

Phil Armitage - The Engineer

“His children, Janet and Michael, never saw their father during hop picking – but they smelt him”!

(Extract from the Vicar’s eulogy at Phil Armitage’s memorial service at Playden church in 1994).

Just recently, I was writing a few notes for the family, and realised just how much the Guinness community meant to me, and that if I didn’t record something about my early years – which clearly went on a bit - all those memories would be lost for good!

Mike Armitage, Hawkhurst, 2009

Early days

As a young lad, and also much later on, the Guinness Hop Farms at Bodiam were everything to me.

From a very early age, I can just remember Dad vanishing down Cackle Street in Brede, where we then lived, in an ancient bright green Ford Popular van. This was one of the first ever Guinness ‘company vehicles’, and was apparently necessary for someone who normally drove an even older Morris 8, to get to the offices, machines and oasts that were dotted all over the Sussex countryside at Bodiam.

Dad had always been a builder. He was a skilled bricklayer coming from his family firm in Hertfordshire, and, after a lengthy stint with The Royal Engineers during the war; he established the Armitage family in Sussex with his brothers, Jack and Bill, working for Allnatt Builders of Park Royal, London, who had an office and yard in Battle, next to the station.

Words like ‘Udjam’, and ‘Okkam’, were in everyday talk at home in the early fifties, and I hadn’t a clue what they meant – even less of an idea how to spell the names of the farms! I used to ride my tricycle around at home saying to my mother: ‘I’m going to Bromyard’, (where Dad sometimes stayed when working at Braces Leigh), and still lived happily in oblivion as to what or where Bromyard really was.

It took me many years to understand what being the Engineer at Guinness really meant. Dad’s job was designing and building new machines, oasts, presses and looking after other buildings on the Guinness estates at Bodiam, Teynham and Braces Leigh. But the farms at Bodiam were to me the places where I always identified with his work and I loved every minute of it.

During the hop-picking season, he would often take me with him on the various rounds of all the farms. I would sit in the Land Rover/Hillman Minx/Bedford van, peering over the dashboard as we tried to overtake a bucolic blue Fordson Major, belching TVR fumes all over the place and swaying from side to side with an overload of hops from Garil Meads or Eight Acres. We would always visit M5 at Udiam, which was my favourite, then went on to M8 at Eyelids. From there, it was the long drive up the Junction to M7 right down the track at Northlands, which seemed like it was in the next county, (which it nearly was actually). M9 got a look-in on the way back and it was then off to M6 at New House as well as the oast there, which was a modern brick building then. I remember Stainsmore garden on the Junction Road being blown down one autumn and the fire at the tar pit opposite, which meant that the Brede fire brigade had to pour foam

everywhere to put it out. I got a trip home wearing a fireman's helmet that day!

In later years, the numbers of machines developed further. I must have asked Dad hundreds of times where all the machines were – like M1, M2 etc. I can just about remember the original grey M1 opposite the old workshop at Ockham This was situated where the new stores were later built with the carpenters shop underneath. Edwin Willard was the storeman, and he had an outside bell for his telephone. The stores were like an Aladdin's cave to me, with huge shelves containing just about everything. The new workshop opposite also had a barrel of Guinness on the table every hop picking!

The machines

M1, a 'Hinds' built machine, used to churn out a peculiar, sometimes frightening regular 'boom—thump' noise, which I still can recall to this day! Dad always said something like 'Oh, that's the lateral picker panelling; it doesn't make that noise on a Bruff machine'! When I badgered him about M2, I don't think I ever got an answer I understood, because I still can't remember where the old M2 was, (not the new one, which I think was built at New House, near M6).

The old M4 was at Udiam, on the slope up towards the sharp left hand bend towards M5 on the lane eventually leading to Ockham. I always stared at the M4 shed in disbelief, as it was so small and low compared with all the others. M3 was another with an uncertain past, but was eventually built as a new machine next to M8 at Eyelids, (more about that later). M4 also re-emerged as a new 'state of the art' machine at Ockham, just below the oast, which I think was named O1. M11 used to be further down, near the railway, and M10 was near the quarry, at Udiam.

