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Plympton St.Mary RDC Undertaking

An Extract From Bertram LeBearn's Memoirs Together with Muriel Isaac's Contribution

Plympton St. Mary was a local authority undertaking near Plymouth, the electricity committee of which were fiercely independent and especially independent of "big brother", the City of Plymouth Electricity Department.

Bertram LeBearn's Memoirs (Condensed by John Haynes)

Bertram LeBearn has written some notes about his days with the above undertaking. He joined in 1947 just before nationalisation and stayed until 1952 when he left to join the British Electricity Authority. He tells us that the Plympton undertaking covered an area approximately 60 sq. miles on the north and east of Plymouth. It stretched from the Tamar to the Plym and took in such villages as Roborough, Bickleigh, and Cornwood together with the industrial area of the clayworks at Leemoor. Then there was the Urban District of Ivybridge, Yealmpton and the twin villages of Newton and Noss Mayo at the mouth of the Yealm.

Bertram studied Electrical Engineering during the War at the Plymouth and Devonport Tech and despite the blitz was successful. He then moved to complete his practical training with Metropolitan Vickers. He returned to the Plymouth area and took up his post with the Plympton Undertaking in February 1947, starting with a Mr. Fursey. Here he joined the staff of four engineers Mr. R.Upton, Engineer & Manager, Mr.C.Isaac, his Deputy, Mr.J.Belcher and Mains Engineer Mr.J.Whipp. These four men had been carrying on all the necessary work, with just three of them on standby. The jointing staff consisted of a foreman and 10 jointers, 8 of them under training! There were three linesmen and their ganger, George Frost, with about 15 to 20 labourers, who also acted as mates when required.

Transport was provided by the engineer's cars, Jack Whipp's being a small Austin Seven to which he had upgraded from a motorbike and sidecar. There was an electrician's van and the rest were hired. Bertram's transport was by bicycle, bus or lorry. His area was 90% underground and included the new estates being built by Plymouth to accommodate the homeless. Most at that time were single storey prefabs of varied construction.

Bertram suggests that the first supplies at Plympton St. Mary were obtained from a small DC generating station established at Market Road by W.G.Heath & Co of Plymouth, who ran the adjacent undertaking of Ivybridge. The small station would have had possibly two DC generators with batteries. Garcke's Manual states that Plympton St. Mary's supply commenced in 1928, which would have been when the AC supply was installed from Plymouth.

When Bertram joined, the networks were 6.6kV and 230V AC with the supply coming from a substation situated close to Plymouth's Prince Rock Power Station. This housed a Reyrolle 6.6kV 5-panel switchboard. Bertram recalls 6.6kV metalclad pillars on the network which were particularly lethal! These pillars were about 2'6" wide by 2'0" deep and some 5'6" high. They contained four circuits at 6.6kV terminated through links onto unshielded busbars. Testing was carried out with a 'tickling stick', a 3" long 2.5" diameter bakelised rod with a metal spike. Rubber gloves were worn to remove the live link, but Bertram says that one foreman had been known to use his cap liberally laced with hair cream! This drew a spark from the live terminal. One such pillar at Torybrook was involved in a tragic suicide.

Standby at Christmas usually meant foregoing your lunch. On one occasion Bertram spent the time cooling a 400amp fuse, supplying an allelectric estate at Pennycross, with a hand operated blower! A lasting memory is the ubiquitous coke brazier surmounted by a boiling kettle and nearby a pot of well-stewed tea. This was a Godsend during a long drawnout fault repair on a cold night.

Eventually after nationalisation the Plympton organisation was absorbed by the new Plymouth District of SWEB. Gradually the staff were split up. Mr. Upton went to Exeter and Mr. Isaac went to Liskeard after a spell in Plymouth. Mr. Whipp left to form his own business and Bertram joined the BEA in February 1952.

BERTRAM LEBEARN

Extract from Muriel Isaac's Letter to Peter Lamb

Dated 11th April 1996

I found Mr LeBearn's letter of interest for of course it was during my husband's time with the Plympton Authority. My husband joined the Authority on qualifying - we were married in '38. Mr. Lewis was in charge then. Mr. Butcher was Mains Engineer and I remember Mr. Whipp too. Cliff joined up in July '39 - he had volunteered for the RNVR earlier that year. He served through the whole of the War at first as an Electrical Officer (with a green band with the gold). Then finally became an executive officer i.e. Torpedo Officer. He served with the submariners and with the Fleet Air-arm. He helped to bring back the "lease-lend" ships from America (they wore civilian clothes then). He was in several Arctic convoys and was en route for Singapore when it fell. He was in Australia when war finally ended..

He returned home looking forward to a lengthy leave but Mr. Lewis was so anxious for him to return to help him cope with a greatly enlarged district that he felt that he should return earlier than he had intended. However he found his situation was not as he would wish, so applied for other jobs. He was appointed as Chief Engineer and Manager at Heckmondwike (near Batley in Yorkshire), a highly industrialised area with a high electricity output hence a considerably higher salary! I had considerable regrets about leaving lovely Devon!! However he announced on his return his success to Mr. Lewis and within a few hours Mr. Lewis died in a tragic accident at one of the outdoor switching areas. Was this the accident Mr. LeBearn refers to as the "tragic suicide" at Torybrook? My husband was then asked to take-over at Plympton at the salary he would have received at Heckmondwike, (so we never left the South West) - until a new manager was appointed. Cliff of course had been away from the industry for more than 5 years. Mr. Upton was appointed.

I don't remember Mr. LeBearn, but then I seldom came into contact with other staff other than those in the office for in those days I can't remember much socialising] I think that the article is interesting for those familiar with the area as Mr. LeBeam says everyone seemed to know everyone. I remember Cliff used to feel he had to be present at every major break-down. I can remember many occasions when the phone would ring and he felt it was vital that he should be out-with the lads. I can remember vividly when we were entertaining an American lady here on a fact finding mission for some large electrical authority when we were plunged into darkness for most of the evening by a severe storm. She came from an area which had many overhead lines so was most sympathetic. Years later Cliff was called to the phone to be told that a digger had snapped the cable to Antony House(Cornwall), who were at that time entertaining Royalty! I have been reminiscing far too long

MURIEL ISAAC