



End of the Shift An Oral History Project by Grace Notes Scotland

Date: 21 August 2013
Informant (s): William (Willie) Black (WB), Douglas (Dougie) Reid (DR), Ronald (Ron) Fleming (RF), John Greig (JG)
Fieldworker: Margaret Bennett (MB)
Subject: Melville Brodie Engineering Co.
Place of Origin: Kirkcaldy, Fife

This interview is Copyright Grace Notes Scotland

Please contact to the End of the Shift Project Manager at Grace Note Scotland , prior to any broadcast or publication from this document.

Project Manager
End of the Shift
Grace Notes Scotland
Arch House, Dunira
Comrie, PH6 2JZ
Perthshire, Scotland
info@gracenotesScotland.org



DATE: Aug. 21, 2013
PLACE RECORDED: Ochtertyre, Crieff
INFORMANT (S): William (Willie) Black (WB), Douglas (Dougie) Reid (DR),
Ronald (Ron) Fleming (RF), John Greig (JG)
PLACE OF ORIGIN: Kirkcaldy and district, Fife
FIELDWORKER: Margaret Bennett (MB)
ORIGINAL FORMAT: wav files, Digital mic, Edirol
TRANSCRIBED BY: Hazel Cameron
SPONSORS: Heritage Lottery Fund & The Gannochy Trust
PUBLICATION: In preparation
COPYRIGHT: Grace Note Scotland

Notes: recorded round the table at 'Grange of Locherlour', Ochtertyre

INTRO: AUG 21, 2013

TRACK 2 (begins in the middle of a conversation...)

MB: apprentices.... What they got up to for fun ...

DR: We had a lad he was worse than a lot of folk at picking up the dog ends. Some folk would drap a fag and there would be a couple of good puffs in it. So we got in ahint this big electrical cabinet and we'd laced this fag wi thread and we laid it on the floor where he couldnae miss it. I was lying on the bottom and there was 3 or 4 guys on top of me and when this lad put his hand down to get the dog end – and it wisnae there.[laughter] We kept pulling it further until we started to laugh and the rest of them got oot of the road quick and I was stuck at the bottom and he come round and got hud o me and hammered me and I couldnae do nothing for laughing. The things we got up to!. I got that boy back but I'm no gonnæ tell ye how I did it. [laughter]

MB: Don't get mad, get even?

DR: You would be daein quite a lot of jobs – machining mugs and things like that and it would be fairly quick an operation, you know, and the likes o Wullie would come doon and say, "Where are you stacking them?" You'd say, "I've only done that," an he'd say, [joking] "Oh come on you've gotta dae more than that. I've gotta get ma bonus offa that!" We had a lot of good laughs and we only had one major accident when the lad got killed

MB: What happened then?

DR: It was a crane thing, eh, Wullie? The gantry gave way.

MB: Were you there, Wullie?

WB: The Techy shop put the gantry up, the long jib – and it was bolted – the four bolts you know these big beams they had in the machine shop, and they had it bolted across. That was fixed – or they thought, and an H-beam and they put their jib in – the one that goes back and forward – well they were lifting this big pipe – about five or six of them all trying to manoeuver it in or takin it out. And does the jib where it was bolted did a dunner, one of the bolts gave way. [Snap!] And it came, well I wasn't there well, I was there but I didn't see the accident, but it just so happened he was pushing it in, there were a liner up, he pushed it in, and it so happened, he fell and the thing came down on him.

MB: What a tragedy.

WB: Oh it was a tragedy!

DR: The men were quite good at telling us, no this rigid regime for Health & Safety but it was common sense, to tell you to watch your hands and your hair and things like that.

WR: Aye, and no muck about with it.

MB: I remember seeing a notice once, on a factory wall, it said ‘Only nuts bolts through the factory.

Wullie shows his hand with the missing finger joint¹

MB: (gasp!) Oh what happened here (that took your fingers away)?

WB: I would only be there about a year, but it was partly my fault because I took the guard off the back of the machine. And we were doing – it was the bolts for the tubs a right hand screw and a left hand – and you had to go to the back of the lathe to reverse it, and Black had his off and where I was standing I must have slipped and my hand went in the gear wheels and just, see, and juggled a bit off

MB: And took a bit off the end of your thumb – oh my word!

WB: And I had to go down to the hospital – oh wait the noo – was it Christmas day or a boxing day? Mark now, I’m sitting in there with a big bandage on and I could always remember – their operating place was just a small room – and then the Sister she came and said, “Look at your hand!” (meaning it was dirty)

And I said, “It has to be dirty, I’ve been working aw day!”

So she says, “Give it to me!” She pulls it to a wash han basin and gets carbolic soap.

MB: That would sting!

WB: and a scrubbing brush and in! Nae bother, but oh! I could hae seen her far enough!

MB: I bet – that would be as sore as getting the top of the thumb off.

WB: When the man had tae do it, he had tae get right into the bone to get that bit of skin to flap over.

