

The Didcot Diaries.

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Foreword

It is humbling, and not a little sad, to see something as large, and apparently permanent, being torn down, as being of no further import nor use. I felt a wrench to watch the last sad remains of Didcot 'A' being destroyed, as if a little of myself had been dismantled and cast away, no longer of any significance whatsoever. However, if the power station had not made the news because of its demise, and the deaths caused during demolition, I would probably not have had my memory jerked back to the (mostly) happy times I had spent at Didcot, whilst helping with the station's build, and this account of my time there would probably not have been committed into words.

An admission – I kept no diary in the period I worked at Didcot. In fact, I've never successfully kept a diary – there were always so many new things to do, instead of writing about what had already happened. So the accounts here are from memory, and dates, if any are given, will be approximate. Although this account is intended to be factual, I have changed the names (the ones I remembered!) of the persons mentioned. Most, if not yet dead, will be quite old – just as I am.

My job interview took place in a grubby little office in Redheugh, Gateshead, at the then fabrication works of Redheugh Iron and Steel. This company had a history going back to 1918, and in the 1960's were engaged in the rolling of plates and sheets; welding, constructional and general engineers; fabricators and erectors, with a staff of around 800 employees. [source: Grace's guide]

The engineer who interviewed me, turned out to be the site engineer for Redheugh at Didcot. Redheugh's role was the fabrication and supply of all major pipework, including pipelines from the Thames to the station at Didcot, and the extensive network of pipes below the turbine floor. He was pleasant enough, and appeared to be satisfied with my experience, though I was still an 'Improver', both on the construction of the bowling alley over the ice, at Whitley Bay Ice Rink, and also work on the extension to Switch House 'B' at Blyth Power Station. I was given a railway warrant, and told to show up at Redheugh's site office at Didcot, the following Monday.

1 - Accommodation

Construction at Didcot was in full swing, and there was no doubt pressure locally, for temporary accommodation for itinerant workers like myself. This meant that, although there were folks in Didcot who were willing to take in lodgers, the quality of rooms, and prices charged were at times questionable.

The Camp.

Kiers, the main contractor, had recognized this and thoughtfully provided on-site accommodation blocks, which were single-storied, large inter-linked wooden huts. These provided individual rooms, toilet and washing facilities, a shop, bar, and restaurant facilities. I was very pleasantly surprised at the quality of the sleeping accommodation, which was immaculate. All of the other facilities were more than acceptable, and the food in the restaurant although basic, was of very good quality and value for money. Kiers charged what was indeed a nominal sum for the rooms, and after inspection, I moved in.

Staff were a mixed bunch, mostly local females, and I was surprised at their honest appraisal of me. I had heard stories back home, from friends who had worked at British Ropes in Gateshead, about the somewhat assertive sexual behaviour of groups of women employees. I had just turned 18, and although still in the full flush of youth, was quite 'fit', or so it seemed. The older women showed no shyness, and my backside was grasped several times, accompanied with invitations to 'fun'. Shyly demurring resulted in shrieks of laughter, and remarks regarding cherries.

Although The Camp was of course handy for work in the morning, life in the bar was samey in the evenings, and it was a long walk into Didcot, and more especially, a longer walk back full of beer at the end of the evening. I decided to look for 'digs' in the town.

The Cats & Bottles.

I was warned not to go there, but it was proving difficult to find anything, at all, in the town. Peter the plater, latterly from the Tyneside shipyards, and deaf from the constant noise of his chipping hammer, had warned me about the guy, and his 'style' of accommodation, but I had to find out for myself.

The smell hit me as soon as the front door was opened. It was complex and hard to identify exactly, but two main constituents resonated: cat's pee, and stale beer. He invited me in. I managed to breathe shallowly through my mouth. There were cats everywhere. There were empty beer bottles on almost every surface. The bedroom was rank, cigarette tar coated almost every wall. I told him it was great, and said I would be back with my 'gear'. I hope he isn't still waiting.

Tomato Man.

I liked Tomato Man from the very start. He was big and burly, just as any site guard at the Harwell High Energy Laboratory should be. The house was beautifully kept, and my room had a double bed. It was expensive – compared with The Camp, but all things are relative, I was earning more money than I had ever before, nor would do in the future for quite a while.

After my first evening meal, he took me outside into his very large greenhouse, where we sat together sampling the scrummiest tomatoes of every size and description. Surely this was Heaven?

I settled in, enjoying the ability to walk to any one of half-a-dozen pubs, and meet up with

workmates and their girl-friends. Tomato Man and I discussed issues of the day, and he was interested in my experiences of growing up on Tyneside.

Mrs. Tomato Man was a little more reserved, and seemed critical of the development of Didcot Power Station, and particularly the influx of 'foreigners' – whom she seemed to distrust. She also had her eye on the local price of rooms, and all too soon, I found myself asked to leave by her, lying to me that they wanted the house 'to themselves'.

