

The “Wonder Bakery” (June 1947)

Mr Jim Clark b.1925

I had been working happily in a small basement factory in the East End of London for about a year; the pay was handsome and on the strength of it I had incurred a large hire purchase debt, the most foolish thing I have ever done in my life.

The market for our main product (cigarette cases) suddenly dropped to almost zero and I became a casualty in the laying-off which resulted.

I immediately applied in person for work at the Wonder Bakery in White Hart Lane having heard that there was good money to be earned there. After a brief interview during which I learned that it was a non-Union firm I was taken on with the proviso that I must obtain some very light clothing, singlet and white slacks, as I would be working in the bakehouse. Clothes were still on ration and luckily I had some unused coupons sufficient for the purpose.

I worked on the top floor of this clean modern building where there were three long ovens (about 60 feet in length) for the steam processing of the famous “Wonderloaf”. These ovens contained moving platforms and the dough in baking tins was fed in at one end and ejected 40 minutes later at the other, extremely hot and with a great clatter. The plant was in operation 24 hours a day 7 days a week, and three 8-hour shifts were worked by the operatives: 6am-2pm; 2pm-10pm;and 10pm-6am. We worked a six day week, Saturdays and Sundays were working days. The work was so fatiguing that a change of function was made every hour with a 10 minute recuperation break between each.

The first operation was thus:- the dough, which had been prepared in the “dough room” came rapidly along a conveyer belt from right to left in pairs of lengths about 8 inches by 2 inches looking like large white sausages. These pairs had to be twisted together with two twists and placed in baking tins, these were divided into 4 sections (5 for the smaller loaves). For each oven three workers stood in front of the conveyer belt each taking every third pair leaving the other two for his or her workmates. Yes, women worked there too and for equal pay.

It was fast work and if any dough was missed it either went into a bucket at the end of the line if there was one there, or on the floor and theoretically was wasted, but I saw it picked up sometimes and placed in a baking tin. I made sure that I never missed any dough. “Music While You Work” played over the tannoy system to keep the pace going.

After an hour of this a break was essential, and then on to another job—loading the tins into the ovens having careful regard as to the intervals between loadings. There was a good reason for this.

The worst job by far was unloading the tins at the back of the ovens where the processed bread was ejected. From each oven the tins came out three at a time with a great noise—BANG BANG BANG! This could be heard from the street below. Wearing makeshift gloves consisting of squares of sacking with a slit at one end through which you slid your wrist, you seized one of the tins and bashed out the loaves on to the conveyer belt which took the hot bread down to the despatch department where it was wrapped and loaded on to lorries for immediate delivery.

You had hardly dealt with the three tins when BANG BANG BANG! Three more landed in front of you. If the tins had not been properly greased and if the intervals between loadings had been too frequent it was impossible to keep pace with the system. The foreman was supposed to supervise this. The tins were returned by another conveyer belt and if your gloves were wearing thin, as they soon did, you stood a tin on its side as a signal for “more gloves please”. If I remember rightly only half an hour was permitted on the unloading job.

Unfortunately, at the time I worked there a fierce heat-wave was in progress and during the afternoon shifts the temperature in this working area sometimes rose to 120 degrees. There was a door nearby which we used to open to let some air in but the foreman would close it because he said it spoiled the bread. I heard a whisper that a woman employee was in hospital on the danger list suffering from a heat-related illness.

At the end of the second week when I had been working the afternoon shift I had to tell the foreman I could not continue as the heat was getting me down and I was obliged to give a week’s notice. He put me on the morning shift for the following week this being the best one in the circumstances. I finished on the last day at 2pm thoroughly drained and exhausted.

It actually felt cool outside the building by comparison although the afternoon sun was scorching down mercilessly.

I was deeply depressed and filled with anxiety as to how I was to discharge my debt. It was only a chance meeting with my very good draughtsman friend who gave me the clue that there were vacancies at his firm, Prestwich's, which ultimately solved my distressing problem.

I had learned a hard lesson and learned it well. Never again have I entered into a hire purchase agreement and would recommend to anyone that to do so is most inadvisable.

(original typed 5/4/1993)