SNAP SHOT MEMORIES OF THE EVER READY COMPANY - 1964 – 1969

Life at the Ever Ready company began straight from school at the tender age of 15. I was employed as a machine minder/operator on the PF floor. The department was located on the first floor and housed the labelling, hot melts, cutter and hopper machines.

Essentially, the department produced the outer cylindrical cardboard tubing that when completed and emblazoned with the company logo were cut to the normal battery sized units or cells. Finally, they were sealed with a metal disc at the base end of the cell.

From the PF floor the units made their way down to the floor below via gravity chutes for further development. I cannot recall either A or triple A's designated type battery's being made by us at that time. Quality Control was also located on PF.

A covered external area led to the ground, upper floors and the canteen. A female locker room door and a medical room fire exit sat on opposite sides of this area and bench seating was arranged along both sides for the benefit of employees during break periods.

Adjacent the entrance sat rows of stacked pallets providing additional seating. This area was normally occupied by male employees during lunch breaks beefing about their lot in life whilst eyeing up the females seated on the benches or otherwise going about their business. Behind the pallets was a long, dark storage shed running parallel to the perimeter fence. The fence line separated the factory from an area of waste ground that in later years became a carpark.

Internal building access was via two heavy duty rubber fire doors with dirty plastic windows leading to a communal staircase. Another set of these doors were fitted at all department entrances and were designed to restrict the

advance of smoke in a fire situation, the windows I assume, was to help reduce the likelihood of accidents occurring by seeing who was coming from the opposite direction, however, the state of these windows ensured no one saw anything.

Floor Managers

Management were identifiable by their long distinctive tan coloured coats including those worn by engineering managers. Female supervisors wore white.

PF's floor foreman was Eric Boswell a tall, quiet and distant individual as I recall. In the five and half years working on PF I cannot remember talking with him for any amount of time. Nevertheless, he has held a presence in my memory for over 50 years. Possibly his leadership attitude as foreman was to involve himself only when required but in the meantime to let his people get on with the job they knew and were paid to do.

Eric was ably supported in his role by a short stout and bespectacled fellow whose name has long faded from memory. If Eric had a hands off approach to managing, this chap was the complete opposite - never standing still for a moment he certainly kept us busy and on our toes. Despondency always set in when Eric was away as it meant - well work!

Above Eric was Mr Liddell who would periodically walk the floor without looking away from his direction of travel. Only occasionally would he hold court with Eric and the supervisors. On such occasions he would sally up the gangway much like a hospital consultant doing the rounds followed in tow by his subordinates.

Although stern looking, Mr Liddell must of had a sense of humour as he once caught me listening to music using an extra-long tube I'd made by leaving my machine running but stopping its cutting cycle for a few seconds. The end result was one continuous extended cardboard tube that enabled me to reach up to the nearest radio ceiling speakers running the length of the department. By placing one end to my ear and

the other against the speaker grill I was well able to listen to radio music to the exclusion of noisy factory machinery or distractions while still maintaining a watchful eye on my machine. Mr Liddell uttered not a word standing close behind me without my knowledge, listening to my feeble attempts at singing in rhythm to the latest hip tune of the day; Family Doggs 'Way of Life' I was informed later he chuckled to himself and just walked away - no doubt wondering possibly, as we do now - what makes today's youth tick.

Hot Melt Machines

In the day, battery tubes were made by bonding together three thick strips of buff paper attached to 3 foot diameter reels. These quite heavy reels had a centre hole that the operator had to lift onto corresponding lugs located beneath their machines. Once fitted and secured in place the operator manually threaded each reel strip through a series of pullies. It was important to keep the reels taught when threading as the sudden jolt on a slack reel when starting the machine almost inevitably tore the paper which then necessitated re-threading through.

When the machine was switched on a heavy duty nylon belt pulled the strips through and over the heat receptacle where one side of each strip is liberally coated with heated glue. This action glued the strips together and the cardboard tube cools and bonds. A synchronised blade cuts the tube at the specified length. As mentioned earlier, the tube cutting cycle can be manually interrupted for the purpose of making a longer tube and which in theory, could continue until the reels had completely run themselves out. From memory each reel lasts around 20/25 minutes before replacing.