MB: You haven’t had a thumb nail to trim ever since?

WB: It’s awkward but

DR: He used to stand at a lathe – and you know how ladies have got nice nail files, Wullie would stand with a muckle big engineer’s file!

WB: You’ll see there’s a part of a nail there. I went back later and says, “Can you no take that out?” “Oh,” he said “you’d have to go through all the system again.”

I say, “Och!” But you see that corner always grows and I have to file it.

MB: Gosh but it didn’t stop you having a good career?

¹ See movie clip: Willie Black-nurse-cleaningAmputated thumb

WB: Oh no it didn't stop me, well it was partly my fault, if I'd had a guard on the machine, I wouldn't hae done that – trying to make money one ways because we were on a bonus.

MB: I imagine you kept the guard on after that?

WB: Well I had tae

MB: And you'd have to teach the apprentices the same.

TRACK 3

RF The miners down in Cardenden, they had a wee bit more money than farm workers and what not, so they had motor bikes and they could go up to Stanley.

TRACK 4

DR: For the memorial plaque we wanted a bronze plaque wi aw the names but the risk of it being stolen

MB: Stolen? Oh is that not tragic?

RF: In Kinross the war memorial they prized off the bronze plaque with all the names, but the chappy that took them to a scrappie in Methel, he said where did they come from? Oh we found them, I know were they came from and tried to apprehend, you know, them but they got one of them

MB: Wullie this is you [looking at photo of Wullie]

WB: This is me and this is the size of the plaque that they would like to make as a memorial for Melville Brodies

MB: Would this go on the site of the factory?

WB: Yes, it's a corner site

RF: And we're thinking of doing it in these bronze resins which some of the artists use as it works out a bit cheaper and people will no steal it.

MB Isn't it an awfie thing to think about that

DR: Yes, it's ridiculous ... We are fairly well advanced. We got local authority permission to do it, the Fife council have been great that way, we have the owner of the property, Scotia Homes Development, from Aberdeenshire, we've been all through that process, we've been all through the infrastructure people, electricity what not, traffic lights the whole lot, so much so that where we initially thought about digging for the foundation, we obviously can't do that with the amount of infrastructure underneath so it will be a structure that is free standing but heavy enough and robust enough that it couldn't be quickly lifted but the service people could, with an appropriate sized crane could take it off if they needed to. For that project alone it would be for construction and installation about £2,500, we're at the process with the Local Authority and some local manufacturers who have suddenly started to show a wee bit interest, we may well get sufficient money to do that – that is of course a separate entity without the book and the archives but equally important.. This is just my crude sketch of the building

MB: The way you remember it

DR: Yes

MB: How fantastic

DR: With the help of the lads I will be able to restructure the drawing, to more like what it is, and we envisage having a photograph of this on the front of the book, but we can't find a photograph.

MB: There'll be some, have you tried the Royal –?

DR: We've tried everywhere, we've been at libraries everything, we've hit cul-de-sacs, dead-ends, so we're left, almost, with a sketch

MB That's good and a great thing you can draw.

DR: Fortunately, a lot of skilled people, because they are fairly good at drawing on the back of fag packets, for example, this is what we want you to make

RF: Hey, Dougie, I've just thought of something – Do you know who demolished the building.

DR: No

RF: If you find out who demolished the building, maybe they took a photo or what not

DR: It was Muirs that demolished it.

Muirs? They certainly wouldnae take a photo – Tom Muir wouldnae demolish

RF: I'm quite in with George Muir, that's where I get ma scrap fae --

DR: Well, by all means –

Penman doon at the harbour, the harbour-master, he was on demolition --

DR: You know Kilgours had the (?) Malt burns behind, well we went to the Kilgour family, this is my last venture, we asked the Kilgour family to go through their photographic albums, just may be a photo was taken of the Kilgours Malt burns that took in the building, just on one side and we could separate that away from it.

WB: Even the linen factory next door, Lumsdens next door.

JG: What happened with the sister, the relative on Brodie side,

DR: June? We've got quite a lot of stuff from June, but not of the building, and she is getting into her 80s, well Wullie is 89

WB: No, 88

DR: Oh sorry, well you're 89 this year, (you bugger) so we've got to capture everything we can, And from her and Bob Thomson – he's the oldest one and he's 92. The company itself was founded in 1869 and it finally wound up in 1971. So we've got a fair bit.

JG: As that main heading...it continued to manufacture under other headings.

MB: So this was Melville Brodie...B R O D I E It's a story that has to be kept

DR: Without a doubt and our era for example, when I started serving my apprenticeship, it was taken for granted that you only did your apprenticeship then you were paid off. So you started looking for a job at the end of your 4th year so I ended up in Dundee after my apprenticeship and the rest of the lads they've all got their stories.

MB Do you mind if I take a wee pause just now and I talk to Wullie? I'm coming down to your end of the table and even if you are only 88 that's all right. Can I ask you your full name?

