

A day in a Motorcycle Factory

It was a Sunday morning a few streets from the factory when I knock on the door of a bleary eyed key holder. He gave me a big bunch of keys and pointed out the one I needed and off I went. Pulling up at the factory and parking where the managers usually do because after all they weren't going to be there on a Sunday. Across the road and through the small personal door in the loading bay locking it behind me. It was very dark inside with just enough light to walk past the lift and then looking to my right where a wide gangway led past the inspection shop and through the press bay to the machines shops further down. This part was single story with the windows in the roof allowing a little light to filter through. The machines may have been silent but there were a few strange little noises giving the place an eerie feel. Looking forward again and walking down a dark narrow corridor with a wall on my right and a low partition on my left separating me from the gear cutting machines all lay silent. At the end I turned through double doors into the office block. Being on my own in this vast place I decided not to use the lift but to take the stairs to the second floor and into the design office where there was now plenty of natural light. Lights on and I settled down to continue my work from the day before.

Where was I? I was in the Norton-Villiers factory in Plumstead South East London. It was July 1968 and a critical job needed to be finished. It all started on the Friday when I got a call from my parents who had had a car accident near the end of their journey to holiday in North Devon. They were walking wounded, my father with a broken wrist and their car a write-off. A word with Tony Denniss, Chief Draughtsman and it was agreed that I should join them as soon as possible. I was nearing the end of the redesign of the Commando timing cover incorporating the points and re-positioned revcounter drive and placing that wonderful Norton scrip set into the cover. So it was that I worked all weekend to get the detail drawings completed and left them for someone else to look over and sign off. The drawings were on the critical path for getting the modifications into production and with no one else working it was arranged for me to have access to the factory on the Sunday. I must say it was a strange feeling working that day knowing I was the only one in the whole place and knowing too that I could have gone anywhere I wanted had I a mind to. It was never a problem for me to work on my own because I often used to do an hour of overtime in the morning before others arrived which I found more productive than doing the same of an evening when others were about. It was easy to concentrate that day but at the same time that feeling of isolation in this uncannily quiet place was something always at the back of my mind. I was approaching my 22nd birthday at the time so to be trusted with access to such a large factory on my own was quite a privilege. I am sure health and safety would not allow it today. Late that afternoon my work was done so I retraced my steps making sure the factory door was securely locked behind me and returned the keys before setting off for North Devon.

Bob Cakebread