

**Personal Memories of The Evode Group**



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**Service: 17 August 1953 - 1980**

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At 16 I was leaving Alleyne's Grammar School with very little idea of what I wanted to do for employment, There were no careers teachers at school and most school leavers went to the Youth Employment Office. You could have a pick of careers from a blacksmith to an accountant. The fact that you had no preparation for your chosen job did not matter. If you went into a trade you became an apprentice and a profession you would also be trained at work. In both cases, unless you were fortunate enough to go to university, you studied at a technical collage. On the advise of the Youth Employment Officer I applied for a position as a laboratory assistant at a small, but growing company called Evode Limited in Stafford.

My interview was with Mr Elias Peake and Dr Barry Jackson. After two interviews the job was mine, however I would have to go to Wolverhampton Technical Collage do an ONC and HNC in Chemistry then onto Grad R.I.C. It was one full day and two nights a week and there was an exam at the end of each year. If I failed my exams, then I was told I would be sacked, - that's incentive. Evode paid my fees, bought my books and even paid my train fair from Stone to Wolverhampton,

It is difficult to think that is over 50 years ago, on August 17<sup>th</sup> 1953, since I walked down Glover Street to start my first day at Evode Limited. Memories of that day are still fresh in my mind. Catching one of the many red double decker PMT buses from Stone to Stafford for the first time, the top deck full of cigarette and pipe smoke and I was greeted in Stafford with the smell of white spirit and lavender polish drifting up Glover Street to the A 34 .

The social climate of the day was quite different from now. A job with a good company was a job for life and Evode was a good company. Full employment meant that there was always a job for anyone who wanted to work. The average wage was probably about £5 to £6 week, a new car cost from £500, but you could get a pre-war Austin 7 for £5. Sugar was still rationed from the war and public transport was the norm with many companies having their own works buses. Winston Churchill was the Prime Minister after Clement Atlee and his Socialist government had been voted out.

Work meant a big change in life style. It was a 48-hour week with 2 weeks holiday a year. Christmas Day and Boxing Day were holidays and we had another 5 days off during the year. The biggest shock was having to work from Sam to 12am on Saturday mornings. With the hours spent at Technical College and studying it was a long working week. My starting wage was Two pounds, seven shillings and six pence per week, which works out at £2.37 in today's money.

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Evode Limited was situated at the bottom of Glover Street in an old M.E.B. building. The generating building ( which was still operating in 1953 ) is still standing at the end of Glover Street on the A 34.. You could walk from the factory to the centre of Stafford in less than five minutes. There was no motorway around Stafford until about 1961, so the A34 carried all of the southbound traffic through the centre of the town and traffic jams were the norm. As you walked down Glover Street you were facing the end of the two storey building, with the laboratory upstairs. Downstairs was the Shipping Office, Wages Office, Maintenance Workshop and a small laboratory workshop. On the left hand side were offices which surrounded a yard. Dr Simon's office was upstairs overlooking the yard. On the right hand side was a road which ran through the site to the River Sow and on the right of the road was the Polish Factory.

About sixty people worked on site and we manufactured building chemicals, industrial paints, bitumen products, polish and adhesives. There were about 6 chemists working for the company and the same number of laboratory assistants. Mr Peake was the Chief Chemist and Works Manager, but Dr. Simon kept a watchful eye on everything that was going on. It was uncanny that when there was any trouble, the phone would ring and the message always the same. "Send Mr Peake to my office".

The workforce was quite unusual. Doctor Simon and John Forman ( a Director) had both left Germany before the Second World War and we employed quite a few people who had been displaced by the war. Poland, East Germany and Russia had become part of the Soviet Communist Block and there were lots of Europeans who did not want to go back to their homeland. We had 2 Germans, a Russian and the bitumen shop was staffed with Poles. Most of the workers had been in the war and although there was respect for authority there was also a very happy go lucky attitude. After what a good many of them had been through nothing appeared to bother them at work. The oldest employee was Chic Godwin who had lost a finger or two during the First World War. Chic was the odd job man and factory cleaner. I don't know how old he was at the time, but I remember him telling me that his Grandfather had been at the last public hanging in Stafford.

Every section of the works had a different smell. In the polish factory the smell was of hot white spirit and lavender used as a reodorant in some of the polishes. It was run by Reg Mosely and May Swinton. The polish was made in heated copper kettles by two Germans, Raina Gahab and Helmut and filled out and packed by twelve girls. Every time there was a heat wave the polish

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would not set and that was an ongoing problem. The paint factory had the familiar paint smell but a lot stronger.

