

## CHAPTER V

Chromoworks Limited – Neasden - Oppenheimers – Printing House - Factory Work – The Artists Studio – Lithography - Drawing Techniques – Studio set-up – Work relationships – Trial Period – SLADE & PW Union - Father-of-the-Chapel – Getting to grips with work- Management – Apprenticeship – Work place - Printing processes – Posters – Festival of Britain.

My father had generously paid for a weekly train ticket – an action meant to demonstrate to me the confidence he had in my ability to hold down my first job. He was very much of ‘the old school’. Whilst I was looking forward to a bohemian lifestyle, he, understanding the ways of the world, looked towards *my* dedication and perseverance... to ‘*set me up*’, for a lifetime of work!

Ever since leaving home, my thoughts consumed by doubt and fear. Every part of me charged with foreboding. My walk, dodging in and out of the streams of workers down Station Road, Neasden, took me away from the railway station... past the bombed out sidings and goods-yard that stretched as far as Wembley. The soot blackened factory walls - hiding behind spearheaded railings... the endless rows of terraced Victorian villas - bravely advanced upon the pavement; their geranium filled window boxes trying to lend colourful distraction from the all too obvious bomb damage. A poster-hung hoarding exclaimed, by stark design, the virtues of Persil’s whitening power and Tetley’s superior leaf - promoted by a colourful plantation scene, which gave colour and softened the aspect... I reached the factory gate...

Peering out from behind the grill of a small enquiry hatch a portly gatekeeper acknowledged my knock. He was attired in a brown, patched, warehouse coat, gripping a rolled-up cigarette between a few stained teeth, croaked a gruff, ‘What-ja-want?’ My fear returned; I thrust out my letter - Mr Oppenheimer’s

elaborate hand graced the paper... I made my first utterance since leaving home, 'Here sir!' The door opened... I reluctantly squeezed in. My working life began...

The Gate Keeper showed me the clocking-in procedure, having found my card, then marched me down the long corridor which followed the whole length of the factory to the Artist's Department. There, a grey painted sliding door opened onto a room furnished with eight six feet by four feet wooden tables, several racks of metal plates, and a small anti-room which contained the Foreman's toilet and a storeroom.

He introduced me to the foreman, Mr Brian Porter, whom I had met before at my interview. He, in turn, introduced me to Charlie Cockburn, the eldest in the room. Although past retirement age had elected to stay on - at onetime had been the foreman. Reg Passey held the position of unpaid deputy, Bruce Ormarod, the second eldest and the most irascible. Frank Clements the lettering artist and finally to Eric Campbell the ex-apprentice - had just serve an extra year's apprenticeship to improve his skills.

I was then shown to an empty bench - to be mine, and to the storeroom cupboard... my responsibility. It had been explained to me at the interview that I was to serve a trial period and that if then I was accepted my indentures - a signed and sealed binding document made by the Master and Apprentice stating the terms and conditions, witnessed.

For my duties, I had Eric to show me round - as he was a most sensitive and industrious fellow, his explanation of my tasks most detailed and seemed to last for ages! The first thing in my day was to mix up the ink using an enamel plate as the mixing container I had to rub onto it a greasy wax black stick and then by rubbing the tip of my middle finger over the applied wax using

water as the base. By this method, a black drawing ink produced - the consistency of thin cream.

My second task was to take the orders for dinners and snacks. Chromoworks had an efficient and popular canteen, which remained open for the next five years and that, was where my love for cheese rolls began. Their rolls freshly baked to a nicety and the butter and cheese unsparingly applied. The Works Drama Group laid on frequent dances and the annual Christmas Pantomime. As a whole, the firm was a family run affair and The Directors looked upon their factory with a parental responsibility; the workers viewed the firm as a means of employment and social companionship. Chromoworks was self contained not only having a canteen but a carpenters shop, it's own engineers and electricians, a resident nurse and social worker and the works painter and decorator. It was efficiently run, clean, freshly painted, windows regularly replaced and cleaned and the industrial site up-to-date regarding methods of production and delivery of goods.