PF had three hot melt machines, two, including the one I operated in later years were located in an ante-room facing the entrance to the department. The third machine was located on the main floor, opposite the foreman's office. The glue used in

the tube bonding process was made by melting large irregular plastic blocks that were simply placed into a thermostatically controlled covered receptacle that maintained a constant heat temperature. An accidental splash-back from the melting glue on bare skin was a painful experience as it quickly solidified on the outside but maintained heat internally very much like liquid candle wax acts on skin. If not immediately removed it would leave its mark - operators therefore learnt, normally through splashback experience, to exercise caution when feeding in glue blocks.

From here the tubes would be stacked onto wheeled trolleys and pushed to the labelling machines where the company logo was mechanically glued on.

Logo Labelling Machines

The labelling machine was the only machine I never operated during my time at the firm and looking back I'm grateful I didn't. They were overly noisy, hard to clean and used a thick white gum substance delivered in 50gal drums. The look and consistency of the gum resembled a thicker version of your everyday PVA glue. It smelled horrid and if you got any on the clothing, it stayed there despite frantic, but no doubt, futile efforts being made by operators to remove the stuff. Nevertheless, the machines very important contribution to battery production was advertising the Eveready brand on all its batteries thus, any bare, buff coloured tube that entered the labelling machine at one end came out the other proudly suited and booted with the Ever Ready or special job logos rapped around them.

Cutter Machines

Another integrated part of the battery making process were the cutters. These machines were connected directly to the hopper machines by a horizontal feeder guide. The cutters were operated primarily by female employees although we were

cross trained on both machines. The cutter operators job was to keep the hopper continually supplied with battery cells.

The cutting operation required the operator to take a tube from the trolley positioned in front of their machine and place it onto a fast revolving horizontal spindle.

When on the spindle, the operator depressed a foot peddle which brought up air compressed blades synchronised to cut the tubes into approximately 8 single sized battery cells or units.

Once cut, the operator released the peddle and physically propelled the row of units along and into the feeder guide whilst depositing an excess piece from both the top and bottom of the original tube into a bin.

The cutting operation was carried out in one, seamless and rhythmic movement. In skilled hands the process took only a couple of seconds to perform but it was a repetitive action performed hundreds of times throughout the working day. The tube trolleys were regularly replenished as they became expended, either by the cutter girls themselves or by a designated floor person. As well as experience, cutter operators needed good hand eye co-ordination to perform this operation.

Gloves, similar to today's reinforced gardening gloves were periodically issued to help limit sore fingers and thumbs which was common following hours of nonstop cutting. The gloves were not universally popular however, as they curtailed speed and interfered with the rhythm and in any case, wore through easily. Sometimes, the spindles built up deposits that restricted the speed in which the cells left the spindle and further added to sore fingers. In such situations an engineer was called to file the spindle smooth again.

The feeder guide linking cutter and hopper was twisted along its length so that although the cut units entered the guide horizontally they arrived at the hopper end vertical.

As mentioned, the tubes would normally have been labelled with the traditional Eveready logo or subsidiary brands like

Berec and Varta prior to being stacked and trolleyed down to the cutting machines. There were times however, when brand logos were to be left off for whatever reason.

Hopper Machines

These were the machines I operated for the first couple of years of employment and were known as hoppers. When recalling them now, they were quite an ingenious piece of industrial machinery. In the mid 60's Eveready opened a factory in Sir Lanka and a couple of E17 engineers including one from PF were seconded for a few months to work at installing and maintaining hoppers and cutting machines out there. Perhaps they are still churning out battery cells the old way, notwithstanding the devastation of their troubled history.

When viewing the bottom end of a round battery cell there is a metallic disc known as a bottom cover or seal. The machines job was to align and seal by pressure action, the cover to each cell as they passed through the machine. Hopper machines were sited in pairs i.e. 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B etc although they functioned quite independently of each other.