WB: William Black

MB: And where were you born

WB: Dysart

MB: In Fife – a good Fifer. What was your date of birth?

WB 17.12. 24

MB: Well, well, so you were a post war baby and you grew up with folk talking about the war and uncles that never came back and all that.

WB: Yes.

MB: So how old were you when you left the school?

WB: I was about 15 when I left school

MB: Because people did leave younger

WB: Oh yes, they left at 14, but it was the year I was caught at school so I didn't start Melville Brodie till about '31 so I was 15 and a bit when I started

MB: So you started your apprentice – what made you choose to be an apprenticeship at Melville Brodies?

WB: My grandfather

MB: Your Grandfather –did he work there?

WB: He got me a job there he used to work in an engineering shop on the other side of the road, which was called the Fife Forge Engineering Company – they used to do all the shafting work, everything for ships

MB: So as a wee boy do you remember being close to your Grandfather?

WB: Oh yes, 'course I stayed in Dysart, my Grandfather stayed in Kirkcaldy – he was away along near Starks Park , the football ground, that's where they all stayed and my mother used to take me down once a week, or whatever. To visit him.

MB: Can you remember your first day at work as an apprentice?

WB: First day? You went in there like a wee laddie and you were stuck, the foreman he got hold of you and he put you with a tradesman and you had to start with him. That was it, you weren't

doing anything you were just watching and it spread on from that.

MB: And did you stick with the same man?

WB: No, no, you just move around after maybe a week you moved around.

MB: Did they play any pranks on you?

WB: Och! The place was full of pranks – these boys will tell you the pranks that used to go on!

MB: What memorable ones can you mind?

WB: They used to tell they to go for a long stand [laughter] They would go and somebody would say – yes, hold on there, and they would maybe stand for quarter of an hour, half an hour

MB: And then that was you having a long stand

WB: Yes,

MB: I suppose you got wise to it after a while

WB: Oh yes, but everyone just had to take it.

MB: That was all a part of the learning

MB: Can you remember the first pay packet you took home?

WB: It was 9 shillings – sure it was 9 shillings and 8 pence

MB: Did you give it to your Mum?

WB: In those days you gave it to Mum and she gave you something back

MB: Yes but you must have been quite proud, your fist pay packet?

WB: Oh yes!

MB: So how many years was the apprentice in those days?

WB: It was five years.

MB: And was there a specific trade right at the end of it that you were aiming for?

WB: No, well, you just finished your time

RF: You started at 16 –you couldn't start before that

WB: They anes had to start at 16

MB: And Wullie started at 15 and so you were 20 when you were time served. And did you celebrate

WB: Oh yes everybody went out, in those days you couldn't at 20 – in those days you couldn't get a drink until you were 21, supposed to be

MB: That’s interesting; we forget that now

WB: Yes and then it came down – was it 18?

MB: Are we to take it that never a drop crossed you lips till then?

WB: Well there was always some place, I mean, if you went out, where I stayed in Dysart everyone knew each other and you couldn’t go out into any of the locals because they knew you, or they knew your father.

MB: And how about smoking?

WB: You just had to go into Kirkcaldy and if no one knew you, you were lucky.

MB: Now, can you remember what you were earning when you were time-served at your 5th year?

WB: It was 2 pound something

MB: Well, you’d quadrupled your wage, more, not maybe a lot by today’s standards but quite significant

WB: Well, it depended on the unions in those days whatever rise the unions used to get you

MB: So the unions were still quite strong in those days?

DR: You’d have two things, your paper, apprenticeship papers and your union card, both pinned together.

WB: Your union card and your union book, you showed that to show you’d served your time. Then after the war, it was finished, there were a lot of people looking for jobs and that’s when they made that semi-skilled. Well, as I looked in those days why start people semi-skilled when you’re bringing up apprentices?²

MB: They should have talked to the men who knew. Now you did follow a very specific skill in Melville Brodie, what was that?

WB: As you know a lathe, it’s on the parallel, well, we used to have vertical ones, and then later on we had surface grinding, cylindrical grinding –you had to know all that.

MB: So there was a whole series of different kinds – was it mostly lathes?

WB: Well it was lathes or whatever you were on. And then you started getting – when Bertrams bought us out, they were into paper machinery, have you seen a paper mill, the big drying cylinders, we used to machine they.

MB This might sound like a naive question, what were the lathes mostly used for turning?

WB: Well it depends on what job you were on, metal, cast iron, brass .

MB: So they could turn the whole lot.

WB: Oh yes. Aye, seen you doing wood, wooden rollers, you made the tools to suit whatever

² Movie clip” Willie Black-skilled vs semi-sk.MOV

MB: Highly skilled, gosh me. Did the war interrupt your work?

³WB: Well during the war when I was there we were doing the tank turrets, well you know how a turret swivels? Well, we used to have to machine the facing bit, do a groove in so they could get ball bearings in, you know how a turret swivels round.

