

# A Shipyard Apprenticeship Part Three

## Incompetence, and more of Potter

### Incompetence

When I was an apprentice, I soon discovered that I infinitely preferred talking about work to actually doing any. It wasn't that I was lazy, or I would hardly have managed fifteen hour days four times each week for eight or nine months of the year. No. What I really mean to convey is simply that, when I knew and fully understood *how* to do a task, I quickly became bored with the physical *doing*. My future was already beginning to unfold.

I also very quickly discovered that most tradesmen could not bear to watch ham-fisted work, so, knowing that, I could always avoid doing anything I didn't particularly want to do simply by shaping up like a duck with a shovel. The tradesman would watch in growing disgust, give a pitying "Tut tut" sort of look, a shake of the head, followed shortly by, "You useless bugger! Get out of the way and let me do it!"

Part of the reason for the tradesman's reaction was, of course, that the work would be attributed to him and so nothing short of the very best would do. That's why our ships were so good. (And, if anybody mentions the *Titanic* I will just point out that her Captain was an Englishman )

Apart from old Bob Metcalfe, the Robber, may he rest in peace, was the only other man who ever saw through my displays of simulated incompetence, which he effectively countered by setting me to work on my own and making me undo and redo the task until I got it right.

"Do it again. And properly this time. You're not as daft as you let on," Robber would snarl, standing over me. I soon realized that I could never pull the wool over his eyes.

But in general my "inept" tactic was effective, often leaving me free to slope off and study other tasks performed by other tradesmen. For example, I spent as much time as I could with the engine fitters, even masquerading at times as one of their apprentices. That way, I became familiar with diesel engines, steam turbines, reduction gears, engine speed governors, engine-driven pumps, oil separators and centrifugal purifiers, etc, etc. It helped of course that my mechanical engineering evening class studies often gave me the basic theoretical understanding and I was thus able to talk the talk most convincingly.

Until I became badly unstuck one morning . . .

I was in an engine room, in a crankcase, helping an engine fitter to insert a heavy gudgeon pin -I should have been up top, in a deck machinery house, helping an electrician to solder connecting lugs on the mains cables to a sub-switchboard - when the Foreman Fitter came along -accompanied by the Pope . I hastily pulled up the collar of my filthy oily boilersuit, pulled my flat cap down over my eyes and tried to shrink down out of sight.

"You?" The Pope shouted above the din.

"Er. Me?" I asked feigning wide-eyed innocence.

"Yes, you. D'u see me lookin' at anybody else? What the hell are you doing here?"

"What's the matter? Why shouldn't 'e be here?"The Fitter Foreman asked.

"Because he's an apprentice bloody spark, that's why. You! Gimme yer board!"

I fished in my pocket, and handed over my board, shrugged my shoulders at the astonished fitter with whom I'd been working and gave him an impish grin. I was undone anyway, so there was no point in crying, "Woe is me." I climbed out of the crankcase and hauled myself up the ladders and out of the engine room, with my metaphoric tail between my legs.

I hated soldering cable lugs, too . Hated those blasted paraffin blowlamps. Always managed to get my fingers burnt at some stage of the game.

At the subsequent disciplinary hearing, Management were divided over what should be done with me. The manager in charge of apprentice training wanted to suspend me for a month without pay. Mr Johnson, a director and head of the electrical department, sat and scowled at me. And, surprisingly, the Pope redeemed himself by weighing in with the opinion that I should be soundly ticked off and told not to do it again. Maybe it was the common surname that did it.

I was invited by Mr Johnson to explain myself, which I did, most eloquently I thought, mentioning my dual studies at evening classes to justify my interest in both trades.

When I had finished, the great man stared at me for a while, coughed to clear his throat, then told me, not unkindly, that I would probably have received little or no compensation had I injured myself, that I might well have breached the accepted demarcation rules, and that I would be called upon to apologise to the engine fitter and to senior shop steward of the fitters' trade union. I was then dismissed with the command that I was not to be *caught* repeating the misdemeanour.

Which was the end of the matter. No suspension. Nor was I called upon to apologise to anyone. But it was the effective end of my "dual" apprenticeship. Under permanent suspicion, I was able only occasionally to watch and ask questions of other tradesmen after that, which was not quite the same.

## and more of Potter

I must confess I never liked Peter Potter at all. But that may have been because he was everything that I wasn't - tall, as handsome as sin, and knew it - athletic, well-spoken, charming and exceptionally clever. So, yes, my instinctive dislike of the bugger could have been largely due to envy, but I don't believe it was. And, of course, I suppose I did owe him an indirect debt of gratitude in connection with the very beautiful and charming SN.

Potter was another of the rare breed of dual-fuel evening class students, but he was a student with a difference. I said he was exceptionally clever - but the fact is he was a genius, no less.

At the college, Potter would attend the bare minimum number of lectures, do the barest minimum of class work, cheat on laboratory experiment results, submit just the least possible homework papers, and spend as much time as he dared out of the classroom during those lectures that he did deign to attend. Then, at the end of each academic year, when all the compulsory requirements set by the Examining Board were added up, Potter would have just the barest minimum in every category to be permitted to sit the examinations.