The 'imaginative' names for all these seething places of industry still stick with me! Once in September, many years later, I was working in an office in London, and just mentioned to nobody in particular, "Hop-Picking starts today"! I looked up a few seconds later and everyone was staring at me as though I'd gone completely mad! It took me some time to realise that a firm in Westminster was a long, long way from 'real work' in Bodiam!

Guinness machines were manufactured by Bruff Engineering Ltd, based in Suckley, Worcestershire. Albert Brookes, the Managing Director, and Dad became firm friends over the years and obviously did a lot of business, because the green machinery was evident on all three farms.

It was about then that I got my first Meccano set. I can remember as if it was only yesterday, sitting by the fire and opening such a fabulous present and I was hooked immediately.

Radio cars

When I was about 11 years old, the offices in the brick building next to Molly Richardson's telephone office, were converted to house a radio hut. The Base set for the brand new radio telephone system was installed In Dad's office. The way it worked was that there was a receiving and sending radio set in four cars or Landrovers with this home base at Ockham. This speeded up farm communication very well, and enabled all the serious business of knowing what to do next to be carried out at break-neck speed. Molly could easily run round with a message for Dad from Bruff, and he could know what was going on immediately – despite being up to his elbows in grease at Eyelids.

At the start, there were only four sets. Telephone Company rules, under penalty of death, demanded that there had to be a proper call sign allocated to every set – hence the (again), imaginative but now evocative names which were assigned to the four vehicles: -

Hop Able – Hugh Roberts (Land Rover)
Hop Baker – Dad (Hillman Minx - KDY 425)
Hop Charlie – Bill Melton (Bedford Van)
Hop Dog – Lou Osbourne. (Bedford Van)

Hop Able - Hugh Roberts was of course Farm Manager before becoming Managing Director. He had been decorated with the MC during the war and was a stern, likable man to me. Since my earliest days, I always coveted his Jaguar car, and am still waiting to own one! He had a small dog called Bullion, and another called Fuggles!

Hop Baker - Why Dad was Hop Baker I never found out, but the call signs were based on the older version of wartime phonetics, and the names became synonymous with the users of each set!

Hop Charlie - Bill Melton lived in Hawkhurst on Moor Hill, (very close to where I live now). He was an exceptionally clever and innovative engineer and Dad thought the world of him. I don't think Bill ever slept during hop picking, and I can still see him, overalls flapping away, using the motorised hacksaw in the workshop (which always fascinated me), or explaining to Dad in a foreign language to me, that 'Phil, the tines on the lateral pickers at M8 are all breaking off and finishing up in the sample, so I'll have to get in there and replace them all overnight...!' And he would!

Hop Dog – Lou Osbourne was the Tractor Foreman. How he ever managed to change tractor wheels with the ancient tools he kept in his cream Bedford Van (the sliding door type again), I'll never know. He was continually on call as there were always tractors breaking down or wheezing along in need of some tender loving care – especially after some of the students had been in a race with them, or hit a cant pole at full speed!

In later years, there were four more names on the phone list: -

Hop Easy – John Burgess (Farm Manager)
Hop Fox – Ernie Goodsell (Transport Manager)
Hop George - John Edwards (Personnel)
Hop How – (Trills Electricians)

Hop Easy must have surfaced when John Burgess took over from Hugh Roberts. I remember John calling in at the most unearthly hours of early morning or late at night, usually from a far-off garden that was earmarked for picking next.

I always remembered Ernie Goodsell sending off the pale green Jempson's flatbed lorries. They were always stacked incredibly high and swayed all the way out of the farm gates onto the main road, bound for Park Royal or possibly Dublin – I never found out! Ernie has a special place in my life as he gave me, via Mum and Dad, a silver serviette ring when I was christened in the late forties. I still have it!

John Edwards was a fabulous man. He was a schoolmaster, and his holidays were spent running the personnel issues with Concordia staff during the picking season. I can well remember him driving the usual transport – a Bedford Van with the doors rolled back, and, with me laughing in the passenger street, taking

the Bodiam bridge at nearly forty miles an hour! We took off for a second, everything in the back shot up and clattered down in a heap and the gleam of fun which showed though his enormous whiskers is etched on my memory to this day.