MB: How incredible, so obviously you weren't going to be called up because that was your war service/

WB: Oh no, we all got a card and twice Wull Lindsay an I went, the chap at the – said “get tae --!” He says, “If I was starting you I would be out a job”. No they wouldn't take us, until the war. Then I was on making drums for – have you seen an air craft carrier? And that cable that goes across – well there's a drum at each side which we would – in our thingmy it had a left hand drum and a right hand drum and the cable was slack on – you see them doing it yet, well that cable was across and the plane came down and I take it there was a bolt right through from the tail to the engine block and that caught the cable and these drums tightened it up and that's how the aircraft didn't go over the other end.

MB: Such precision and to think it all out, would you say Wullie that you were a natural and that you had just a feeling for this?

WB: Maybe I was with my grandfather and my uncle was at the same trade but they worked at this heavier machinery. Ours was light – you got heavier.

DR: He definitely was good with his hands, good with his brain, and also good at putting his trade across because I learned an immense amount from him and men like him.

MB: Well we're going on to not quite the next generation but there you were, you'd be a lad in your thirties when along comes the next one? (Before that man) Dougie you were saying that Wullie was really a mentor to you?

DR: Oh he was! He definitely was – he taught me all the good and bad. [laughs]

MB: Where did you grow up?

DR: In Kirkcaldy

MB: What was the school leaving age then?

TECHNICAL COLLEGES⁴

DR: Fifteen, that was the leaving age then. And you couldn't start your apprenticeship until you were 16, so you got yourself a job or something else, I was fortunate I passed the wee exam to get into the technical college for that year 15 tae 16 so that gave me a wee bit of a spring board – cause the employers went first to the technical college for apprentices and then elsewhere

MB: So you had a year to learn a few skills?

DR: It was actually learning all different trades, you know welding, electrical, foundry work, carpentry, the technical college had sort of taster sessions for all that. There was no day-release at that time, it was just night school. So you had to do 3 nights at night school.

³ see movie clip Willie Black-tank turret in WW2

⁴ see movie clip: Dougie Reid-technical college

WB: Same wi me – ye had to go to night school.

MB: What made you choose to become an engineer with Melville Brodie or do your apprenticeship there?

DR: I always wanted to do something with my hands, My father was a music teacher

MB: Really?

DR: Aye, but all the family were kind of musical, I don't have a musical ear but I'm a good dancer – I'll take a lady off the floor no bother. But as for a musical ear, they knew right away that I wasnae gonna be a player of some kind or a singer. My father who could play any musical instrument and could sing, but he couldnae hammer a nail in. He was as useless as --

MB: It's strange isn't it?

DR: But everyone to their own. But funnily enough he didn't pay much attention to me because I wasnae musically minded.

MB: It'll be no comfort to you but if I tell you that my dad was an engineer and he had four daughters and he wanted to have at least one engineer so I spent my teenage years holding a theodolite, [laughter] yes, working out levels, it was civil engineering and my grandfather is a blacksmith, it was an industrial blacksmith not a farrier, so I sort of grew up more around engineering than I did around music yet what do I do now? Music. So it's a great thing to have that range, that variety and follow the bit you wanted to do

DR: And Willie has said, he's told two or three lads, a minority, “Lad you'd be better leaving this job and going elsewhere cause you'll never make...” We've got a saying – you'll never make an engineer as long as you've got a hole in your erse! [laughter]

WB: Well when we started apprentices maybe three or four of them, whatever they were doing and you knew this boy – and you'd say I feel sorry for you, he'd be – well they were all the same age 16/17 going out, well that boy was going home and having his tea, what have you, and Mum would maybe say “how are you getting on at work?” then he'd be going out with his pals, but when you think about it, that was always in his mind – I've to go back there.

MB: And you sensed this?

WB: And I had an idea and I used to tell them, “You know, you'd be better to get your son another job.”

MB: You know that kind of honesty is just so crucial, it is actually unkind to let someone do a career they're not suited for.

WB: I used to feel sorry for them, but I knew the loddie and I'd say, you know son, you've a five year apprentice and if you're at this trade till your 65 --

MB: It's true it's the kindest thing you could do.

WB: I says oh no – you'd be better packing it in.

MB: However, you didn't tell this fellow to pack it in. And you enjoyed your apprenticeship?

APPRENTICESHIP, 1950s⁵

DR: **Oh aye, it was marvellous, you got moved round the place, you did a wee bit of stint in the pattern, you went up to the moulding shop, you went up to the fitting, the grinding, the blacksmith, the company was a total engineering entity. In that respect it was all embracing. If you didn't finish up once your apprenticeship was finished with a good engineering background there was something wrong.** Everything was there and although we were a strong union shop the management relationship were very good. Although we had an apprentice strike.

MB: You did?

DR: But that was caused by the national circumstances, because engineering followed national engineering wage rates and conditions. So our bosses were a member of the Employers Federation and they just followed the thing, and the basis of the apprentice crib was that the percentages were far too low and it was actually very funny because the main full-time union officials in London – because this was a national strike – told us to get back to work and we all refused.

