

The life and odd times of this Norman

In the best tradition of the early 1960s, Norman turned down the opportunity of starting an apprenticeship in the industry he really wanted and went for one in his 'second best' industry. Why? you may think, well at the time it seemed a good idea to go off to a training school in deepest Essex for a year before returning locally with a shortish journey to work. The one I turned down would have meant travelling to Middlesex every day for ever and a day, which really didn't appeal at the time.

So EMIs' loss was Eastern Electricity's gain although looking back, it was another of my decisions that seemed a good idea at the time. Just think, being a recording engineer at EMI at Hayes in the early 1960s would have been heaven to a teenager then. Instead, there I was, messing about doing electrical engineering at an assortment of training locations in South Essex and when all the other apprentices left, I was off to the jointing school near Southend. It did have one advantage though, I could hear the test transmissions of the pirate radio stations off the coast at Easter 1963 – the sound of things to come! On the other hand it did mean I lost touch with my girlfriend.

I suppose it would be fair to say the five year apprenticeship gave me a good grounding, particularly as I spent a lot of time with the electrician who got all the awkward jobs including working at the local glue factory, Ashridge College and several large homes in the area. At the time I found myself involved in the voltage changeover where they were trying to standardise the electricity supply to 240V AC as many bits of East Anglia and even Buckinghamshire had assorted DC overhead supplies or anything between 200V and 250V so everything had to be checked and converted if possible. With the American bases also scattered around 110V was common and one cottage on the outskirts of the new town of Hemel Hempstead we had to rewire as it had a private generator and they wanted to go 'on grid'.

Another one of the odd things I got lumbered with was being seconded to the Electricity Council to help with the research on how to promote off peak electric warm air heating to both the private and commercial sectors. For the private sector, they bought a pair of cottages in Berkhamsted and electric warm air installed in one with the other kitted out for solid fuel – remember this was 'the age of coal'. The commercial project was much more involved as it was decided to convert the top floor of the electricity offices to warm air from a 'storage heater' on the roof! I will just say that a lot of various grades of stainless steel was fabricated and asbestos(?) used in an effort to retain the core at a temperature that provided adequate heat for the poor office workers below. The best I can say is that it was an experience not many had.

Needless to say that as I seemed to miss out on 'normal' training, when my time came to collect my apprenticeship papers, the district manager shook my little hand and congratulated me on being the first apprentice to complete 5 years without passing a single exam! I put it down to circumstances myself. The following few years once again 'proved' I didn't really fit as I did time in various sectors although management did seem to keep wanting me to do any work at their homes when something came up. I ended up on the emergency team for a few years until I finally went on my own in May 1972. Enrolled on the NICEIC register for a few years until I discovered what a sham that was (and still is). Then came that fateful day when the lady of the house asked why I don't get a proper job.

Me? Proper job? Who would employ me? Quick as a flash back came 'EEB want an inspector, you can do that'. Reluctantly I applied and they stupidly offered me the job. Everyone, including me, was surprised, then they discovered I used to be on the emergency team. Shall we just say that their idea of emergency was not the same as mine and we soon parted company. This led to a slight change in direction in the life and times of Norman.

This change in direction was one of those things that just happen (well, to me anyway). Being an electrician meant I was frequently called out, particularly to regular clients. At the time, I had an answering machine you could call into and the inevitable happened. Called machine and no calls, so off home to find urgent call to a new supermarket a client was having fitted out by their regular mob down from Manchester. Apparently all the freezer rooms had started to pack up and the installers had gone back to Manchester. So off I go, only once there, I was told the refrigeration engineers had arrived and fixed the problem, back to van and home to paperwork. Naturally, message on machine saying I'd better come quick as they had failed again (freezers all

with nice new stock ready for opening!!). Double checked and they really needed me. On arrival found problem was incorrect equipment had been fitted so little I could do – why do these companies have the cheapest from miles away? Remember no mobile phones in the dark ages, but I had a taxi company as a client who kindly said I could have one of their two-way radios to use. On site, these were looked at and everyone wanted one, but the Home Office (later DTI, then Radiocommunications Agency and now OFCOM) said licence conditions did not allow this use. So into the Mobile Radio industry I fell into.

Message Handling was the way to go with Securicor having their ‘help’ service and AirCall being the big boys in town. Neither being user friendly, so ‘Normcall’ was born – ‘call Norm’ became the watchword with even one competitor forming a company named norcall. I ended up with 11+ transmitters providing coverage from Midlands to the south-east and Cambridge to Bristol. Then the big boys tried to make a similar system without real success called Band 3 but we were all overtaken by the mobile phone systems (more and bigger money). Ours and the Band 3 licences allowed only businesses to be customers and although we were allowed into the telephone network, restrictions such as 3 minute maximum time and only simplex operation (our systems were actually duplex – ask if you don’t know the difference) really only one thing. Shame really as we provided emergency coverage when the cellphone networks were overloaded. The change in direction hit the buffers, so back to the real world of providing electrical services which seemed to coincide with local event in my home town of Berkhamsted.

That's how I was, up until 1995. Even to the extent that I was working in the Water End home of Cllr. Mary King (ex. Mayor of Hemel Hempstead Borough Council) in the 1970's when she suggested I stood for election. Naturally, I didn't want to know as the likes of me just doesn't get involved – so I didn't. In 1995, I just 'ticked' all the boxes on the form put round by the 'Berkhamsted First' at their public meeting in the spring of 1995. My wife gave me the look that wives do when they disapprove (must be a female knack!), but I reassured her that everyone was filling in the forms and no-one in their right mind would even want me.

A couple of days later, the telephone rang and I was asked if I would attend an interview as a possible candidate in the May 1995 election. Much to a certain parties disgust, I wondered down to the Kings Arms, to be greeted by one of the organisers (who I found out later was Anthony Reay) holding out his hand with the immortal words 'Ahh, so you are going to be our candidate'. The slippery slope just got more slippery. Their idea was to change the Town Council as they believed they had let the Borough simply walk over them since reorganisation in the 1970s. The Town Council at that time just handed the town over to ‘Big Borough’. All the housing, land, property and facilities that had accrued since before Henry VIII granted a charter to the town. At long last, the worm had turned and I suggested that it was no good simply standing for election to the town Council but the Borough also needed an active Berkhamsted representative. The ‘group’ contacted all the people who had written letters on the subject to the local press and, shall I say, another 12 were convinced that standing did not automatically mean election. Only, the feeling in the town was such that all except two of the sitting councillors were dismissed by the electorate. I was also unfortunately the only one to stand for the Borough and was elected by an overwhelming majority. Even did an interview with the local radio station, no less, such was the political outfall with even TV coverage of the 1st Borough Council meeting (I know, I was there).

Now I knew what I would be doing for the next four years and what an adventure it turned out to be. Ward boundary reorganisation gave the major parties the chance to maximise their support and led to this Independent losing out, so it was back to normal, but what an upset!

Since that time, I've been involved in various local organisations and committees and even to the time we relocated ‘up norf’, many still thought I was on the council and contacted me with their problems. Up here, it seems even with 2 vacancies on the Birstall Parish Council, it seems I'm far too political to be co-opted and join their little club even though the Chairman of the local Conservative Association is a member!! Even a local Borough Council by-election proved a little difficult for this Independent new comer to break into the local system – but it's early days yet!

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