

More REAL fun TIMES

The new, computerised Assembly Line Broadcasting System had been introduced into brand new facilities in South Works at Cowley for the Morris Marina. Another new model, the Princess, was due to be introduced and assembled in the North Works assembly building. A computerised line broadcast system was wanted here too. However, a cheaper version was specified using existing printers in that building that had been part of the hard-wired broadcasting system. Additionally, a cheaper computer had been identified - a General Automation (GA) SPC16. GA claimed that any software that ran on the IBM1800 could run on the SPC16, and that software could be written to enable printing on the original Cowley printers.

A cautious approach was taken. GA would write the printer driver software and we would test and prove the existing Line Broadcast software. To enable this 2 Cowley printers were taken to GAs' Burgess Hill HQ. We would go to Burgess Hill at weekends to load our software, test it out along with their software. We would travel down on a Friday afternoon, returning Sunday evening. No M25 back then and we got to know the route around the edge of London well. 32 roundabouts between Cowley and GA!

Around this time standards started to emerge for computing. We received an edict from our Systems Management that stated "All programs should be written to run in an 80K partition." I replied that we had complied with this standard, but we only had a 16K computer. Now what should we do?". Never got a reply.

Longbridge were interested in having our Line Broadcasting System. I was despatched along with a business analyst (had never encountered such a beast, and did not know where he appeared from) to establish their requirements. A straight repeat of the Cowley system was envisaged. Wrong. Cowley got a report at the end of each production hour listing how many of each model/derivative had been assembled that hour. At the end of each shift, an hour by hour report could be printed by the main printer and distributed. Longbridge wanted a report that showed production hours (8 hours+) across the top, and up to 20 model/derivatives down the side. This report to be printed, hourly, in selected managers offices throughout a shift. Despite stressing that the prime purpose of the system was to broadcast vehicle requirement to sub-assembly areas, I could not persuade them from this hourly matrix reporting. This is where the Analyst came up trumps. Using his superior knowledge/experience he produced a report that showed that the only printers capable of operating remotely, had a very limited print speed. The hourly reports required in management offices would take over 60 minutes to print! It all went quiet. My memory tells me that the "business analyst" had the initials JPL.

Meanwhile we were learning that GA claims were true, our programs would run on the SPC16. Their printer driver software was progressing as were our relations with Stroods Motel staff. Stroods was a motel on the main London to Brighton road near Hickstead show ground. It was busy during the week, but quiet at weekends. To boost revenue they held cabaret dinners on Friday and Saturday nights featuring well known artists. Our routine was: leave work 6ish, shower and change, into Brighton to eat/drink, return to Stroods circa 10pm just in time for the cabaret. The staff would sneak us in to an empty table.

Eventually everything came together and our management were hosted by GA for formal sign off, having had a lavish lunch. The SPC16 was installed into an air-conditioned office

at the point painted bodies started their way on the assembly track. We were learning that the GA disc drives had read heads that "wandered" meaning that visits from their engineer was not uncommon. Also, the GA single shot card reader sensed where the holes were in a card by pin detection. The IBM version used light. Occasionally a card would snag on a pin in the GA reader. We developed a sophisticated tool to solve this problem. We had a straightened out paper clip bent into a small hook at one end. If a card snagged, slip the pin, bent end first, into the reader slot. Twist and manoeuvre until a hole was located, hook in and pull the card out. Sods law: on the official first launch of a Princess onto assembly the senior management present were too busy admiring the broadcast printout to notice our hooking the card out!

Systems management were also too busy to notice that we had the same person on standby for North and South Works and that person was being paid standby for each. 15% per hour for North Works and 15% for South Works. Telescope to blind eye from us. News of our system had also reached Land Rover, Solihull. They were building a new paint shop and assembly building for a new saloon car code named SD1 - SD = Special Design. They planned a GA based system like ours, but with added features. Whereas the Cowley system broadcast the complete specification to each sub-assembly area, the Solihull version would only print relevant parts of the spec. They would also delay the printing until the vehicle was near that station. I was asked, half way through my 1974 honeymoon (!) to go and advise their programmers (all ex mainframe - ie 80 K partitioners) how to develop software on an SPC mini computer. Thus I spent several weeks of 4 nights in the St John's Hotel, Solihull, with my advice being listened to politely, and then doing their own thing when my back was turned. The result I only learned later.

Whilst there, a senior member of Solihull Systems Dept. drew my attention to an internal vacancy advert. The role involved becoming a "manager" within their Systems Dept. Becoming a "manager" was a significant step up within the hierarchy. You were paid monthly into a bank account, did not be paid for overtime, but became eligible for the company management car scheme - a car of your choice with included tax, insurance, servicing for a sum per month dependent upon the make/model chosen. After 12 months you handed back the car and chose what you wanted for the next year. Just married in an £8 per week 2 bed unfurnished flat near Oxford, a happily employed full time working wife: there was some serious thinking needed. We decided I should apply and decide if we needed to.

By 1975 a number of Austin Morris Systems managers had moved to Solihull to help implementation of new systems to support SD1 manufacture and assembly. At my interview I was greeted by a familiar Cowley face with the words "Rogan, I am very glad you have applied for this post". Not a bad start! In due course I received a written job offer from Land Rover Systems. Decision needed. Decision made I went back to the familiar face and said " Much as I would like to come and work for you here, I cannot afford to." "Gosh, I thought we offered you a good increase."

"Based upon the basic salary I put on the application form, you did. However, basic salary does not take into account the standby payments I regularly receive."

Head was buried in hands, as the familiar face opposite was also opposite when I was with our union rep and negotiated standby and call-out!!

Rogan Meadows