MB: Can you remember what year that was?

DR: 1959

JG: No it was later than that – that's when I started

DR: Well it would be 1960 then.

MB: So when did you start?

JG: 1962

MB: So it would be before 1962... Can I ask were the wages of apprentices pretty well standard throughout the country?

DR: Oh, yes, Scotland anyway

MB: What year did you start again? What year were you born, we'll work forward

DR: [started in] 57

MB: Can you remember your first day at work? – tell us about it

FIRST DAY AS APPRENTICE⁶

DR: And I had to get a boiler suit, and the very first day you were waiting at the doors to go in, and everything was new and you were neat and tidy and you were nae too sure if you got the right boiler suit because I kept seeing boys, wi – I'd had gotten an all in one, which I thought was the right thing and I kept seeing boys, the pattern makers in dungarees and different things, a jacket and so on. I'd think, "Have I got the right thing on?"

MB: Were you nervous?

⁵ see movie: Dougie-apprentice learning about operations

⁶ see movie: Dougie-boiler suit apprentice

FIRST JOB⁷

DR: Oh jeez Aye! Not, I might add, the most nervous I was, and that was my first full skilled job after I left Melville Brodie, in Dundee, in Melville Brodie I knew I was a complete and utter novice and I knew I was gonna get kidded on some of the time

MB: They'd warned you?

DR: Cause your pals and your uncles and aunties told you – they're gonna rib the backside off of you. But when I went to my first job in Dundee and I walked into the factory and I was given the job by the foreman, and I went onto this lathe, a rather big lathe, and I felt the eyes burning in my back and everybody was ostensive working on their own jobs but they were really watching me to see if I was going to make a right dick of myself. But fortunately because of my excellent training, I did all the right things. And of course that's the thing about a skilled job, people can tell, I do it myself, you can tell right away the way a guy handles the tools, looks at a drawing, whether they are on the mark.

MB: Can you remember what your first pay packet was?

DR: Thirty bob - It was a ten shilling note a one pound – the wage packet the top corner was open, the corner of the pound note and the ten bob note stuck out so you could count the right notes were there. And my granny got all that money.

MB: Did you stay with your granny?

DR: No, but this was the thing in my family, that the first pay packet that a grandchild got, you gave it to your granny.

MB: Oh that's lovely, was that tradition?

DR: That was tradition and the thing was, my boiler suit cost me 30 bob!

MB: Was it the right one though?

DR: It was, it so happened it was

MB: I'm so relieved, what colour?

DR: Navy Blue

MB: But that dark blue not thon bright blue you see now

DR: But I found out I had to have more than one

MB: 30 bob was a lot, actually,

DR No as much as a miner, a miner apprentice got £5

MB: I didn't mean for the pay I meant for the cost of a boiler suit

DR: Oh sorry, aye, but that boiler suit lasted you, unless you grew, that boiler suit lasted you for a long time.

⁷ see movie clip” Dougie-first job-time-served.MOV

WR: you always got a long one, and you tucked the sleeve up...

DR: A shop in the High Street did them, Sharps.

MB: Where were Sharps based?

WB: In Kirckaldy on the High street– near the Port Brae

MB: Oh wonderful so it was a Kirkcaldy firm made the boiler suits, fantastic it's kind of nice to keep it local.

DR: But Kirkcaldy has a tremendous linen industry – we could tell you more about that, but that's another story.

WB: They made dish towels and that. They used to have a place in Cowdenbeath as well.

MB: Now, Wullie was telling us about some of the pranks that got played on apprentices, can you remember any that were played on you?

DR: I better watch what I'm saying here! We did some daft things on the men actually.

MB: Oh they're getting bold now, the apprentice played the tricks

DR: The toilets when I first went there were in a line and the water just ran through, and the splash back was there so when you went in and sat down and did the toilet, it just flushed away, so it was a 90 degree room, there was three stalls on that wall and one at 90 degrees and if some of the craftsmen had been giving us a bit of stick and we would wait until some of them were in the stalls and we'd tie a rope round the doors and put something on fire underneath the floors – they knew there were certain ones of us classified as toe-rags

MB: Troublemakers?

DR: We didn't have much money and the men didn't have much money and people used to pick up dog ends, because everybody smoked, I used to smoke Senior Service until one of Wullie's pals said –" I wouldnae smoke them, I wouldnae smoke Senior Service, you ken every packet of Senior Service, there's tuppence goes to the Pope. So fae then on I never smoked Senior Service!

[laughter]

MB: Oh you couldnae make it up, I was trying to predict what you were going to say.

TRACK 5

DR: ...we'll exchange numbers... You wouldn't mind assisting us in doing the booklet?
This is the kind of thing we started with

MB: The history – an outline – so you have a kind of a timeline and a potted history

DR: That was my idea, if we put down what Kirkcaldy was like at the time, and with the help of Ronnie and Wullie and John and the rest of the lads, the rest has to be filled up with the names of people and the types of machinery we had and so on and so forth.