Eric took me on a tour of the factory- to every department and shop, introducing me to all the workers. The works employed sixty percent men. The forty percent women mostly occupied positions in the warehouse and print finishing. Great care was taken by any man walking through these areas, for the women would call out and barrack them. However, it was all in good fun and never got out of hand. If any of the machine minders became too fresh they were soon slapped - the women sheet feeders who fed the paper into the grippers of the large machines worked on platforms above ground and the men passing would make to grab for a leg only to have their hand stood on. Mostly the machine minders were very protective of their women helpers so there were hardly any problems.

Chromoworks was a Lithographic Printers - a printing house that was able to reproduce in colour all forms of commercial printing work. Their work covered production of the smallest labels right through to the largest posters. The reproduction of drawings, paintings, photographic prints and transparencies reproduced both photographically and by hand.

A Lithographic Artist in 1950 was still using the same tools, materials and processes adopted in 1796. He was drawing on the printing surface with a wax crayon and ink... either copying a previously painted artwork or making his own drawing. The standing, and future development of the industry, were not explained to me - that the industry was about to be revolutionised by new technology; even if they had I would not have understood the significance.

I was born at the time Kodachrome transparency film was invented – a process giving excellent quality. In 1942, Kodacolor negative film was introduced which bought about the eventual tricolour separation for colour reproductions. It was during my apprenticeship that this discovery, and the inventions that followed, was introduced from America. By 1950, all small colour artworks were reproduced using photographic halftone principles, adopting primary colour filters to separate the tricolour printing images. Lithographic colour retouchers corrected those separations for their spectral deficiencies.

I do not know how much the men understood about the changes that would come about when the film companies introduced their new discoveries and inventions. Even by looking at the American industry you could not fortell the future. It has always been surprising to me how backward the Americans are in implementing new advances. Their printing processes were lagging behind European print houses. What was sure because I was there and experiencing it was that in 1956 the hand drawn

poster industry was finished. Photographic film was now produced in large format size with a stable backing... previously, photographic plate glass size was 30x20 inches. From that moment a very quick change took place. It was a retrograde step but customers insisted upon having their work produced using the latest technology. It is obvious that multiple printing improves commercial posters which were now printed in four colours instead of eight. Over printing increases depth of colour allowing self colours to perfectly match the original and customers house style. Those lovely seaside posters on railway platforms would never be seen again.

By the 1960s electronic scanning began to be introduced for black and white newspaper block making using a Hell Klishograph. This spelt doom to photographic screened halftone images. Still, that was to come later, although workers began to appreciate what was in the air... These changes were to make the onetime power of the camera operator, colour retoucher, lithographic artist and film planner, redundant...

After my trial period had been successfully completed - three months after starting work, I was invited to the following month's union meeting to hear whether I was going to be allowed to become an apprentice. I stood outside, whilst my worth discussed; later allowed back in to hear the verdict by Frank Clements, the Father of the Chapel - elected sometime before I arrived at the firm. He continued in this position until the Printer Strike in 1956. He was my mentor and had taken me under his wing ever since my first day in the works. Frank was an avowed Socialist, proclaimed the worth of social care and the brotherhood of man and was not afraid to say so - he frequently stood up at Head Office Union Meetings and declared his position - he was a most caring individual but unfortunately he expected others to be equally strong both in opinion, resolve and

care for others. This was all very well but his thinking did not seem to include a consideration for the management and owner's need to make a profit; the effects of overseas and home-grown competition nor union strength used undemocratically. Without the use of a sealed ballot - to evade undue pressure applied to an opposing union or works committee.

The vote taken without dissention, I was pleased to stay and start my apprenticeship. However, I had to join the Union and attend Head Office and works meetings.