The adhesive factory was the worst, particularly in the summer. Apart from the usual solvents used in adhesives we used methyl isobutyl ketone. The toluene and xylene were industrial grades with some very strong smelling impurities, which lingered.

I was Ken Wood's laboratory assistant working on adhesives. After a few months I was told to get myself a boiler suit by Mr Peake, because the only way to learn the job properly was to get first hand experience of working in the factory. Not only would I understand the processes, but the people in the factory would know I knew my job. It was six months of invaluable experience, which benefited me throughout my working life. When Ken was sent to Ireland as M.D. of our factory in Swords, Vee Vohralik came and I became his assistant.

The laboratory was quite different than today. The equipment included a very fine swing balance with a set of weights that had to be cleaned and covered every night. There was an oven for solids, a platinum crucible for doing an ash that was kept under lock and key. Glassware and distillation columns, measuring cylinders, bunsen burners, stirrers etc. made it look like every other lab of the day, except for the large number of raw material samples and tins of solvent. The working practices at that time would horrify the modern chemist. Almost everyone in the laboratory smoked and naked flames next to inflammable solvents was not unusual. Using a pipette meant sucking up the liquid . whatever it was. Cyanide solutions, chromic acid and even benzene were in common use at work and at technical college. We even had a stone jar of hydrofluoric acid, but nobody treated that with anything but respect. Every Friday the whole factory and laboratories were cleaned ready for Monday morning. Although this was time consuming, it was also very necessary. Most of the processes created a lot of mess and dust and we were short of space in many areas.

At the time we were still making some adhesives under license to Angiers Inc. of Massachusetts U.S.A. I would often have to convert the formulation from fluid ounces and pounds into cc's and grams. This was sometimes complicated by the fact that an U.S. gallon was only 0.83 of an English gallon.

In the 1950,'s we were working on the first tile adhesives to replace the traditional way of fixing tiles with cement based render.

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The adhesives were based on black reclaim rubber and wood rosin. The problem was on white tiles, over time the carbon black showed through. We then moved to white reclaimed rubber in SBP 2, which worked very well until they stopped making white walled car tyres.

Formica produced by De La Rue became very popular in both manufactured products and for the DIY market. To stick this, we sold a dark brown nitrile / phenolic resin adhesive, called SH 12. It was an Angeriers formulation, which was very good. Edwin Beaumont was the Sales Manager based in our London Office, which was in Edgware Road. I believe it was Mr Beaumont who thought it would be a good idea to sell SH 12 in small cans to the DIY market. Because we were not set up for packing small cans there was opposition at the time, but eventually this was overcome. Evode worked with De la Rue and we produce a 1pint square can of "Formica Adhesive" and this was sold through DIY shops.

We had a problem with the adhesive being unstable over a period of time, so we changed to a Neoprene formulation called 528. It was such a success that we started to fill it into tubes of Household Adhesive in about 1955. The girls in the polish filled all these by hand.

Evostik 528 became our main adhesive product for a number of years. It was sold in green 1-gallon cans to industry and red and white containers as a DIY product at a lower price.

In those days we were still working without equipment that we now take for granted. Almost everything was man handled. The raw materials coming into the factory were lifted off the lorry one bag at a time, the 45 gallon drums of solvent were rolled off the lorry onto truck tyres and the finished goods were loaded one piece at a time. None of the luxuries of using a fork lift truck like today.

In the adhesive factory all of the materials had to be carried up the stairs at the side of the churns and loaded down the chimney. When the mix was ready, one man would fill the tins and another would put the lids on. Outside packaging was only used for small containers. There were no masks for dust or solvent and it was hard and not very healthy work.

The Foreman worked from a formulation book, or from memory to weigh out the materials. When the mix was finished a viscosity was done on a Torsion Viscometer and if it looked right then it would be emptied. The new factory at Common Road was built on the site of an old brick works.

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Mr Peak was issued with a company car, a Humber Super Snipe, which from 1954 to 1956 travelled between the two sites. The polish section was sold off, we purchased Vik Supplies Limited from Lotus and in 1956 we moved to Common Road. The Paints Division moved a couple of years later. Because, after Glover Street the factory was considered to be so far out of town, the lunch hour was extended to an hour and a half.