TRACK 6

DR: The trade union officials told us to get back to work, the government told us to get back to work, the employers federation was telling us to get back to work but the craftsmen in all the factories were 100 percent behind us and so were a lot of the employers but the employers darenae pay anything against their federation. And it took a tremendous effort but eventually it succeeded. And we got the percentages altered.

RF: We also got strike pay at the end

MB: You got strike pay?

RF: That's right 3 weeks running and we got it back dated. I mind getting the wheels of my bike

DR: Cause the men within the union structure, Margaret, there's a system, which we call the final appeal court system. And if the head officers are thought to be wrong in their decisions by the rank and file as we talk about, then they can appeal to these final appeal courts and that's how we got the strike benefit because the craftsmen said 'these lads were absolutely right' and so they told the full time officials 'you were wrong and you pay'.

MB: Gosh what a turn around.

TRACK 7

MB: Separate unions in trades?

RF: All the trades had their own union – we were the amalgamated union of Foundry workers

JG: We were the amalgamated union of.... United Pattern Makers (UPA)

MB: And what would yours be?

DR: Amalgamated Engineering Union.

MB: I see

WB: And then the electricians – they were in the electricians Union

MB: It was highly organised?

DR: I've just got 2 weeks ago, my 50-year union membership, unite badge.

MB: Fantastic, it is fantastic isn't it?

RF: We used to get a monthly journal telling us where all the work was, which foundry was busy and which foundry was in use.

DR: And we used to kid each other on, and Ronnie came across to me one day and said, "I've got you now you wee buggler" he says, you'll never beat this one, he says "the foundry workers had a moulder, and he's the first man in space".

RF: That's right! Yuri Gagarin was a moulder.

MB: Really?

MB: Ronnie I don't have much of your voice.

RF: Well the foundry was completely different from the rest of the places, you didn't go to work in a foundry because you left the school with A-levels. That was the worst place, right from the hierarchy, the drawing office, if you didn't make it there, you got put down to the fitting shop, if you couldn't make it at the fitting shop you got put to the turning shop, the lathes and that, if you couldn't make it there it was the smiddy, the blacksmith and then if you couldn't make it there, and all through the way you got threatened 'you're gonna finish up in the foundry, you're going to finish up in the foundry if you dinnae buck up', that was what they used to threaten the apprentices with, for next to coal mining it was the worst, a terrible job.

WB: When ye came home at night ye were black!

RF: You were absolutely, in fact, you got extra money, ye came out at night like a coal miner. We got extra money for the working conditions, we were the highest paid. We had one shower for 25 folk and all the big journeymen got in first. But when I started, you mentioned you shouldn't do jobs you didnae like – well, I'd never heard of a moulder before, but trades were pretty scarce on the ground, so when they said they're looking for an apprentice moulder up at Melville Brodie. "That'll do," I said, so I went up to see it and the old gaffer started me, I was the last apprentice he started, Bob Williamson, and he'd been to America and he used to talk about Boasting Bill, this was his friend in America, and smoked a cigarette out the corner of his mouth. He said, "oh yi want to be a moulder eh? I can't say it's the best trade in the world but you've come to the best place to learn it," he says.

MB: Oh, very good.

RF: And we mentioned accidents – the tragedy with the chap McArthur, well you can imagine in the foundry molten iron gaun all over the place, well I can honestly say I never saw, you used to get wee sparks but nobody was ever seriously burnt. And you were running about with a hundredweight o molten metal in the wee ladles, and they had a shank, a long shank, the other end was split into trams, that someone carried, and the floor was anything but even, then pouring this metal into the mould and going back and getting more out the big ladle, and if you start to shake a wee bit the journeyman would ask "What were you doing last night?"

MB: You'd need to be pretty strong to do this?

RF: Well if you didnae you soon were.

MB: And was it not awful hot?

RF: When they were casting it was awful hot but in the winter it was awful cold. Because there was so much iron, the boxes, and the whole floor was just damp moulding sand. So, as I say, next to coal mining it was [terrible]

JG: How deep was the sand – 15 feet?

RF: Well 10 feet yes, and it was aw old, it never changed they never modernised it from Victorian times, in fact the big crane we had in the foundry came from the building of the Forth Rail Bridge, the big wooden crane.

MB: My, a wooden crane, there's not too many of them.

RF: But eh, it was the camaraderie o the moulders too, you know. Like coal mining, when you were casting you had to trust the boys on the ladle, don't do anything stupid with the molten iron. Then when I finished, I wasn't getting on very well with the new gaffer, I was sixpence short when my time was out, I was sixpence short on the hour on my wages, I had a young apprentice with me, Brian Marshall, and we made it up with him that we'd get our finger out and do a bit, and we were making they big sole plates, and two journeymen usually made one a day but we were doing one and half a day – a better fecher. So I goes through to the gaffer, Bob Brough, he died there just a wee while ago, I said, you notice a bit difference now, I'll be getting the extra sixpence now?' "Aye I noticed a bit difference, right enough, but we'll gei you another thruppence." So I waited another wee while and said, "Is it no about time I wis getting that thruppence?" "No your no getting that, no yet" Right I said, hae ma books ready for Friday. Pucky as anything, "Get ma books ready for Friday", of course, it was just what he was wanting, "Right" he said "your books will be ready for ye." So that was me out of Melville Brodies and up to Auchtermuchty.

