Remembering Istel

Lode Lane, Solihull 1975-1976

Rogan Meadows

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It was 1975 when I transferred from Austin/Morris to Rover/Triumph and became a member of the Systems Department at the Solihull Rover plant. A new factory comprising a paint shop and assembly hall was being built for a new saloon car, code named SD1. The new factory had bare metal bodies delivered to the new paintshop on transporters from Castle Bromwich. The bodies were stored, painted and stored again before being transferred automatically into the new assembly hall where there were 2 assembly tracks.

My role at Solihull was to take over a team that had designed the process for receiving unpainted car bodies, storing them and selecting them for entry into the paint process.

I was new to Solihull, new in a management role and new to this team. I was put up in a local hotel for four nights per week on a dinner, B&B basis pending finding my own accommodation.

Being a new manager I was able to join the Management Car Plan (MCP) scheme. I ordered a white MGB GT which took ages to arrive direct from the factory. When I eventually got the call to say I could collect it on a Friday morning it would not start. A colleague came to help and we eventually found that, if you raised the bonnet, put your hand over a breather pipe, it would start. Hooray, take it back home to Oxford for the weekend to show off. But it was somewhat embarrassing to have to keep going through that start up palaver! Next week it was into the Solihull dealership to get sorted: well, the starting process. One Monday, when driving from Oxford to Solihull, it started to rain. On with the windscreen wipers. Swish, swish, swish, whoops. The drivers side blade flew off into the road-side hedge. Can’t beat quality!

As I was taking over the leadership of an existing team who had already designed the solution to the problems associated with receiving, identifying, storing and selecting for paint the bare metal car bodies (BIW – Body In White) from Castle Bromwich I basically played a passive role within that team, only becoming really involved when there was something to be done from a “management” aspect. In due course the system/process was installed. It involved the use of cameras to view the bodies arriving on three deck transporters which linked directly onto a conveyor system that routed the bodies into a BIW store. Body types (sun roof/left hand drive etc) were identified by a number hung in the front window aperture. Selection for paint similarly used a camera to view the front of the seven (??) storage lanes with a further camera used to view the conveyor of bodies going from the BIW store to the paint process. The BIW store consisted of bodies in slings on overhead conveyors above a mezzanine floor.

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Control of body movements was executed from a BIW Store Control Office within the paint shop building below the BIW Store itself. A control desk consisted of three TV screens (one for viewing bodies on the transporter, one for store lanes, one for store exit conveyor) , a couple of selection panels (one to select storage lane into BIW store, the other for exit selection) and a wooden model of the store into which wooden pieces could be slid into each store lane in line with a bodies selection from the transporter and removed in line with body selection from the BIW Store. The body type was indicated on each wooden piece, thus giving a view of the BIW store content at that time.

The design of the office assumed three to four people would be required at full operational speed. However, currently the new factory was operating on a test and trial basis. This applied, equally, to the movement of bodies into, through and out of the BIW store. Maybe only 1 or 2 a day! This meant that we could simply walk out onto the mezzanine floor of the BIW Store and double check om body placement. However, the mezzanine was not visible from the Control Room, neither was it secured at all.

This changed after one particular incident. A photographer had been invited into this new factory to take some “promotional” photos. Unknown to us testing the BIW control system, he had got himself up on the BIW Store mezzanine floor and set up his camera to take some photos of the store and conveyor system leading from the mezzanine. However, the lighting was dim and the photographer went off to get more light onto the scene, leaving his expensive camera on its tripod on the mezzanine. Sods law! One of our test selections out of store completely flattened tripod and camera. Result: cage in the store such that anyone entering the area had to do so through a proper entrance that caused the conveyor process to stop. You live and learn!

