

THE LOCKING APPRENTICE

Who is this that crawls out from beneath a stone!

This year being the 50th Anniversary of No. 1 Radio School, one cannot forget the Radio Apprenticeship scheme which played a large part in the history of the School.

The Apprenticeship scheme was well established when it moved from Cranwell to Locking in 1953 and continued to flavour the character of the School until it was phased out in the mid nineteen seventies. The spirit of the apprentice still lives at Locking, quite a number of civilian instructors and RAF staff were Locking apprentices and will have mixed emotions about those days.



THE LONG SHARP SHOCK!

Three years of training - how did we survive? The first year was the hardest, if you survived that you were conditioned to survive for a further two. First year conditions :

No civilian clothes to be worn, on or off the station.

Allowed off the station Saturdays and Sundays from mid-day until 9.30pm only.

Church parades on Sunday mornings.

No consumption of alcoholic drink whatsoever.

No cars or motorcycles allowed.

If you were a smoker you had to have a smoking pass signed by your parents.

Part of your pay compulsorily held until you went on leave.

Lights out 10pm every night.

THE ENTRY SPIRIT

Survival was due to the 'entry spirit' being very strong. We all suffered together, but also banded together to help fellow entry inmates.

There were three entries each year consisting of 100 to 150 apprentices per entry. Each entry developed its own character throughout the three years of training with its own entry banner and entry song. These came to the fore on entry sporting and social occasions. For example, for famous apprentice boxing tournaments, we would march from the Apprentice Wing billets (in the area of the present Flowerdown Club) to the old gymnasium (now Station Workshops) displaying our entry banners and singing our entry songs. The rivalry was intense, each entry supporting their champion boxer.

I dare not mention that I was in the 84th entry as no doubt many reading this article will shout SPROG! They being 69th, 72nd, 76th or some other senior entry. Such was the strength of Entry Spirit.

POWER OF THE SENIOR ENTRY

Fear was struck into the hearts and minds of the Junior Entry at the very mention of the phrase 'Senior Entry'. During the last four months of training the Senior Entry was almost a law unto themselves and had many



RIGHT :
A Locking Apprentice in the foreground (an extinct breed) with a wooden billet complex in the background (also extinct).

FAR RIGHT :
Hooray!! Senior Entry at last!



ABOVE :
Christmas dinner 1958 -
note the Entry Banners on
the wall.

unwritten privileges. The first experience by the Junior entry of the Senior entries' power was when they were commandeered to clean their billets and bull their kit. You dare not refuse otherwise you end up with a cold bath. The way to get protection was to volunteer to be a kit boy to a particular member of the Senior entry and you 'bulled' his kit exclusively.

Then there were the raids on the Junior entry billets by the Senior entry which happened after light out when your bed, with you still in it, was tipped upside down, your kit taken from your locker and thrown around the billet or outside. The kit had to be well marked so it could be retrieved more easily.

Once a week the Senior entry held a kangaroo court in the NAAFI where again the Junior entry billets would be invaded and the SPROGS marched off to the NAAFI to face such charges as being improperly dressed, in the billet. Of course you were always found guilty and had to stand on a table and sing before being released.

We longed for the day when we would be Senior Entry!

SAGA OF THE WHITE CHINA MUG

Every apprentice had his own mug and irons (knife, fork and spoon, to the uninitiated). These had to be laid out on the wooden locker for daily inspection as well as being used each meal time. The white china mug barely lasted a week during your first term. During the many kit inspections by the Apprentice NCO he would wipe his finger around the inside of your mug, stand about two inches from your face and with a blase of hot air should "DIRTY, VILE GREASE!" **SMASH!** would go the mug over the iron bed end. After those inspections the billet looked like a whirlwind had hit it.

Needless to say the NAAFI kept large stocks of white china mugs in anticipation of the frequent whirlwinds.

Another place your white china mug could disappear was outside the Apprentice Mess in the large hot water trough used for washing mugs and irons after each meal. If you accidentally let go it would sink to the murky depths of this trough never to be seen

RIGHT :
Hamish McCrackers,
Apprentice Wing Mascot,
having Christmas Dinner
1958.



It was the custom of the Senior Entry to leave their mark on Weston-super-Mare with such pranks as putting washing powder in the fountain on the sea front, or hoisting the entry flag on the flagpole of the Odeon Cinema.

again. After up to a thousand apprentices had used the trough the contents became quite murky with bits of food floating on the top. We swore this was used as next days soup although we could never prove it.

LITTLE MAN - BIG VOICE

As you pass the Flowerdown Club there is a sign saying "PARKES ROAD"; this brings back memories of a WO Parkes, the Apprentice Wing Warrant Officer. A little man barely five feet tall and a former RAF Bantam Weight Boxing Champion. He organised the Apprentice Boxing Tournaments for which he was famous. Parkes Road was his favourite apprentice hunting ground, being small in stature he could hide easily behind a billet or tree, stepping out just as you were marching down the hill. "Get those arms swinging shoulder high,

you flock or docile sheep!" he would shout. The voice was heard quite a few seconds before we actually saw him.

Apprentices feared but also respected him at the same time.

APRENTICES VERSUS THE LOCAL LADS

Apprentices were always conspicuous in Weston-super-Mare as they always wore uniform. This of course provided bait to the local 'teddy boys' during the nineteen fifties era and many a skirmish took place on the beach especially during the summer.

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ABOVE :
Wet weather Passing-Out Parade in 3(T) Block, July 1959. Slow March Past.

GOOD GUYS/BAD GUYS

Good conduct stripes were awarded if your crimes went undetected, these were worn at the bottom of the left sleeve on your uniform. By the time you had reached your final two terms the apprentice had accumulated three of these stripes (see photo of passing out parade)

After one year certain apprentices were selected to hold a local NCO rank and give them responsibility at a young age. A leading apprentice (one stripe), would be responsible for one billet of twenty-two apprentices, a corporal apprentice would be in charge of two billets and live in a bunk at the end of one of them - what luxury! A sergeant apprentice would be responsible for a squadron (approximately four hundred and fifty apprentices). The flight sergeant apprentice was selected for the passing out parade only, then the next day we would all be demoted to Junior Technicians and be away on our postings.

SACRED GROUND

This of course was the Parade Square used exclusively for parades and drill instruction and was out of bounds at all other times. This was the territory of the Station Warrant Officer who could often be seen stalking its perimeter like a game warden looking for poachers.

CAR PARKING!

We never had cars to park so that solved the problem. As apprentices joined the RAF at Locking the

first year included a large dose of initial training - that meant plenty of drill. For us we had an extra large dose to get ready in time for the inaugural Freedom of Weston Parade in 1956. As we always wore studded boots, drill timing could be more precise and we could hear our movements, compared to today's 'soft shoe shuffle!'

The frequent parades were always lead by the Apprentice Wing Pipe and Drum Band with the Shetland Pony Mascot 'Hamish McCrackers' who held the rank of Leading Apprentice. Apprentice wing being about thousand-strong would fill the square with its three squadrons.

TO CONCLUDE

In between all the above capers we actually did some technical training; but that is another story which time or space does not permit.

These days when I come through the main gate I expect to see the guards in red jackets and white trousers giving a cherry "Hi-De-Hi! Welcome to Locking Holiday Camp". Yes times have changed and I must change with them.

At the end of the day taking everything into consideration, I am proud to say "Yes I was a Locking Apprentice and wouldn't have missed the experience for the world".

Now I can crawl back under my stone!

Squadron Leader Dick Cheeseman
(RAF Ret'd)
84th ENTRY 1956-59.

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