Trills have a very special place in my memory. The electrics on the newer machines were becoming more complicated (It took me ages to find out what a solenoid was, but it was pretty damn important)! Mr. Tommy Trill was based in the workshops and shop on Cranbrook Road in Hawkhurst. This building was famous as the first business premises for what eventually became the Rootes Group. There are many photographs of the shop in the early part of the last century and little seems to have changed at the front. I always wanted to talk to the Trills men. Ken Reeves and Bernard were constantly on call for any sparks jobs on any farm building or machine! I can still see these men clambering around in the rafters, pulling wire in all directions and always laughing at something! Ken used to call Dad 'Sir Wack' after some Liverpool joke, and I always looked up to him!

Because these radios were switched on all the time, they would have been useless if there was nobody there to answer the calls. In the first years, together with some of the other 'sons and daughters' we were paid £2 a week to sit in the car all the time and take all the messages. This was good money and paid for all the extra Meccano bits from Mozleys shop in Hastings. Again, Post Office laws stated that there must be a proper and correct mode of communication at all times, otherwise we would be closed down and everyone arrested and jailed for life.

It all worked pretty well. The base set was manned by another student (£4 a week) and the other lads and I would talk over the ether in measured, serious tones. Over the years, there were many boys like me working with the sets and I am sorry to admit that I can only recall Robin Blackford (fabulous Meccano set) whose father was first at Ockham, then at Braces Leigh, Lewis Roberts and George Watkin's son.

The camps

There were still hand pickers working at Guinness in those days. The camps like the one at Park Farm (where I think M7 ended up), were full of noise and open fires. There used to be a van with 'Sound Systems' painted on the sides and huge trumpet like speakers on the roof, going round all the gardens where hand picking was going on. One particular year, I learned all the words to 'Diana', by Paul Anka from that van! There were also films shown in some of the communal areas and cinemas at the camps. I was 11 and Bodiam really seemed to buzz then! The Junction pub (now The Curlew) seemed to be packed to the rafters every night.

Eventually, I finished up working on the new radio base set in the tiny room round the back of the main office block at Ockham, where Tex Bailey also worked with Dad. It really got quite busy sometimes, especially when there was a gale, or more often than not heavy rain. Tex was always a very funny man, and kept me in stitches about his Navy days. He was also a superb guitarist and ran a dance band in Hastings, 'The Texans', which was always in demand.

Family friend

It was around that time – early 1960's, that Dennis Wood, who worked in the accounts department, was killed in the Innsbruck plane crash. I was actually

sitting with Dad one evening in February, when the announcement came on the radio. I remember him looking at me, then becoming very grim. "Dennis Wood is flying out there today..." was all he said, and sadly, it was indeed true, and we had all lost a good friend. So had everyone who knew him, especially at the Priory Cricket club in Hastings, where they used to have a large memorial photograph of Dennis and another of the team who also died. It was proven folklore that Dennis once walked to Bodiam from Hastings in the snow, because the roads were too bad to drive on!

Terrace Wood

One of the perks of working at the base was that I was allowed to buy my lunch (1/9d tickets, obtainable from Alan Karn) at Terrace wood, where Fred Archer would cook enormous meals outside near the road on an open fire. Who can forget the sight of Fred in his vest and trilby hat, stirring huge pans of vegetables under a makeshift tarpaulin roof? I was allowed to sit at one of the communal tables with my heroes, Ken Reeves, Bernard, Fred Barnett, Bill Melton, Mickey Hall and Basil Bambridge among many.

Basil was probably the nicest man I have ever met. I think he lived at Terrace Wood before he got married, and I met him several times in later years after he and Bambi moved to Bedgebury School in Goudhurst, it was so easy to slip into memory lane when he got talking! There was also a policeman living at Terrace Wood during picking. He was probably the only one we ever needed in those days, but I could be wrong...! Fred Barnett knew absolutely everything about plumbing. In later years, long after he retired, he was the only man I knew who still went up into attics, bent pipes, put Rayburns in and replaced taps! At home, we are eternally grateful for him coming to help us when our own Rayburn sprang a leak! His singing was unique and continuous and we loved it!