The run-down of the P6 with the transfer of manufacturing staff to the SD1 was being slowed over continued orders of the P6 being taken and built. Consequently, our Systems Management were asked, by Manufacturing Management if we could help by running the systems/processes for SD1 ourselves until more staff became available. This we agreed to do. In due course the Manufacturing Manager came to inspect the new BIW facilities, including the Control Room. He asked how we knew which TV screen was which. We explained that the one on the left was the entry to the BIW system, middle was the store and right was the exit. He said that there ought to be clear labels. We complied. Next time he visited everything was clearly labelled: door, store, exit, light switch, chair, table, window, entry screen, store screen exit screen etc.

At some point in my time at Solihull the workforce (assembly workers etc) voted to go on strike. This they duly did with picket lines on the factory gates. Should we cross those

picket lines, we asked. Yes. Meet at 0930 hours across the road and follow me in was the instruction from our senior manager. We met. We followed him in with our heads down. We got in and went to our office. Now what do we do? No-one else in, so nothing really to do. So, we slunk out one by one.

Given that it was still the early days of SD1 trial production, new ideas were also surfacing for manufacturing/assembly processes/systems. One of these ideas was vehicle assembly On-line Inspection And Rectification. At key points along the assembly track inspection would take place and any faults noted and relayed to the next station(s) where rectification would take place. Not only that, but large displays over the track would show the percentage of faults found at that inspection stage. This was seen as an incentive to get it right first time.

From my experience of vehicle assembly at Cowley, I was very dubious about the practicality of this. For example: when a window is fitted into a door a mechanism (manual/automatic) is fitted to enable opening and closing. This might work well at time of fitting and inspection. However, later when the door inside panel/trim is fitted, if there is a slight problem in fitting the normal/natural thing for the fitter to do is give it a tap (or worse). Panel fitted successfully. But what about the inner mechanisms? Do they still work? And if they don't, whose fault is it and can you rectify it on-line?

However, it was not my decision or job to justify the proposed process. I was given the job of investigating the kit needed to make it happen and to make presentations to the plant director and senior managers about the proposed process. Let us start with the kit. Hand-held pads were envisaged that would display aspects of the vehicle being inspected. Inspectors would indicate what and where faults were found. These would be printed out at the following rectification station(s) where correction would take place. Large, overhead displays would show percentage success/failures for the area. However, there was no experience of hand-held devices, or overhead displays anywhere in the company.

What sort of displays do you have in mind I asked. Like those in New Street Station in Birmingham I was told. Go down there and find out how they work. Going to the station enquiry desk was not very helpful! They are operated from that signal box up the line. No, you can't go there.

Hand-helds? We will get a number of makers in, onto the assembly track, and let them demonstrate how they could work. A number attended and demonstrated to senior production and systems managers, including JPL. Will these devices withstand a harsh

factory environment. Oh yes, we were assured. Can they withstand being dropped? We found out as JPL tested each by dropping it on the assembly track.

Overall, it was my judgement that the proposed process would be expensive. difficult to justify and certainly a long way off needing a systems designer which is where my interest lay. Thus, when I got a phone call from Oxford telling me that a project there was fully approved with financial sign-off, would I be interested in joining the development team, I said yes. I was interviewed by the project manager and told that, if I got myself back to Oxford, I was on the team.

I went to my Solihull manger and explained that there was this role back south that really suited me, so could I leave Solihull and take myself back to Oxford, please?

Might you leave the company if I say no?

No, it is just that there is a fully signed off development project that I can work on..

But if I say no, might you think of leaving?

No, I don't mean that.

But surely, if you can't go and you don't have such work here, you might look around.

Well, I suppose I might.

In that case we had better move you.

Blimey, how lucky was I. I was on the team for Swindon Press Line Monitoring.

Rather than claim full moving expenses, I struck a deal that meant both my wife and I moved out of our Solihull flat immediately, put our furniture into storage at the companies expense, and moved in with my parents in Oxford, thus saving the company paying for hotel and travel costs for, potentially, 6 months. The company did pay a small, agreed amount to my parents for their inconvenience. An all round win, win.

Stop house hunting around Solihull and back to Oxford we go.

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