

CHRONICLES OF A NONAGENARIAN MECCANOMAN

Introduced by Pat Briggs

Jack Partridge, doyen and active member of the NMMG celebrated his 90th birthday on January 22nd this year. Well known for his many fine Meccano clocks, he also has a wide range of other interests, not the least being travel by rail. Solo trips to the continent – no bother! Further he supports a number of other organisations both social and professional. Indeed he is viewed as a role model for those of us who have entered what is euphemistically termed the “third age”. He was a keen walker until recent times when a couple of new knees became necessary, though he can still be seen putting tables away after meetings.

Our editor takes a keen interest in the lives and welfare of our members and after her persuasion Jack has agreed to tell us something of his long life. The following account serves to remind us of times both good and bad through which he and his contemporaries have lived.

Jack tells us; Christmas 1926 was the occasion when I first became the owner of a Meccano set – it arrived on Christmas Morning, a dark red and green No. 3 and I was 6 years old. My awareness and interest in Meccano had already been awakened by visits to a cousin Les, who lived in Bedford and possessed an original nickel No. 7 together with a clockwork motor and a 4 volt electric motor which he powered by borrowing the accumulator from his father's “wireless set”. Whenever I visited Bedford with the family or alone during school holidays I either helped in the construction of models or sat in admiration whilst he did the building. Unfortunately during the next 10 years things at home became financially difficult and Father suffered as a result of gas during WW1 and although I managed to build most of the models in the No.3 manual my stock of parts did not increase, especially after passing the 11+ and joining the new Grammar School in my home town where I needed uniform and sports clothing etc. Eventually odd jobs out of school hours and during holidays enabled me to buy a few additional parts. These included a clockwork motor and enough parts to try my hand at some of the super models which included the original grand father clock using the newly introduced 133 tooth gears, but not a model using the GRB. (Birthdays and subsequent Christmases helped) Les advised with my building but unfortunately the clock which had worked extremely well had to be dismantled when I eventually left home for RAF service.

In the late 30s I left school and joined the Post Office Engineering Dept who in those days provided all the UK's Telephone services – except for the city of Hull. During the few weeks when my application to join the PO was being processed I spent time with the local power supply co. In those days electric supply was provided by the local council who bought it in bulk from the nearest power station – in this case 12 miles away in Northampton and brought to my home town via the first long distance 33,000volt underground cable in the country. They also provided a direct current supply by local generation and massive secondary cells which supplied several clothing and shoe factories. During these few weeks I was very fortunate in joining an electrician who was converting the power supply to the local cinema for their arc lamps supply from rotary convertors to mercury arc rectifiers.

When my application to join the PO Engineering Dept was accepted I started work in Northampton. It was a very fortunate time to join the Post Office as automatic exchanges were replacing the manual ones including those where a handle had to be operated by the caller on his handset using the old magneto systems. The old manual systems in many villages invariably had a switchboard in the village Post Office house with power to operate it by Leclanché cells; more than a dozen telephones in a village at that time was unheard of! The PO had started a programme of conversion of these exchanges to automatic switching. I was also fortunate that the area in which I started my training was an important link in the first London to Birmingham coaxial cable. This particular cable operated with several hundred audio telephone circuits on one pair of wires with amplifiers about every 6 miles – amazing for that period.

In 1940, having joined the RAF it became necessary to learn about Radar, originally called RDF (Radio Direction Finding) before the Americans joined us when the title became Radar. The learning curve was very steep as new equipment was regularly being introduced. As well as working on the equipment in the UK I well remember joining a group who were landed in an overseas tropical country with a collection of equipment and instructed to build and operate 2 Radar units – something none of us had ever done before. We did this however and they performed satisfactorily in spite of the problems we faced with the high voltages in humid tropical conditions.

After 18 months of tropical temperatures and mosquitoes and Malaria I returned to the UK from Freetown on board the Queen Mary and not as on the outward voyage on a converted New Zealand meat boat.

Back in the UK the radar chain was kept busy plotting ships and aircraft and making preparations for the invasion of Europe. At the same time some of this work was overtaken by the need to add equipment to counter the threat posed by V1s - Flying bombs and V2s - Rockets. Of the former very many were shot down by both fighters and guns using locked follow radar and proximity fuses. Unfortunately there was considerable destruction in and around London and many people were killed as a result of the ones that did get through. The V2s always got through and over a 1000 fell in the London area and many more on towns in Europe. Although the paths of V2s were plotted by Radar stations and their firing point calculated they were fired from mobile launching platforms which were moved rapidly before rocket firing aircraft could reach and destroy them.