The guy that took over my room ended up paying almost twice what I had been – he had joined the Redheugh gang, and when he was told about me by another workmate, had come to me and apologized profusely. I felt like smacking him, but it wasn't his fault, Mrs. Tomato Man had lied to him also.

Prefab Palace

Yes it was a small Prefab, and I had to share a room with two workmates, but these were desperate times. I had been tempted to go back to The Camp, but that too, was being tested to the limit by a burgeoning workforce. Piggy from Wallsend, and Jack from Liverpool, were both platers. Piggy made a good fist of playing centre-forward for Didcot, Jack had permanent radiation burns on his face, due to his insistence not to use a mask when he was tack-welding. Both were drinking mates.

Amy was a mature talkative lady who wouldn't move an inch from the TV when 'My' Crossroads was on – sometimes delaying evening meals almost beyond my endurance. The house was clean and well-kept, and not far from a decent pub, so I settled in.

During one conversation with Amy, she had expressed her love of Rabbit stew, and since there was a steady supply of cheap rabbits caught by locals working at the site, I had asked her if she would like a couple. Her face had lit up, so later in the week I had presented her with two rabbits, wrapped in a paper bag.

She had opened the bag and gasped with dismay. Apparently the local rabbits had fur, and heads, not to mention 'stuff' inside them, obviously not at all how she had imagined. We never got the rabbit stew – presumably the fully-clothed rabbits had been confined to the dustbin.

Amy had a grand-daughter who visited regularly – a sweet, pretty girl, all of 12 years old. She was bright, funny and completely un-phased by the three men who had descended on her Grandma's house. She was intensely curious, asking lots of questions, and thinking nothing of inviting herself into our bedroom un-announced. She was musical, and leapt on the few musical instruments I had, including a piano-keyboard breath-powered instrument.

She seemed completely at ease in the company of adult men, and even early on, I found her familiarity a little disturbing. That at one point she started helping Jack and Piggy by washing their backs as they sat in the bath, should have been no surprise. That she subsequently insinuated herself against me at every awkward opportunity was a source of guilty pleasure, coupled with a desire that I found very difficult to deal with.

There had been two girls in my recent past – both of which neither looked nor behaved their real age. I was 16 at the time. The discovery of their lying about their true ages had put me in a spin.

I voiced my discomfort to both Jack and Piggy over the young girl's behaviour and theirs, but quite clearly her attention was too good to pass up for them. Amy was either completely oblivious to the potential disaster unfolding in front of her own eyes, or didn't care. I left.

Meili Inn

My final resting place in Didcot. The name I have chosen to call this Chinese lady means 'beautiful' – she certainly was pretty, and quite young. Two young children shyly attended my 'interview' for the room, where she managed to say all of the right things in halting English, including telling me she had been deserted by her English husband, and then in the next breath, warning me to keep out of her bedroom. Fair enough.

She was engaging company, with a long story to tell, one daughter amongst 30 or so brothers and sisters, all children of some well-to-do with several 'wives' back in Kowloon. We got on well. Back then I had hair – a lot of it, and she loved playing with it, with me sat on the carpet in front of her armchair. She was more than aware of the effect this had on me, and laughed lightly as I collapsed into gooeyness.

She caught 'flu, and announced tearfully that she couldn't look after me. Since this consisted mainly of a breakfast and evening meal, I told her I would manage. She became quite ill, bed-bound. A friend did the school runs for her, and I cooked both breakfast and evening meals for around three weeks. Meili was deeply shocked to discover that her children liked rice pudding – it was always a savoury when she cooked it. The kids were fun. A boy and girl, with only a year or so between them. We played Monopoly, and cards, before they went to bed and I went to the pub.

Meili was distraught when, just before the Christmas, I had announced that I wasn't returning to Didcot in the New Year. She had cried and hung onto me as I left, begging me not to go. I was deeply touched, and not a little upset myself. She was a lovely, kind, and thoughtful woman, and I considered the man who had deserted her and their two lovely kids, a complete fool.

2 - Friends

There was one young man, I will refer to as T.M., who was known to my father. He hailed from Berkenhead, was tall, good looking, and friendly – especially with the Girls.

I became the junior member of a team of three, whose first appointed task was to fit expansion collars to the 12ft diameter pipe sections leading from the Thames to the Didcot site. This may sound simple – it wasn't. Kiers would drop into the trench sections of pipe, level them up, and the collar had to be fitted between the last section laid and the newest. It was a simple arrangement of a large steel ring, two large bevelled rubber sleeves and two large angled brackets, together with a large collection of long bolts to ensure a snug, water-tight fit of the collar on both pipe sections. Lifted by a crane into position each collar would deform from a circle into an ovoid, and the three of us used to struggle to position it evenly, to make a water-tight, but expansion-enabling joint.