New projects

The year Dad designed the continuous loading tracks for the machines was one of the busiest I can remember. Machine loading had always been carried out from the back of one tractor and trailer, onto a single continuous chain with the hooks attached at regular intervals. Dad had always wanted to speed up the number of bines going through the pickers to optimise the work these machines did. One way to keep the bines going in at full throttle, was to have them loaded in the gardens as usual, but the trailers were covered with loose canvas sheets with three vertical columns about four feet high attached at the front.

When the trailer arrived at the machine, the canvas sheet with the bines held by the three poles, was slid onto a low wheeled platform, which was pushed into the machine to be loaded on the hooks as usual. This meant tractors had a quick turn around and could speed off for a new load very quickly. The idea worked for several seasons but he wasn't happy with the spaces on the chains – which meant that the pickers were picking nothing but air!

The continuous loading track was designed to use a dual system of hook chains, located in the loading bay as before, but enabling two tractors to load the machine side by side. The bines went up on hooks or grabs, but at the top, they were freed from the chain and were able to start rolling down two free running tracks towards the lateral pickers. Just before the bines descended into the tines, there was a points system, rather like a railway, where the two tracks converged into one. This all meant that there was always a queue of bines waiting up in the rafters and the whirring pickers were kept working at full capacity.

The 'guinea pig' was M10, up at the Quarry, where the prototype was built. I can still see Bill Melton up in the gods, pushing a trolley down the sloping track where it became stuck somewhere. I nudged Dad and he laughed, but really, after all the adjustments, the whole system proved to be a great success, and all the machines were altered to use the system.

The next innovation I recall was the heavy press. The long-established rack and pinion presses, which used to make the oast floors creak and groan, always produced the traditional long pockets, so loved by people driving behind the lorries at ten miles an hour as they left the farms. The idea was that the hops could be pushed with much more force into a steel formwork, which was lined with the standard type of hessian. After pressing, the hops really were in there tight, and stitching up afterwards was carried out as before. The prototype was at Udiam (U1 or 2; anyway, in the small oast on the slope opposite Frank Jarvis's house). These bales were actually tubular and the steel formwork was well capable of taking enormous pressure. In later years, the bales became square and the forms made from heavy timber.

Wilt watch!

When I became a real teenager, broke as usual, I was steered to a holiday job working for Bob Butt on the Verticillium Wilt Identification programme. Bob used to have an office next to Molly Richardson in, funnily enough, the very room where Dad first started at Guinness. He had a team of people including Marie Trussler and another local 'son' (Ivor Melton?), who would check every single bine in all the gardens on the whole estate. The job entailed walking down a prescribed row, defined on a precise drawing in the office by its position in relation to a cant pole. You had to look left for three bines at each row of hills, then right for three bines. Any sign of wilt would be obvious from a discolouration of the lower leaves or stunted growth. Further inspection of the suspects entailed sticking a thumbnail in the lower bark, and, if the inner stem was slightly brown, then there was a probability that wilt was present.

Verticillium Wilt was a real problem at Bodiam. The disease could lay waste a whole area of several gardens, and, was contagious in the extreme. When there was a particularly bad year, there used to be half barrels of Formalin at each junction, where we would always have to wash our boots, and also the car tyres. The problem of Wilt infestation became more paranoid with Dad always having to keep his normal car at home. He had to hire another car from Jack Bryan's garage at Broad Oak (usually a Mini van), for work at Bodiam, and, when he went to Teynham or Braces Leigh, he could switch to his usual car. Never the twain should meet though!

Back at the office, I was consigned to a room even smaller than the radio shack, to mark up the huge maps with green coloured squares, defining the infected bines. Eventually, the diseased bines would be grubbed out and presumably replaced. This job was incredibly boring and repetitive. I hated doing this and was glad when picking started so I could get back on to the radio job, although Bob was a good and fair man to work for. He once docked me an hour from my wages because my Mobylette moped was playing up, and naturally, I went straight to the workshops where Mickey Hall sorted the thing out. Well, you did things like that when you were young and indifferent to guvnors didn't you!