MB: My word

MB: Were you 15, no 16 when you started?

RF: Sixteen when I started in the foundry but you didn't start your apprenticeship.

MB: So labouring, just the general go-for

RF: The boy on the drums and for the tea.

MB: Were you up in Kirkcaldy as well?

RF: No I was out in Cardenden, which was six miles.

MB: So you went to school there?

RF: Yes

MB: Are there many Flemings in Cardenden?

RF: There's four different families of Flemings, aye. But there was quite a few of us, there were 9 of us in the family.

MB: Can I ask what year you were born, Ronne?

RF: 1943, and it was a coal mining village of course, and I actually, I applied like everyone else go to the pit but I failed my medical on eyesight. They used to say, the older journeyman, stupid trade, you'll never make any money at this trade. You'd be better being a painter or a plumber where you could do work at night, but I had a wee side line going, tying the artificial flies for the fishing

MB: Oh very nice.

RF: I used to thousands of them, I used to do four gross a week.

MB: Four gross a week – what was the hair or the feather you used?

RF: Starling wings, most common, most of the flies had starling wings.

MB: Did they have a name?

RF: All different patterns, Greenwells Glory, Kingfisher, Butcher, Silver Butcher, Murray Butcher, Dunkeld, Black Petal, Victor, Zulu, Burn Fly....ocht aye.

MB: I take it you went fishing as well?

RF: O yes, yes, still do.

MB: Where?

RF: We have a wee private loch up at Dunkeld, in fact I've got the loch booked for Monday and I go up in a wee camper van. It's a private loch with just the one boat on it so I have it to myself. I share the fish with otters and the ospreys, beautiful.

MB: Beautiful, yes indeed.

MB: John, you are the only voice not on this. The pattern maker. Can I ask what your full name is?

JG: John Greig

MB: And I take it you grew up in Cardenden as well?

JG: I did, the Jampers, Bowhill then the Jampers of Cardenden.

MB: Do you remember when you started with Melville Brodie?

JG: It must have been 61 or 62. Like Dougie I was at the technical college for a year – what they called the pre-apprenticeship course. Things were quite well planned at that time. You got a taster in the college of all the various trade aspects and if you were lucky when you came out the college it stood you in good stead and you could get a job as an apprentice trade from a local employer. But things were picking up by the early 60s they were better than they'd been in the 50s. Without too much searching I realised it was between an electrician or a pattern maker, I enjoyed working with the wood and doing the wiring and electrical side. I did try with the Scottish Electricity Board but before the results came through for the exam I got a job at Melville Brodies and was happy to take it, in the pattern shop.

MB: As an apprentice?

JG: Yes.

MB: Do you remember your first day?

JG: No, as it happens. But it must have been similar to Dougie's. [laughs] We just had to wear a bib an' tucker, ordinary dungarees.

MB: You must have been quite apprehensive, but were you excited?

JG: Yeh, both, excited, apprehensive, the biggest worry was investing in tools, the pattern makers had to buy an awful lot of tools compared to the other trades. Ronnie was decrying moulders as the bottom of the heap, but I claim the high ground, the pecking order – was the Drawing Office, the pattern shop, the fitting shop, then and that was reflected in the pays that went out to apprentices and so on and tradesmen, although it may have been thrupence an hour – it was still set at a pecking order. But the pattern makers had a tool allowance, which they were

expected to spend on their tools, replacing tools and buying tools in the first place. If you were lucky you had a loan or the use of a tool belonging to the company or to another foreman, without that you couldn't do your job. But it was a good training, a wide range of appliances, wide range of materials, timbers, yellow pines and so on, and a wide range of companies. A pattern maker was party to a lot of goings on prior to everybody else because the draftsman would come through and say “Look, we're thinking of designing that, is that feasible?” and it could be discussed in the pattern shop and whether or not, then it would be sent back and modified. A pattern has to be drawn to it so it can come out the sand, a pattern in engineering terms is a replica made of wood or plastic or fibreglass or metal sometimes, and that replica is used to mass produce the end product, be it a camera casing or an engine block or part of the Forth Bridge. In the past it was often made in wood, softwood if there was only a few, hard wood if there were larger numbers or in resin or metal if there were larger numbers.