The only primary battery cells I remember being made on the floor were designated U2's, and U11's. Today, battery reference numbers have long been re-designated C and D sizes but I suspect Eveready employees from those times still think of them by their original designation. I know I still do.

At the hopper end, each cell exiting the feeder guide was filtered onto a small rotating table where they, in turn, were picked up by second revolving table. From here they pass through the machine and sealed.

On exiting, the cells were guided along a small bridge that pushed them out onto a much larger revolving production table from where they exited, via two gravity fed chutes, through to the department below for further production. This involved having a zinc container being inserted into the cells and filled

with a quite hazardous compound mixture including manganese and carbon.

It was quite normal to see lads from what may have been the PT floor walking about during their breaks with carbon blackened faces, mouths and coveralls. I might add all production employees were provided a mouldy looking chunk of green soap, periodically that had the solidity of a brick for washing purposes prior to knocking off for the day.

The hopper itself consisted of a rotating circular container situated above head height and similar in shape to a high sided, upturned dustbin lid. The container was angled downward at approximately 45 degrees. A small standalone motor kept the container revolving on its axis.

An inch and half wide chute dropped the seals down, one after another, from the container by gravity motion where they were individually seated onto the moving cells and sealed.

To keep the container filled with seals the operator used a small metal pot attached to the end of a broom handle that he/she thrust into a large metal drum located by each hopper containing thousands of seals.

The loaded scoop was offered up and the seals emptied into the open container. However, and I'm guilty of doing this on a number of occasions, the combination of the rotating hopper, its angle and combined weight of the filled scoop sometimes resulted in the operator totally misjudging the angle and emptying half the contents down on man and machine. Such mishaps delayed production until all the seals were removed. On the positive side it gave the cutter girls a 5 minute break and no doubt, a good laugh.

A filled hopper would last approximately five minutes, perhaps a little longer. A quick cursory check that everything was running as it should, the operator could then have a natter with the adjacent operator or daydream as to what life was all about and wonder how green the grass was on the outside.

Sometimes, bored operators developed and honed their skills in the art of seal flicking. Using forefinger and thumb the seal could be propelled towards some distant target or at another bored operator within range who would of course retaliate. Some of the lads became quite skilled in distance travelled, speed and target accuracy.

On occasions the small hopper motors threw a benny. The distinct smell of electrical burning or a smoking hopper was usually a good indication that something wasn't right. The problem was usually caused by an overzealous operator overloading the hopper beyond the motors capacity to rotate sufficiently. In such situations the machine was switched off and the hopper motor permitted to cool before being replaced. Each pair of hoppers had a high powered airline attached to the machine, supposedly to aid cleaning, but sometimes we used it to help dissipate fumes and cool the motor.

Hopper machines didn't have automatic cut off devices when detecting a fault like most machinery has today. The absence of seal covers for example, feeding down from the container did not prevent the machine from continuing its job of sending cells through the machine for sealing. In such cases, the now damaged and crinkled cells could not be put through the machine again and so had to be dumped.

As part of daily housekeeping routine, hopper operators were required to clean their machines before finishing their shifts ready for the next day. The chemical cleaning agent used was tetrachloride contained in your everyday squeezy fairy liquid bottle. Believe me you needed no recreational aids to get high if exposed to this stuff in a confined space.

The correct method for cleaning hoppers was to do it bit by bit, using the machines on/off buttons to move the tables round under control until all moving parts had been liberally doused and then wiping off any excess fluid with a rag. The operation took about five minutes or so to complete.

As wise to the world youngsters, logic dictated that if a quicker way was found to clean the machine then why not adopt it. And we found it. I might add the air-line had its limitations in respect of cleaning. The job could obviously get done much quicker if the machine was left running while we cleaned. This was achieved by squirting the chemical onto the machines moving parts and just keep the rag resting on them. And so, with safety guards removed, the revolving wheels were copiously sprayed with the agent and cleaned at the same time.