On another occasion, I was also torn off a strip because I spent a pleasant half hour talking to Tooter. He would drive his horse and cart all over the place. Everyone knew him, but I never really found out what he did! He was to me the Guinness Old Retainer, because his presence was always recognised, and, better,

everyone seemed to acknowledge him – well I did anyway. Dad accused me of wasting work time (for which I was being paid), about this and that, talking to him and I was most aggrieved, because Tooter seemed to be a bit like My Uncle Silas in those gorgeous stories by H.E.Bates.

On a brighter note, Peter Knapp once let me drive his jeep for a few yards in the field behind M11 at Ockham!

Holidays as a teenager

In 1964, I got a job as 'fitters mate' and sweeper-up on M3 & 8 at Eyelids, during the school holidays. Ken Wells was foreman on M8 and I think Bert Jones was on the other machine. M3 was new then, and had a lot of state of the art processes built in, including a huge magnet at one end to take out any stray metalwork! M8 was much older. I still thought that the work was fabulous for a teenager who was going to rule the world, but began to think a bit more seriously after eight hours in the crows nest, moving the points on the continuous loader track! One job I had one evening was changing the teeth on the Wilder machine, which was a forerunner of the industrial shredders, which demolish trees on the roads and railways today. Previously, the hop waste would emerge from the final belt to be fork-lifted away, but this new machine had real power!

I had to crawl in and hang upside down inside the machine, unbolt all the teeth and put new ones on. All this was done with the power off of course, but I do remember asking Ken about a dozen times, to check that all the juice was disconnected. He very kindly pointed to the red master switch, which was definitely 'up'. The power of those shredders was such that someone once dropped a piece of asbestos sheeting in and it was immediately despatched into the trees about 100 yards away! Hmmm!

I got my 'O' level results that year, and was able to bask in glory for about two seconds before real work kicked in again. I do remember also, that the smell of hop resin, oily and hot from the processes became very unpleasant, and perhaps this was a wake-up call to a teenage sprog, that everything might not be so rosy after all, and it was hard work there.

Time moved on, and Dad, as always, was involved in keeping the machines and oasts at their peak. There were always other property jobs to attend to and they always fell onto his great big metal desk in the offices, which had been relocated to the block overlooking the valley towards Bodiam Castle. He had given up his radio officer's chair which he loved to bits, and eventually gave to me! He became a serious Guvnor in my eyes. He was becoming quite different from the man who wore a boiler suit and his old army belt with violently heavy brown army boots, which he wore during his days out on the farms during hop-picking. June Bryant would run all his secretarial work with precision.

New design work

In 1974, I was looking around for some new work, and as there was a backlog of design work on the new oast at Braces Leigh, as well as some domestic surveying at Bodiam, I went to the offices in Bodiam to do some drawing and design. This was under the cool, quiet gaze of Ernie Seeley, who was one of the most influential men I have ever had the pleasure of working for. His skill was that everything he did was designed to the minutest degree. Nothing was left to chance. Between us, we designed and built the wheeled bins for the oasts. The idea was that the hops were all dried in wire mesh trays, then, when they were ready, a large lever at the front was pulled and all the hops dumped below onto

the pressing floor. Luckily, the system worked and they also used them at Teynham and Braces Leigh.

Ernie and I could fill the room with pipe smoke in those days (so could Dad actually) – when smoking was allowed! I also had to prepare a new windows work job for Levetts Lane, and also, design the new building for a revolutionary new oast at Braces Leigh. Big stuff for the old radio-telephone chief!

The oast building at Worcester went off pretty well, I only had a few problems, but the Levetts lane houses became a bit of an issue, which was left for me to sort out. You see, Dad had been unwell for some years. Since I was at school, he had always had to watch his blood pressure, and had had a couple of scares. In early November 1974, he had a serious heart attack at home in Broad Oak. He was whisked into St Helen's Hospital and spent a few days there being told to slow down, lose weight and take things easier. I think he eventually took notice of their instructions, because from then on, he began to wind up work and consider early retirement.