The examinations were always three hours long. Potter would write furiously for, at a pinch, only half the allotted time, certainly never more than two of the three hours, then he would hold a hand up, give his paper to an invigilator and swagger out, no doubt to meet some poor besotted girl or other, his current successor to SN.

Then, when they were published in early September, Potter would show everyone his examination results - never less than 95% in any single paper. Sickening, isn't it?

But in the shipyard, Potter was always in trouble. In fact he numbered among that small band of miscreants who were suspended for a whole month. In *today's* world his offence would be classed as persistent sexual harassment and he might well be prosecuted . . .

At the eastern end of the Musgrave works stood a very new office building in which the three hundred or so workers were all girls, tracers who made fair-faced copies of all the ship drawings that went to the owners, and machinists who did clever things with punched cards in the Hollerith Business Machine Room. The girls were all young, and most were very attractive.

They certainly attracted Peter Potter. . .

One summer, he took to sunbathing, sitting propped against a wall across the road opposite a large open space adjacent to the Tracing Office. When the girls in their bright summer dresses left the office during their lunch break, they passed between the seemingly-indifferent Potter and the bright midday sun . . .

This went on every sunny day«for nearly two weeks, until one girl, brighter than most of the others, worked out exactly what Potter was up to and told her father, who was a company manager. He took urgent notice of his daughter's complaint and paid the voyeur a surprise visit.

"Gimme yer board! "

Home for a month! And he stayed at home for a month, too.

Some time later, Potter fell for a girl called Alice, and he fell hard. Unfortunately for him, Alice was the profoundly religious daughter of the hell-fire-and-brimstone preacher at one of the numerous tin tabernacles that abounded in the city. But Potter was truly hooked. The only way that he could make any sort of progress with the girl was to accompany her to the tin tabernacle, where, in a short time, he got a powerful dose of fundamental, Gospel-based religion. He became Brother Peter, was baptised by total immersion and took up preaching on city street corners.

In time he became a popular and successful evangelist on the tin tabernacle circuit, brandishing a large Bible and haranguing his congregations with a heady mixture of humour and hot gospel. He was quite a good turn, actually.

The remainder of Potter's story I have on several good authorities, one of them none-other than the beautiful SN herself, who was also a member of the congregation at that same tin tabernacle, and with whom I maintained occasional friendly contact until she immigrated to Canada some years later and married a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman from Montreal.

Towards the end of his apprenticeship, Potter was a Graduate Member of both the Institute of Electrical Engineers and the Institute of Mechanical Engineers. He was given a place in the Electrical Design Office ( One up on me -I was taken into the ordinary Electrical Drawing Office where I was offered a much less interesting dead-end career path.)

The Electrical Design Office was headed up by a self-taught old electrical engineer who had begun life as a cabinet maker, would you believe, at about the time the *Titanic* was built. His name was Mr Pollock and he must have been well into his seventies at the time, 1950.

The Electrical Design Office was housed on the top floor of a fairly new office building in the Victoria Engine Works which once belonged to another shipbuilding company, Workman and Clark. The office had large windows and roof skylights which were never allowed to be opened because of the airborne dust and dirt in the area. Consequently, the office could be most uncomfortably hot in summer, a privation made worse by the fact that it was simply not done to remove jackets or ties.

Although Potter was obviously a brilliant engineer, he was also still a strident fire-and-brimstone evangelist, and not particularly popular with the other quite clever engineers in the office. Old man Pollock didn't like him much either.

One particularly hot day, Potter approached old Pollock and asked for the skylights and the windows to be opened. Pollock explained politely

enough about the dust, and refused Potter's request. Being thin-blooded, and lacking sympathy, Mr Pollock refused to countenance shirtsleeve order too. Potter rebelled, removed his jacket. Mr Pollock was clearly displeased.

Next day, Potter intensified his rebellion, removed his jacket, and his tie and rolled up his sleeves. Old Pollock was quietly furious.

On the third day, Potter turned up at the office dressed in shorts and an open-necked, short-sleeved flowery summer shirt. Which was the last straw. Mr Pollock told him to go home and dress properly. Potter stubbornly refused. Mr Pollock went to see the Director of the Electrical Engineering Department, Mr Johnson. And that afternoon, Potter was handed a letter offering him alternative employment - a job in the Electrical Test House, not exactly "on the Tools" but damned nearly. It necessitated wearing a boilersuit, which was an insult to a man holding graduate membership of not one but two major Engineering Institutes.

Brick red in the face, Potter stuffed his slide-rule, drawing instruments and his various text books in his briefcase and stormed out. He marched through the Victoria Works, strode across the Queen's Road, and entered the main office where he demanded to see CC Pounder, the company's most senior Engineering Director (and author of several important text books on diesel engines.) For some inexplicable reason, CC Pounder liked Potter instantly and gave him a place in one of the Engine Design Offices where his eccentricities seemed to go unnoticed.

Potter did much clever work over the next few years, and was acknowledged to be a close personal friend of the Company's most senior Engineering Director. Potter could have had any engineering management or design post he might care to ask for in Harland and Wolff. But, instead, what does the daft bat do? He grows a wild ginger beard and joins the Communist Party. I was told that he wound up in India or Africa working as a Comrade, but I don't really know beyond that.

*to be continued*

Eddie Hunter

*This article has previously appeared in the Official Organ of the Seven Seas Club*