The tools were primitive, and after struggling for a couple of weeks, I had gone up to Kiers on-site Blacksmith's shop with two drawings. He had looked at them, asked what they were for and nodded – 'Get on with it'. Clearly, he was too busy, so I set about and made the two grapple hooks myself – thanking my metalwork teacher Fred Ellis back at Gateshead (latterly - Elgin) Technical School. T.M was complimentary regarding the tools, even more so, when I said I had to make them myself – the 'boss', the third member of our team was a little more subdued – his 'tools' were abandoned.

T.M and I became firm friends, not the least because he'd worked with my father. He showed me around various pubs, introduced me to locals (including girls) and his own girl-friend, a pretty girl with dark hair, whom I liked. Gossip said she was a 'lesbian', and that T.M was 'trying to convert her'. I thought it was rubbish.

There were two other men on the Redheugh team whom I liked and respected. One was a local 'handyman', who drove around our ex-army truck, and the other was a welder, who was quiet, a good listener, and only gave advice if it was asked for. Mostly, I got on with everyone. Peter, the plater who had warned me off 'The Cat and Bottles', and Jack, from Liverpool, blunt, but friendly, and 'Piggy' – another Geordie, was likeable and funny – and a good footballer.

I did find one or two friends 'outside' of work, the most important being a beautiful young woman Helen, who sadly was confined to a wheel chair.

She had a brother, who was fixated on body-building, so he would invite me to join him in the garage of their home for various exercises. He was somewhat bemused that someone built as I was, wasn't particularly interested in making my muscles any bigger than what they were.

Helen was a delight. We went to the local Cinema together, pubs, or simply sat together and talked. I loved her.

Then of course, there was Meili. A woman I deeply respected, who despite her warnings regarding her bedroom, would probably have become my lover, had I stayed in Didcot. She was warm, sensual and generous.

3 – Extra Curricula

There were 'down' days. Work on pipe-laying from the Thames was finished, smaller pipe complexes in the Turbine Hall 'pit' carried on apace. Some days – pipes didn't arrive. Advice was to 'look busy'.

So it was that T.M intimated he would like to take photographs of the whole site – from one of the four towers which provided lighting through the night. It was a calm, sunny day and I readily agreed. There was a rudimentary cascade of ladders up to the light-array platform, so up we went. I was surprised, very surprised, that I had to hang on to the handrails, as the tower was moving slowly to and fro because of a wind, not-so apparent on the ground. After feeling initial fear, I found the movement quite exhilarating. The photos turned out not so good, a little blurred and out of focus.

Berkshire is a 'hot spot' – possessing as it does, some of the highest recorded hours of sunshine. (well it did back then!)

T.M and I were called into the site engineer's office one morning and read the riot act.

The previous day, he'd been showing the Chief Engineer of the C.E.G.B , and his party around, when the guy's wife had pointed down into the Turbine Hall at two semi-naked men sunbathing on top of a pipe.

Some vigorous finger-wagging later, T.M and I left his office with strict orders: clock-in at 8-o'clock, anything to do, do it; nothing to do – piss off, and return to clock-out at 4pm.

It seemed like a reward to me, but T.M had remarked that: 'our cards had been marked'.

Anyway, thus began a rather delightful daily exploration, by foot, or friendly milk-cart, of the area immediately adjacent to Didcot. Pubs, shops and cafes, river-banks – we explored them all – bliss.

4 – Jeopardy

I am, and was back then, aware of hazards. Any building site can pose surprising risk to life and limb.

Manifestations of this were apparent at Didcot. I watched an Oxygen Cylinder fall from a net slung on a crane, hit the ground, breaking its neck and take off horizontally like a land-bound torpedo. Should anyone have got in the way, they would surely have been killed.

This is bad – but it's someone else that is responsible – what about you? - or should I say me?

'Spiders' are inserted inside of large pipe-work at fabrication time, to preserve their shape, and support the pipe walls whilst they have several tons of concrete poured over and around them. When everything is 'set', at some point, these spiders (usually of angled steel) must be removed.

I had been busy doing this, then emerged from a pipe to stand up and offer my unsheltered head to a substantial steel flange. I remember dropping to my knees in excruciating pain. There was a cut and bleed and later, a substantial bruise, but I did return to work the following day – but with a crushing headache.

A visit to a local GP in Didcot and a diagnosis of concussion, plus a prescription of some perception-altering medication resulted.

Two days later I was discovered asleep in a pipe by our head engineer – that my card had truly been marked, as T.M had suggested earlier, became altogether apparent.

The following day, instead of talking to me privately, he entered the cabin at 10 O'clock break and berated me in front of everyone. Apparently, and in summary, I was a lazy c**t who was too tired to do my work.

There were several around me that expected an immediate and violent reaction, but I sat and stared at him, until finally he ran out of steam and left, when I followed him to his office.

I took the small bottle of pheno-barbitone out of my pocket, and slammed it on his desk.

I then said: 'My cards, ready on Friday', to which he blustered some shit about giving notice.

I had stared right through him and said. 'Do it'.

He was terrified. He nodded, and looked away from me.

Goodbye Didcot, it was, very much pleasure, mostly..