have spelled his name correctly)... an eminent authority at the

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time in the design of studio video mixers. The first day Henri turns up for work he confronts Adolf, who hadn't seen him before and had no idea who he was. "NAME" barks Adolf..."Miskiewiczzi" replies mild-mannered Henri. "WHAT" barks Adolph... "MISKIEWICZI" replies Henri... "HOW DO YOU SPELL THAT" responds an obviously displeased Adolph, brandishing his clipboard menacingly. Henri, who had a particular dry sense of humour, replied quietly "How should I know, I am only a bloody foreigner". Henri was particularly skilled in designing control panel consoles in beautiful timbers. It was around the time when "**Formica**", posing as timber, was the latest craze. Henri was heard to say that his biggest problem was trying to make his timber consoles look like Formica!

As an aside, I have found that video console operators (male or female) have quite a different aesthetic taste when it comes to the appearance of control consoles to that of audio operators. Time and time again video operators have said to me that they really like what I had proposed, whereas audio operators have come back with "yes it is okey, but **I couldn't possibly work with that colour**"! But I digress (again).

For quite some time I reported to **George Cooper** who was a senior engineer in the colour TV camera group. George was a giant of a man, both in stature and in nature. A truly gentle giant. Admittedly, he did irritate me at times... and as I have since learned, for very good reason. For example, I might have been working on a particular problem which I would discuss with George. The following day I might abandon the original approach, try another and get the required result... bingo! George would come along to see how I was going, only to be told that I had taken a different tack and been successful. George however, was not so much interested in my success, as in wanting me to determine why the original approach did not work! I since discovered you glean a far greater understanding by using this approach than just finding something that works. I have probably similarly irritated those who have worked with me over the years, so **George's philosophy lives on**.

Also, working in the same group was an Australian by the name of **David Watson**. He came to the UK in pursuit of an Australian nurse, Margaret, who was then working at a London hospital (sound familiar fellows?).

Every morning, summer or winter, David's very first words were "**What a bastard of a climate!**" Over a period of time I, and a colleague **Hugh Buckle**, were worn down and started to actually believe him that the skies were permanently blue in Australia, the footpaths were paved with gold and the only sensible thing to do was to emigrate! David was happy tackling the practical aspects of equipment design but was "allergic" to producing any supporting documentation. Having finished the design of what he was working on (other than producing the documentation), he marries Margaret and leaves the company. Guess who was left to produce all the documentation...? David is retired and lives now in Perth (Western Australia), and whenever we are in touch I let him know that it might be 50 years but he still "owes me one"!

However, both I and Hugh have David to thank (or blame) for where we have each spent most of our working life. We did emigrate, and guess what... the skies were not permanently blue or the footpaths paved with gold!

I had lined up a job with **AWA**, and my wife and I sailed to Australia as assisted migrants (ten pound poms) in the good ship Oriana. We arrived in Sydney late on a Saturday evening to torrential rain (so much for the permanently blue skies!). We were met on board by the Personnel Manager of AWA (Wilf Fleming), and after the usual pleasantries I asked about the accommodation we had been promised. "Tell you what" replies Wilf, "we will put an ad. for a flat in Wednesday's Sydney Morning Herald". Having come half way around the world, this was our introduction to the Australian attitude of "She'll be right mate"! Meanwhile, AWA

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put us up in a motel, and by the Tuesday I had found a suitable flat.

**My apprenticeship days spent in Marconi Broadcast Division served me well, and for which I will always be grateful.**

**Keith Thomas**

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