The next encounter was in the East where Radar was in use against the Japanese in Burma and in preparation for the eventual invasion of Singapore - fortunately the dropping of the atom bomb by the Americans made this unnecessary and I came home.

The PO Engineering Dept which I re-joined in the Coventry area on demob in 1946 bore little resemblance to that I had known in 1940. Little maintenance had been carried out during hostilities and also a great deal of sorting out was necessary especially in the areas which had been prepared to accept Parliament should evacuation from London become necessary. In addition at this time the IRA were causing problems, especially in the Coventry area, where damage was done to cables and buildings. After a short spell in Coventry however the opportunity arose to join the Engineering Training School in Staffordshire and together with a wife - an ex RAF Nursing Sister who I had married in Calcutta and 2 sons, I joined the Engineering Training School as a lecturer in telecommunications.

The next 5 years were spent studying part time - 4 nights a week and Saturday mornings - at the local Technical College for London University External Exams and unfortunately Meccano was relegated to second place although I did have the books and literature which I had been able to acquire over the years.

After leaving the Training School I moved to the London area and worked at London Airport on the use of Radar for airways control. At this time I had already started to communicate with 2 well known Meccanomen - Maurice Morris and Esmond Roden of Cheltenham. MM, as Maurice was called, produced a regular information document on Meccano topics and a series of instruction leaflets on models which were usually based on other Meccanomen's designs. The building instructions were very comprehensive and made the building of them a great challenge - I still have a complete set of his papers. Work at London Airport did not last long however and I left London and moved to Oxfordshire for work on Atomic Energy at Harwell

It was now that my Meccano interest began to take off in earnest. We lived only a short distance from Henley-on-Thames where it was a great pleasure to become acquainted with Geoff Wright and to pay many visits to his shop in which he had started to deal in all aspects of Meccano. Here I met many visiting Meccanomen including the famous clock builder Rahm whose complex model made several appearances at exhibitions and Stores in France not to mention the Meccano Magazine. A 16mm film was made of his clock but I don't think anyone has seen it outside France. It was a great pleasure to help with Geoff's first and subsequently annual exhibition at the Henley Town Hall which was very well patronised by visiting members of the public. At these exhibitions I met many Meccanomen and really became engrossed in the hobby. I started to show my models which included a grandfather clock with Westminster chimes using thin walled brass tube for the chimes and sundry super models. I recall having a model of the 10000 LNER locomotive on display in Geoff's shop for a number of weeks and a Bulle clock which operated on a 1½ volt cell on show in the window of a local Building Society. This model was based on one built by another very famous French Meccanoman, Georges Gombert.

At about this time Esmond Roden invited a number of Meccanomen to a gathering at his house in Cheltenham with a view to starting a Meccano Club. About a dozen of us turned up at Esmond's house and so the Midlands Meccano Guild was born, of which I was a founder member. Ernest Chandler eventually became its secretary and he steered the Guild which initially met in Stratford upon Avon and very successfully to various locations in the Midlands area. It was at one of the Henley Exhibitions I met the Coles family and was invited to join the North Midlands Meccano Guild which was operating very successfully in the Nottingham area under the leadership of Geoff Coles. At about this time another member, Mike Cotterill, was arranging the first of the famous exhibitions at his home town of Skegness which became an annual gathering attracting visitors from around the world and which continues to this day.

The Henley show became an annual event and not only attracted Meccanomen from around the country but also from across the Channel - it became a truly International Exhibition. As a result of meeting them at Henley we were invited to their annual show which took place at a different location each year. It became an

annual event for my wife and I to visit a different area of France for a combined holiday and to join the Meccano Exhibition. I became a member of the French Club and have visited the exhibition almost every year since. (During the late 60s I managed to fit in the construction of our first colour TV receiver!)

In addition to becoming acquainted with Meccanomen from France and their models, through visits to the USA I met the doyen of Meccano Men Dr. Keith Cameron. I soon realised he was the provider of much of MM's literature, especially the models, and we became correspondents on the subject. Kathleen and I were able to visit him and his family on numerous occasions. When I first met Keith he was running a medical clinic in a remote part of Kentucky surrounded by open cast mines. On retirement Keith moved to a very pleasant part of Florida where he met many Meccano enthusiasts who were visiting the area. Even after his death his writings and models are constantly appearing in Meccano literature today.

Ed; Jack describes the busy and varied life he has led and we do thank him for his support of the NMMG and our hobby in general which we hope will continue for many years to come.