It was a complete change to Glover Street, we had lots of room, everything was new and instead of looking up Glover Street we had a wonderful view over the Common. After I passed my H.N.C. in 1959 I was asked to start a Works Laboratory. I acquired an oven for solids, a Torsion Viscometer, crucibles for doing an ash, a balance and books for records. June Ryan joined me and we set to work from scratch to create an efficient and quick system for testing products.

The first thing was to produce a specification for each product. Batch logs had to be drawn up for the cost office to keep track of raw materials and finished products. We introduced infrared lamps for solids, an electronic balance and a system, which enabled us to test a batch of material within 15 minutes. If the material was not in specification then we would decide what was wrong with it and a course of action to put it right.

In 1960 Doctor Simon asked me to start a Customer Service Laboratory. Unfortunately before I could start to work on setting one up, I was called up to do my National Service. By that time I was married to Margaret and earning the princely sum of ten guineas a week. My first army pay was fifteen shilling a week, i.e. 75p, which was the cost of getting home for the weekend.

On leaving the army in 1962 a position of development chemist was waiting for me, with two laboratory assistants of my own, Barbara Flowers and Lynda Roberts. It was a very exciting time, both for the fast growing Evode Ltd. and those of us working in the labs. There was an abundance of new materials available to us and the advancement of adhesive technology was probably at its peak between 1960 and 1980. Amongst other things, I worked on the first PVA water based tile adhesives and SBR emulsion products like 863 and 873 adhesives. We developed pressure sensitive adhesives, hot melts, epoxy resin adhesives, a range of PVA products and many other product lines that enabled the company to sell into a wide variety of industries.

In 1966 I left Evode Limited to go to Daubert Chemical Company in Chicago Illinois. The following year I was approached by Evode to become Chief



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Chemist and Works Manager at Ercona which was based in Toronto. This was a joint venture between Evode and Albright and Wilson of West Bromwich.

Ercona manufactured adhesives for Eastern Canada and our main sales were in Toronto and Quebec Province.

In 1971 I returned to Evode, Stafford as Chemist in Charge of the Building and Consumer Division. The staff comprised Mike Denson, Janice Gibson and me. We were in charge of all the products that were sold through DIY or builders' merchants and the development of new products and concepts.

New products had to be approved through the Marketing Department and I think we missed a number of opportunities during that time. Two that spring to mind are polymer putty to replace linseed oil putty. We had a product long before it became a big selling item for other companies. Another development was look- a- like coal for domestic gas fires. Marketing thought that the idea would never catch on. How wrong they were!

It was inevitable that as the Company grew things were going to change. In the 1970 there were over 1,000 workers on the Evode site. Managers were bought in; some of whom were no better than the ones we already had. Manchester Business School introduced a new management system for the then Evode Group of Companies. It was probably this reorganisation, although it appeared necessary at the time, led to the demise of the Company. Initially it grew, not only organically, but also with the take over of other businesses. It then became vulnerable itself to being taken over, although this was to happen a number of years later.

After the reorganisation I became a Development Manager of the B and CP division. Clive Beard, who had replaced me in Canada, left the Company and I was asked by Dr. Simon to go to Canada for a number of months to organise a new Chief Chemist. While I was away, my laboratory was disbanded. I was asked do a liaison job between the laboratory and Marketing. Unfortunately there was no job to do, because the system of co-operation between the two departments operated as normal. In 1978 the Doctor contacted me again, because the Technical Director of Evode Industries in Ireland, Jim Read, was leaving. I was in Dublin for about three months until a new Director was appointed. They offered me the position, but I declined. On returning from Ireland, I asked for a laboratory position and finished up as a bench chemist again, working for Ernie Webb. That period was usefully spent, studying



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finance and accounting, resulting in a Diploma in Finance and Accounting from the ACCA.

In 1979 Evode decided to drop the Building Chemical range of products. It had already declined to just four products. Evode agreed to my starting a Company making these products under licence. After ten years the formulations and trade names would transfer to me. During the next twenty years Aston Building Products Ltd, made building products under licence and Evode limited became one of our customers.

Apart from two years National Service, and a short time in the U.S.A. I have either worked for or been associated with Evode all of my working life, which spanned nearly 49 years.

Obviously most of my work colleagues from Glover Street have passed away, but many of the young men who came to Evode in the 1960's are still fit and healthy although retired. Many of those who were there in the early days spent the rest of their working life at Evode and there is still a great friendship between us, which goes back over 40 years.

Those of us, who have worked for Evode over many years, owe a great debt of gratitude to Doctor Simon who was Mr. Evode.

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