I started my five years as a Lithographic Artist continuing very much the methods and techniques used all those years ago in Prague. One of my first tasks, after mixing up the ink required for all the artists, was to draw a letter 'c' by hand [without the use of a compass] large enough to fill a 60" x 40" poster plate. The Foreman, Mr Porter, got down on his hands and knees, gazed along the curves by turning the plate round and if there was the slightest bump or undulation, I had to do it again. I had to do that letter 'c' over a dozen times which took over a week and even then he only allowed me to stop and do something else when there was grumbling from the other men that I was being unfairly treated. This sort of attention to detail followed me in all that I did. No work accepted unless it was of a very high standard. Eventually such tasks were commonplace; I had to draw the whole side of a Heinz bean label - that is all the written ingredients, letters that were half an inch high. However, for this I used a ruling pen and compass. These were the first tools bought, and I have them here before me now, a half set of compasses and a ruling pen, so frequently sharpened down that it's blades are half their original length.

My days at work quickly passed. There was so much that was new to me - so much which was a challenge. I had found by luck, something that interested me - and eventually after a lot of

hard work became proficient. I was never a lettering artist although I could produce a reasonable effort. It was lucky that we had Frank Clements who did all the lettering... and he was good at it too. Sometimes to do small letters he would cut down a brush handle to make a wedge shaped tip and use that instead of a brush. It was at colour evaluation, that I found I had a natural bent. It never seemed to me to be difficult to assess how much of each colour needed. What I did not have was the strong fingers of Reg Passey who could lay on a three quarter tint of chalkwork over a large poster plate first time, without having to build it up by continuous application of the crayon. His tint-work would be so smooth - without any patches.

It was in 1950 that Chromoworks won the contract to produce the official poster for the Festival of Britain. This was excellent for the firm and a whole range of posters needed, from small Underground Station posters to the largest forty-eight sheet posters measuring 200 x 120 inches. Much of the other work printed was a succession of well-known advertisers from Tetley's Beer, Persil, Heinz and British Rail. Annually Lyons Corner Shop commissioned pictures for their restaurants. What was interesting was that a number of these were the self-drawn works of well-known artists - known as autolithographs.

Throughout my time as an artist, the basic drawing techniques never changed. To speed up the production of vignettes and increasing the weight of chalkwork an airbrush was sometimes used... for smaller areas the use of Ben Day Mediums - a mechanical tinting device with a raised dot structure stretched over a wooden frame charged with black ink, was appropriate. A pen and ink artwork or architectural drawing could be reproduced photographically that saved drawing by hand. All these methods were adopted to augment the use of chalk and ink. Towards the end of the process - of hand drawn work, great

efforts were made to stem the tide of the camera taking over. However, in the end customers wanted the latest techniques to help sell their produce – thinking that to be modern and up-to-date would give them an advantage - nothing would entice the client to stay with hand-produced posters. Those changes to the industry were to come about, when I came out of my time as an apprentice and had served my National service, six years later...

In October 1950, I started my indentured period of apprenticeship for one day a week, including the evening; I had to go to The London School of Printing at Bolt Court - just off Fleet Street, to study the City and Guilds Course for Lithographic Artists. Many of my fellow apprentices had been to the school for their full-time education, having passed an entrance examination. Their knowledge of the industry was far greater they had had the advantage of training in a department that had a long-term future – the majority were photographic colour retouchers.

The course was for five years and taught by lecturers who were still there in 1980. They were keen on me continuing with hand drawing and showed great interest in the work that I was doing. I produced a reproduction of a horse and cart in nine colours, using hand stipple, by pen and ink. This method last produced commercially, before the war - in the 1920's. It was, even to me, outdated, but I did as I was told... much later I regretted the waste of time and effort!

There was an air of obsolescence about the whole process. It was not just all the other industrial trades affected by modernization and union disruption. Printing, particularly for London's national newspapers, beset by labour problems. National newspapers are unique. Their production is geared to 'the latest story' and 'the fastest deadline'. They make their profit on the advertisers who use their vast circulation for maximum coverage of their product. Any disruption in production is



critical. Newspaper owners are caught by the threat of a strike. They always gave in. This gave the letterpress union's massive power and an enormous pay packet to boot.