PATTERN MAKING/contd⁸

JG: So the pattern was a full size replica of the end product and it then would go down to the foundry to be moulded and cast and to be cored to make it hollow and so on the pattern maker would supply core boxes to hollow out the casting, and machining allowance, because they had the turners and so on, the flanges so it could be bolted together, it had to be tapered so it could be drawn out of the mould cleanly without falling in on itself and the corners had to be round and filleted so the cast metal can flow and run and the planning of rising and feeders and so on so the casting work can be sound – it all had to be planned. Molten metal contracts, and it shrinks quite a bit, every metal contracts differently, brass, aluminium, steel, iron, so each pattern you had to know what it was being made for so you could add the contraction allowance. The contraction allowance – when the contraction rule had maybe three or four sizes and each pattern could be a different size depending on what it was being made for, brass or aluminium or cast iron, so that was one of the skills that came into the trade. There was a lot of satisfaction in the trade. And then once it was made the pattern, you had the pride of painting it, making it look good, then it went down to the foundry to be destroyed – [laughter] well, that's a bit harsh. It went down to the foundry and got put into use and as soon as it was put into use, of course, it got a lot of brute force, hammering and thumping and shaking around and once it was used it was put to the main stores. So we had pattern stores as a record, we kept patterns for 25 years before we scrapped them. We had patterns for Tullis Russell, that's the paper mills in Fife.⁹

MB: Is there an archive of them, did you say Stanley Mills?

JG: No, paper mills, silk mills, linen mills, linoleum factories, Nairns, and Shepherds.

COMPANIES DEPENDED ON ENGINEERS¹⁰

DR: And just interrupting for a minute, and if any of they companies and industries had a problem, they could contact us and we would draw our records out of the store and make new patterns, and that's another reason why, Nairns for example, to dismiss us so lightly, we pulled them out of the muck so many times, it's unbelievable. The coal mines, we made equipment for the coal mines, all sorts.

MB: It's absolutely crucial. You're right at the hub of all of them.

DG: There was a forge shop next door.

MB: I just remembered I have an old catalogue I'd like to show you – for farm machinery parts.

⁸ see movie: John-pattern making.MOV

⁹ see movie clip: John- pattern store.MOV

¹⁰ see movie clip: DR-firms depended on Melville Brodies.MOV

Sounds like the kind of thing Melville Brodie's could do.
[shows book/catalogue]

TRACK 8

DR: The showmen would come assemble this, Margaret, it was the longest in Europe apparently.

MB: Yes, I believe so.

DR: Any repairs in their equipment or whatever else they needed done they used to come up to Melville Brodie to get them done. Wullie was involved in quite a few items to repair the equipment for Links market.

MB: How fantastic, they had everything like the shows, the roundabouts and everything?

[break in conversation to look at Margaret's copy of a catalogue of spare parts for farm implements from c. 1910]

DR: Our stores and drawing offices and places, had manuals like these, to lay our hands on some of the stuff, but when the place was destroyed, a lot of that went by the board as well you see.

DG: It got to the point that the pattern stores for Melville Brodies, were as large as the premises, they had large stores round the back here and additional large stores up on March Street, and the storage of the patterns became a problem, because your feeding it all the time, the sheer volume and they had to start destroying a lot of patterns.

MB: Ah, what a shame, this kind of stuff although it seems ordinary, it's hard to get your hands on.

TRACK 9

[background talking]

DR: He kindly showed us round the factory, and I asked him, Archie, just out of interest, have you got your own company. He says, you know Dougie, I huvnae. I says, 'your now 62, there is one thing none of us can avoid, and its death and if you don't do it now, then the same thing will happen to your company as to what you're trying to protect.' He says, your right, your right pal.

MB: I think it would be great, and I don't think it would take that long, and if you take a few seconds like this, just put a few things together, you'd be amazed at how much you'd get.

[showing photos]

MB: Now I'm going to ask a stupid question, what is this material?

DR: That particular one is precast concrete, reinforced ... [planning the memorial] The one thing which is annoying, and that's particular annoying, what material and maybe a heavy gauge tube, and cut at an angle and it could be filled with concrete for example and placed on a plinth on the bottom... we're at the stage, we started on the words, Ronnie's gonna do the pattern, so we're gonnae get together to decide on what kind of words and then to do the pattern, I'm getting the feeling now, where I'm nearly certain where that's gonna come off. The booklet that comes next, but that's gonna come off and so that means getting it done sometime when you get to that point, things start to accelerate at quite a fast rate.

TRACK 10

DR: He would design it and make the equipment and then we actually installed it and actually commissioned it and this was done on numerous occasions. And two linoleum factories, one at Falkland, which was run by the cooperative society, was built by Brodies and one at Newburgh was built by Brodies. So you were right in a sense that there was a lot of innovation, if someone had a problem in a bit of equipment or a process they would come to Brodies and discuss it.

MB: What does a pattern maker do when his factory closes down?

DG: Goes into shop fitting. I was a teacher, a technical teacher

MB: You'd be ideal for you have this ability to think in 3D which is so crucial.

RF: The thing is pattern makers had all the disciplines in wood-working, they could turn their hand to any carpentry, the higher end of carpentry.

END OF RECORDING