



# Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:7:00

## Oxbridge Wonders

Author: Alan Goodchild

I lectured at Cambridge for three years, which is where I usually leave it at dinner parties if I'm honest. I'll admit, a few seconds of adoration is enjoyed until the inevitable, 'what you?' comes from at least one of the wine-soaked guests. OK, it wasn't a real University College, but a Tertiary establishment adorning East Street within spitting distance of Parker's Peace. A collection of outbuildings and 70's low rise penitentiary-style blocks, where the less able 16 to 19-year olds of Cambridge and its outlying areas continued their struggle for education and enlightenment.

My job was to work with those stepping for the lower rungs of the ladder, the mechanical tradesmen of the future. Some were bright but lazy, a few were vague and unable to shed the immaturity of youth, several seemed lacking in even the basics of communication and then there were those who came in from the Fens, the low-lying lands to the East. A strange alternative race with a different dialect, often mumbling, reserved and, harsh though it seems to say in my experience, very, very, thick. This is not to ridicule or decry them in any way, and my story has no exaggeration whatsoever, everything happened in truth as I tell it, though I do still wonder quite how, and sometimes even why?

Tuesday morning, the first day of term at 9.am I waited in room 3.C of the West Halls. I hadn't realised what a challenge finding room 'C' on the third floor would be for my first-year group of Heavy Vehicle and Plant Apprentices, until I went downstairs to meet them.

They straddled the door of room C on the ground floor, some standing, some sitting, most chewing. Room G.C was occupied.

Are you class 1.G? I asked of the first long-haired young man in leathers holding a crash helmet. He pulled a well-greased joining slip from inside it and looked up at me without answering. His mouth dropping open as he chewed, his expression less vacant more vacated. Then, 'Church' he said in quite the lowest voice I'd heard, and his hand turned the mucky slip up towards me.

'Robert Church?' I asked. He looked straight through me, I waited, he nodded. 'It says class 1G, just there look Robert.' His expression didn't change. 'Are you all in 1G?' I asked. A big lad in a stained T shirt rang out the first real Fen words I was to hear; 'Were's't say thaat?' I guessed at what he asked.

'On your joining slip, the one you were given on enrolment?'

'Not me, got nothin, me.'

'What's your name?' I asked, my ears primed to wade through the slurry of Fen drawl.

'Cooper, P.' I checked the enrolment list and sure enough, Peter Cooper was indeed a member of class I G, the G standing for Goodchild whose task it was to guide this tangle of wetland wonders through the workshop of working life, to as much success as their little hearts desired. The problem was, their little hearts didn't really desire it much at all at the start.

I had the group follow me to room 3.C and once seated I did a quick count of heads. Sure enough, we had 15 young men in a class of 14. I asked them all to look down at the top right corner of their joining slips, except Cooper P that is, and I said; 'Please raise your hand if it doesn't have class 1G in the box.' No-one raised their hand. 'Ah, OK, then we'll call a register, and may I ask that you stand up when I call your name please? so that I can put a body to a name so to speak, OK?' There was little recognition and no response whatsoever. I started: 'Appleby T, Clarke M, Ford R.' I looked up at each one that stood. All was fine until I spoke the name 'Richards P',

when two young men stood up, I just had the one in the register, Eureka! 'Paul Richards?' I asked.

'Yep.' Said the taller of the two. Big Pauly as I would later be told.

'And you are?' I asked looking clearly at the slightly smaller, rounder one with his head bowed.

'S'my brother.' Said Paul.

'He isn't in the register. I'm sorry, I mean what's your first name?'

'Lance.' Replied Paul.

'What class code appears in your box Lance?'

'He's best off in ere wi' me.' Replied Paul. I noticed that Robert Ford, who was standing next to the two brothers was nodding in my direction with a distinctly worried expression on his face, as if to say better leave him where he is, so I did.

This first lesson was entitled Mechanical Principles and the initial morning was for me to ascertain the general level of the class in terms of their prior knowledge of the basics of mechanics, angles, materials etc. This met with some wonderment, a degree of disinterest and quite an undertone of teach me I dare you. I returned to the staff room after one hour and thirty minutes to be greeted by a smiling Chris Chaplain.

'Here he is, shell-shocked from Surrey! Well, you're over the first hurdle, how were the little darlings?' he asked with a gleeful expression, leaning back on the comfy chair he bought from home. 'Don't tell me, cos I already know, solid bone ear to ear, nothing north of the eyebrows in most, correct? Any little shits in the rabble?'

'Well, you could say that, and thankfully, no shits, all good,' I reservedly admitted. 'Though they might be a challenge when we come to the more technical parts, but I do seem to have one extra boy in the class.'

‘That’ll be Lance that will.’ Said Les, the head of the Motor Vehicle department. ‘Lance Richards and his brother Paul, right?’

‘Exactly, I said. ‘That’s them. Lance’s joining slip says he should be in 1.C, so Chris’s class, no?’

‘No,’ said Chris. ‘They share the family brain cell those two, so we thought it best to leave them together, they’re yours to keep. You lucky, lucky man. You’ve got Rob Church too right?’

‘Yes, I have, though he doesn’t say much either.’

‘He won’t,’ said Les, ‘his brother got killed on his motorbike last week.’

I was shocked, and I tried desperately to remember if I had been kind to him, it was a hell of a first lesson in many ways. Les continued:

‘They’ve all got their problems and as I say at the start of each term lads, be gentle with them. It’s our job to help them earn a crust when they haven’t had the best of starts. Treat them like schoolkids and you’ll lose them. Treat them like men and eventually you might get through. Try as hard as you can, that’s all you can do. And above all keeping them safe from themselves in our workshop means eternal vigilance, right?’ ‘Eternal vigilance!’ repeated Chris and I.

At that point Jeff Barnet entered the room. Jeff was a senior lecturer with a vast experience in and a love of steam engines. He also, so I now saw, had a penchant for wearing a small plastic Boots bag on his head when walking out in the rain, the ears of the bag pricked to attention and the word ‘Boots’ displayed squarely and all too clearly upside down above his forehead. Chris mouthed the words: ‘Fen Lad, nuff said?’ and we both chuckled as I sat at my desk for the first time as a practising teacher. What fun I was to have in the next three years, you just couldn’t write some of it.