On the negative side, the moving parts could so easily have resulted in serious hand injuries or clothing with the operator still attached, being pulled through part of the machine.

Cleaning in this reckless way also required the operator to crouch down low in order to see the actual cleaning. Unfortunately, the cleaning agent sometimes had a nasty habit of spraying back directly into exposed eyes leaving operators with bloodshot and stinging eyes (and oh how they stung) for about 10-20 minutes. Foolishly, we still continued this method and took our chances.

Company Social Activities

Although work was repetitive, a good camaraderie existed on all working floors, company offices and within the company generally and employees could even purchase batteries and other manufactured Eveready products at reduced costs.

There was the annual beano's of course. I recall a complete train being hired by the company to ship us all off to Clacton for the day. On another occasion, it was a coach trip to Southend where, unfortunately, one of the hopper lads was left behind but for some reason we brought back one of his shoes. We also gave a female, unknown to us, a lift back to Walthamstow who ended up finding employment with the company the next working day. These were the days when you

really could leave company employment in the morning and start with another employer in the afternoon.

There was also the annual dance that occurred just before the Christmas break, I suspect never quite the success senior staff hoped it to be but on the whole, we still attended as there wasn't anything else to do or go. Besides the Christmas festies always held that general feelgood, dress up factor for most.

The subsidised canteen on the top floor was clean and the food, although by today's standards was I guess, perhaps basic, it was nevertheless good. One favourite item I still remember with affection were the little round meat pies. Apart from our lunch hour we also had a twenty minute break in the morning and one in the afternoon. This was probably standard in most industry type companies of the day.

The Eveready was one of the leaders of the game in contributing to the community or as it's now called 'Corporate and Social responsibilities' by providing the annual Christmas party for children of employees or relatives. This was a slap up event for the kids with cartoons, entertaining characters, jellies and cake. And you just knew whatever present you received attending these events was quality. This was always in addition to being given the latest prized Eveready torch.

Recalling the delights as a kid being transported by some mystical space ship - actually a disguised lift to see Santa at Bearmans, the Eveready kids party is equally and indelibly imprinted deep in the memories of all kids and employees attending them, as evidenced by the positive comments made by Facebook members over the years.

There was also other social events such as competing against other local Eveready sites. One in particular was a car rally that began at the Tottenham site and involved driving around the wilds of Essex identifying landmarks, special features and prominent names. A dastardly deed was undertaken on one occasion however. This involved all E17 based participants not being given the final page and rally end information. So the

Forest road participants which included myself as navigator to an engineer driving a spanking new Sunbeam Rapier and believing we had triumphed and with others rightfully awaited our crowning on a quiet country road discovered too late, we had all finished at the wrong finishing point. None of the Tottenham/Edmonton participants suffered such humiliation I might add.

Like most local firms in those days, the Ever Ready company was very family oriented with parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, sisters and brothers all making up a sizeable chunk of the workforce. Having relatives working there was reassuring to naïve teenagers starting work for the first time.

These arrangements also benefitted floor managers of course as relatives, many of whom were long term and disciplined employees were able to intervene directly to keep younger family members out of mischief and on the straight and narrow.

The company provided a fully functioning medical centre with qualified medical personnel who ensured medical check-ups for all young persons as well as treating the injured or unwell. During hot summer days we were all given the dreaded salt tablets on the production floors by an eagle eyed female supervisor who stood by to ensure you actually swallowed it. Only then did she hand you a refreshing glass of lemonade to wash it down.

Dave's Café

Directly opposite the factory where the Blackhorse road tube station is now sat Dave's cafe. This was a small, solitary white single story building set back on waste ground, amid a batch of

those large hideous advertising bill boards we were so accustomed to seeing in those days.

The cafe was a popular venue particularly with employees requiring a break from the menu of the works canteen. I remember it being light, airy and clean.

