

Memories of working at Marconi Instruments by Aaron Bateman

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A WHILE back we featured Jim Robson's chronicle of working life at the Odeon and the story of Jim's life continues now with his record of his time at Marconi Instruments on Hatfield Road.

Marconi was once a major employer in St Albans and has regularly featured on this page. If you can add to Jim's record please get in touch.

He writes: "Having taken my services from the Odeon to Marconi Instruments in July 1957 I received a jump in wages from £7-10 (£7.50, after 14 years ten months) to £8-10-10d with the title of instrument fitter, having no experience of the industry.

"This was a basic rate for 35 hours, a guaranteed week'. We worked a 44-hour week, 8am to 6pm Monday to Thursday, 8am to 5pm Friday, with an hour for lunch.

"We had to clock in and out if we were more than three minutes late in the morning or one minute after lunch we lost 15 minutes.

"We were on piece-rate. The majority of the jobs were timed, if a job was timed at 60 minutes and you did it in 45 minutes you got paid 25 per cent over the basic rate, if you took 61 minutes per piece you got the basic rate even though you worked 44 hours or more.

"Having spent quite a lot of time making crystal sets, radios, amplifiers, etc and being able to read a circuit I hoped to be taken on as a prototype wireman.

"I was soon disabused of that idea and offered a job on the shop floor.

"I was interviewed by Geoff Coquantin, (Coke), manager electrical assembly, who asked about previous experience such as could I use a soldering iron, had I ever had a Meccano set, etc. 'You'll do well in assembly' he assured me. And that was it.

"So I found myself in the electrical assembly department in company with approximately 100 fellow employees.

"Having for the past almost 15 years never having worked with more than six people the change was quite traumatic.

"Although my new workmates were very supportive even though they couldn't understand why I was so disoriented I couldn't eat from Sunday to Wednesday, after which I was fine.

"I was fortunate to be put on the final assembly of the TF 1066 signal generator in company with Bernard Gourd who showed me the ropes, that being the closest approach to training at that time.

"The 1066 being a tricky job we were on the much prized blue edged' job cards which guaranteed 25 per cent regardless of the time taken.

"We didn't get paid for the first week, the company keeping a week in hand, but the second week I got £12 odd before tax, which was quite a jump from my previous employment.

"We had a copy of the finished instrument, which had been made in the prototype wiring department, but that didn't tell you how to achieve the very stringent fitting requirements.

"These tips were passed on by Bernard. We were the end of the line and after we had finished our stage the instrument was passed to an inspector who checked it over and if any faults were found it was passed back to the guilty party with a reject slip pointing out the errors.

"There was an inspector at the end of each line; ours was Ron Hayward, an ex-Navy man. I thought I was experienced at making soldered joints so it was a bit of a shock to have my first instrument rejected; 'There's enough *** solder on those *** joints to sink the *** Queen Mary', he told me.

"I learned a lot on 1066 how to make proper joints, how to use tools, how to fit parts made in another department to get the best possible alignment, etc, and not to rock the boat; 'Don't rush it Jim, we don't want the rate fixers putting a time on it'.

"The tricky parts, like the rf box and attenuator were made in another department mechanical assembly who were real fitters and had served their time to acquire the title. Consequently they did not look kindly upon members of electrical assembly who were given the title by the company as soon as they joined 'Fitters, I've shot em' or something like that, they were wont to exclaim.

"When the batch (or J as they were termed) of 1066's was finished I got put on the dreaded TF 867. It had been going for some time and no one had made much time on it.

"The final assembly consisted of two periods of assembly operation each timed at 55min, the times were decided by the rate fixers, who, if they had been in Dr Who would have equated to the Daleks.

"They set the times for every operation, initially by looking at the work involved and then timing an experienced operator with a stop-watch after they had performed the operation enough times to be reasonably adept.

"Some people did very well on piece-work, especially if they had done several batches, and the foreman tended to put the quickest on the sensitive jobs since time was of the essence.

"Ted Gourd, brother of Bernie, or 'King of the 995', was such a one. He was reputed to be making 100 per cent, he was certainly doing better than 75 per cent.

"Bob Gillet was another high-flier, often called 'Old Bluey' due to his ability to troubleshoot problematic instruments while working on blue-edged cards. I noted these and other legendary figures and hoped that I could emulate their success."