The budget at Levetts Lane came out at just over £5,000, which was a lot of money in 1974. I had to explain to Hugh Roberts just how this money was going to be spent, and luckily, after a bit of negotiation, we all got the windows and serious maintenance done for about that figure. Dad had told me from his hospital bed that it was too high and I shouldn't tell the powers that be, but I did anyway. When you think that this was probably the first big maintenance programme carried out on the houses since they were built in 1947 (By Dad actually – they were his pride and joy), they had lasted remarkably well. I still have six photographs taken during the original building works.

Other projects.

For some years, the Guinness Board had considered cider production, and Blackthorne Cider became a group interest. I had to go to Teynham with Charlie (?) and set out proposed orchards but this never materialised in a commercial sense. There was also a project to bury a guide wire in the first foot of soil, to allow a remote control tractor to work! I think that died a death fairly early on too! However, one innovation did happen with regard to wirework in the gardens.

Traditional poles and wires were expensive and continually requiring maintenance, especially after each picking season, when the gardens had all suffered from being bashed around by tractors, the weather and the weight of the bines pulling everything down, especially in the wet. The Benker wire system reduced the number of poles and used specially designed wire trusses, which were strung between huge perimeter poles set in the ground at 30 degrees from the vertical. From these, the trusses – really several cables fixed together in a fashion rather like a wire 'rafter', were fixed and strung out across the garden in the usual way. The absence of too many intermediate poles was immediately noticeable, and made much more room on the ground.

The trusses were actually designed by Ernie Seeley, and made in the old M4 shed at Udiam. I think Mickey Hall was running the manufacturing process there, and I believe there are still some gardens at Teynham with this framework.

Another new concept that was built at both New House (NH4) and also Braces Leigh, was the continuous dryer. The drying machinery was developed and manufactured in Belgium. In basic terms, it was a huge steel box, with a driven mesh belt. The hops went in one end, and were dried on a six-hour cycle, eventually emerging at the other end for pressing. All quite simple really! Gone

were the days of oasts with cowls, three o' clock shifts, sulphur burning and creaking hand presses!

Trombone gate

One of the last jobs I had to do was to design some details in the roof and a special gate for Tony Landels' dairy at New House. The dairy was in fact a state of the art building, with herringbone stalls in the milking room, and a brand new Charcon building to house the cows. They had chalk beds to sleep on too! We put in new Yorkshire boarding along the sides and a vent in the ridge, which kept the animals pretty well.

The gate was my own pride and joy, as Tony wanted to introduce a system where he could control the animals going into the milking room, while letting the others out at the same time. The gate emerged as a complex bit of machinery which could go up and down to take in differing floor levels, and in and out like a trombone, to allow for the different widths of the openings.

Mickey Hall made it in the workshop, and it actually worked – and much better after he had added his own touches!

Final years

I left in spring 1975 after the Guinness organisation demanded huge changes. Luckily, my family stayed in touch with several people mentioned above, like Ken Reeves and Fred Barnett. Dorothy Woodin became Godmother to our two girls, and she was a generous guiding light to them for many years. Jim Trussler gave me a special recipe for home made wine, which we brewed for many years! (That's one way to remember someone)!

There are so many other names and places etched in the memory; Frank Jarvis on his horse at Udiam - the pond outside the old workshops at Ockham full of filthy water - the steam trains chugging along side the lane from Ockham to Udiam - helping a French student in the little clinic at Udiam (and trying to speak French) - watching the Bodiam Hill Climb at New House, when we even had an international driver compete once - watching a new reservoir being built behind M10 (it leaked), in fact, far too much to write here!

I still regularly drive through the village, and usually bore anyone with me about what happened down 'that lane', or how 'so and so' did this and that. The reality of the Guinness community was that of a hard working place, possibly no different from other busy farms, but somehow, to a growing lad, a unique experience and a source of treasured memories.