Dave was relatively young compared to most proprietors running cafes in those days. He was also a one man show as far as I can remember as I can't ever recall him having staff. However, Dave certainly knew how to organise and run his cafe. Not only would he take orders and cook meals, he cleared tables and washed the dishes in a disciplined, methodical way. Someone suggested he was an ex-Royal Navy cook. Looking back, I wouldn't have argued with that.

I cannot remember whether the cafe was still running when I left in the winter of 69. I can only assume, at some point the cafe was swallowed up during the underground developments and poor old Dave went down with his cafe.

Engineers

The ingenuity of Eveready engineers knew no bounds and Saturday mornings which was normally voluntary overtime with minimal supervision and only a few other employees present, PF became a test bed area for any non-work related innovations and which on some occasions could have resulted in the Eveready being devoid of their finest engineers due to suspension, sentencing or being committed. If you needed anything designed, developed, modified, altered or adapted, the engineers were the people whose sole purpose in life was to make things happen.

Ted Baker was overall foreman of the floor engineers but the key PF characters were Keith Every and Cliff Berry both of whom became good social buddies that saw us through some hilarious and adventurous travels including motoring through a number of European countries and French Riviera where I had my first experience of getting plastered on neat Cognac. Not to

be recommended at that age. At the time, Brits abroad was still a relatively rare event and there were restrictions on how much cash you could take out the country - something like, not exceeding £20 sterling. Nevertheless we survived to return home and restart work at the factory the following week.

On one occasion PF floor engineers having little to do by way of maintenance decided to build a one man glider. This was secret squirrel stuff as far as anyone in authority was concerned with parts being constructed, modified and when necessary, deconstructed and hidden under work benches until coasts were clear. If successful during planning and design stage, the glider would be fully scaled up and entered into the famous Brighton Pier competition.

This competition involved competitors gliding off Brighton pier attached to any non-mechanical contraption for a pre-determined distance with the winner receiving a sizeable pay out from a national paper. Being by far the lightest and by far the dumbest, I was duly nominated to attempt to fly the man sized glider once it had been built and hauled down to Brighton.

As the engineers work bench was located near my machine and so I was able to see the overall construction over the days. I may of been a naive but at one point I thought the aerodynamics was contrary to lift and that if we ever got to the stage of actually launching off Brighton pier our glider would develop the flying characteristics of a falling safe.

it was decided to make a small version of this flying contraption and for some reason add a motor engine and propeller. This would of course make it motorised and rule us out of the competition.

On one Saturday morning with engine primed with enough fuel calculated to reach the far end of PF, runway cleared of all foreign objects along the proposed flight path, the plane was released and gracefully took to the air straight and true, avoiding trolleys, cutters, hopper machines and radio speakers

as it headed down towards the Quality Control offices where it was anticipated to run out of fuel and gently land. Unfortunately, something went wrong some 20 feet short of its landing spot and it veered sharply left into the unoccupied foreman’s office window.

Not much was left of the glider plane. To be fair not a lot was left of Eric's window. The tell tail debris was quickly removed from the office and replaced by a heavy engineering anvil. A small quantity of grease was then smeared outside the office window and safety coned off and a heel mark made in the grease to replicate a slipping accident. On the Monday morning the foreman was advised of the incident to one of his engineers and it was left at that.

So ended the days of the gliding challenge however, it was certainly not the end of the engineers outside the box inventions and ideas.

In concluding this and of course I am looking at this through the prisms of rose coloured glasses but I'm also seeing it from a much older and wiser perspective that ironically in later years included being employed to inspect the security, safety and welfare of personnel whilst at their place of work.

Taking all this in, gripes as well, I would say the Eveready company really wasn't a bad place to work, socialise and have a laugh, especially at the E17 factory. Admittedly, there was always the potential for accidents occurring but the same could be said of an ordinary household kitchen environment if not on your toes. Management were quite tolerant and supportive of their charges and looking back at comments made on Facebook over the years, I have yet to note any overly negative remarks being made by ex-employees reminiscing on their times at the factory.

Steve Hennah