I had to belong to a Trade Union. Chromoworks was a union house – a fact accepted by the management. The Legal status for such gatherings of workers did not come about until the mid 1860s - include all trades. The monthly union meetings were held at Doughty Street in London, and all members took it in turn to attend and report to their colleagues what took place - raise any questions the chapel required an answer to, and to vote in a manner agreed upon.

The union was organised within printing houses and platemakers in trade groups called Chapels with officials elected annually. The representative for each chapel was called the Father-of-the-Chapel, who was voted into office, with the rest of the committee, annually. It was hoped, by keen trade unionists that each member would fill these positions in turn, in reality, all the officials continued until they gave up the position. Most of the business covered was routine and to a man, the chief participants were left wing Socialists... In 1950, the majority of workers were ex-service men in favour of Marxist ideology – means of production.

The Head Office staff also retained their position until retirement - deputies into the shoes of departing leaders. The main union policy or philosophy was one-man one job – using a 'white card system'. Every journeyman was equal to another and the rulebook was the law.

The union was there to look after your interests from apprenticeship to retirement. The minimum wage was set annually for a trained member based on 'the cost of living index'. All other wages balanced to this sum, including apprentices paid an incremental proportion.

The rulebook covered every known instance of dispute. On any 'in house' dispute, between a member and the employees, it was insisted that the Chapel would sort it out - by self-regulation. Any self-regulating system is flawed by self-interest and a lack of farsightedness.

In my experience, there was little regulation. Workers and management flouted agreements when it suited their interests. Managements were tied to making a profit, meeting deadlines and competing against other firms, markets and new techniques. Workers kept new production techniques and true production times secret whilst protecting the number of jobs and working habits. Employers either extracted unfair profits in good times or did not have the will to take a moral stand in bad... They were at the mercy of the unions, especially the newspapers, who had a deadline to keep. Minor union officials were often dissatisfied men threatened by their own lack of skill - their need to control others gave them a feeling of power - to make up for their own shortcomings.

From 1950 onwards, momentous changes occurred in the printing industry. There was a transfer of work from one printing process to another as advancing technology dictated. Letterpress up to 1960 was the process for general printing work, Lithography the process most suitable for large posters, and Photogravure produced all the most popular magazine work. This order of work lasted from the late thirties until the seventies, when lithographic web-offset printing took over - the large print runs for magazines and newspaper production. Both letterpress and gravure declined leaving lithography in advance until jet and laser printing made inroads into that, in the nineties. While all this was going on, the labour force shuttled from one process to another, retraining as it went, trying to keep up with each innovation as it fitted into the production line. Technical colleges

could not keep pace and Training Boards floundered. Finally, the unions lost power and the adage of one-man one job went out of the window – colour scanners and word processors linked to laser printers won out. However, all this was to come. No one could predict in 1950 what was to happen in fifty years – a revolution for the printed word.

So ended my first fifteen - wartime interrupted, years. No great scholastic achievements – few personal attributes unearthed. These moments were for me, and for my circle of friends, times of childhood innocence... of freedom, security and simple pleasures... In retrospect, they were halcyon days, taken for granted, and as described, doomed not to last.

I now realise my generation was very lucky – discipline, responsible behaviour and public order dissolved as the old social order changed. In America, the lowest common denominator was ‘anything for a fast buck’, here, ‘I deserve a living’, to become later ‘because I’m worth it!’ Society now is far more selfish and demanding.

The anniversary of Prince Albert’s 1851 Exhibition was celebrated a hundred years later. In 1951, The Festival of Great Britain was incorporated to show the world Britain had survived – emerged from the conflict of war with all the skills and trades ready to resume where it had left off – to claim its previously held premier position. The site chosen for the festival was the south bank of the Thames, which had been badly bombed. Several aerial attacks had left a derelict site close to the centre of London - an ideal place to show what the future would bring and to demonstrate what Britain could do. A joyous expression for a war weary nation. This exhibition brought about much needed work

especially to those businesses around London. In the event, it had about the same effect as the millennium dome.