

THE NEWSPAPER TRADE IN THE 1950's

I was born in Walton-on-the-Hill in 1934 a small village in Surrey. I served a five year apprenticeship in the Warehouse section of the printing trade. I worked for three different companies over a period of 27 years. During 20 years of this period I did casual work on the newspapers and in 1982 I started work as a regular employee at the Guardian Newspaper where I worked for 14 years before being made redundant at the age of 63.

In the 1950's the newspaper trade was a thriving industry the printing of which was still a hot metal process that had hardly changed since the beginning of World War Two.

Once the reporters had written their copy and the editor had finalized the layout of the paper the compositors, linotype and monotype operators would set the type and an impression would be taken of it which would be sent to the foundry where hot metal would be poured into it to form a plate. Once the plate had cooled it would be taken to the machine room where the machine minder would fix it to the cylinder of the printing press to start the process of printing the newspaper. Once the printed paper had left the presses it would travel up a conveyer belt into the publishing department each 24th copy would be turned slightly to indicate one quire. A machine assistant would lift each quire off of the conveyer belt and stack it in 4 quire bundles. The bundle would then be pushed on to another conveyer belt where a wrapper hand would put a wrapper on it with the name of the station and the time of the train. Once this was done the bundle would travel along the belt where a bench hand would lift the bundle off of the belt and tie two strings around it. He would then put the bundle back on the belt where it would continue down to the chutes that took it out to the loading bay where the driver would load it on to the back of his lorry to take it to the station. All papers in the 1950's were transported by rail all over the country except for the London editions that would be handled by the wholesalers.

There were a number of different unions involved in each of the processes in the production of the newspapers. The Foundry Workers, Compositors, Linotypists and the Monotypists had their own unions as did the Machine Managers who were responsible for the printing of the newspaper. Then there was the Natsopa Union who were the machine assistants. Their job was the handling and loading the newspaper reels on to the printing presses and then taking the printed paper off the conveyer-belt once it was printed. Finally in the publishing department the packaging, transportation and delivery of the newspapers to the stations and wholesalers W H Smith and John Menzies was handled by the National Union of Printers, Bookbinders and Paper Workers of which I was a member. All these unions were affiliated to one another for the purposes of wage negotiation agreements with the Newspaper Proprietors Association.

In 1951 I joined the National Union of Printers, Bookbinders and Paper Workers. I was at the time serving a five year apprenticeship in the warehouse department of a small company called the Standard Printing Company in South Croydon Surrey. I did not at the time realise how important it would become at a later stage in my

career joining the union at such an early age. I learnt later that all job vacancies in the union were based on a policy of seniority.

SPECIAL NOTICE.

Chapel Officers are requested to take notice that the Society books will be closed each week on Wednesday in accordance with Rule.

No financial business will be transacted on Thursday.

Cheques and Postal Orders forwarded by post should be crossed & Co. and made payable to the Society.

Treasury Notes should be sent by registered post.

Members must quote Branch card number when corresponding with Society.

Twentieth Century Press (1912) Ltd., T.U., (40 hrs week)
103, Southwark St., S.E.1—U1322

**NATIONAL UNION
OF
PRINTING, BOOKBINDING
AND
PAPER WORKERS**

Gen. Sec.:
W. A. MORRISON

H.O. Tel.:
BA71xxxx 2641-4

Regd. Head Office:
74, Nightingale Lane, London, S.W.12

Register No 839T

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Printers' Warehousemen & Cutters

LONDON CENTRAL BRANCH

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1a, ROSEBERY AVENUE, E.C.1
Telephone No., TEL 2533

Office Hours:
MONDAY TO FRIDAY, 9 TILL 5
SATURDAY 9 TILL 12

The London Branch of the union was based at 1a Rosebery Avenue in Holborn London, This building acted as a labour exchange for members of the Paper Workers Union in the London area.

An vacancies in the general print trade and the newspaper trade would be sent there, In the basement of the building was the call room. This was where vacant jobs would be advertised and also where the unemployed members would have to attend to be given casual work on the newspapers. Any unemployed member would put his name on to the list for any of the vacancies but it would be the member with the lowest card number that would be given the first opportunity for an interview for the job. The call clerk would then give the applicant a white card which he would take along to the company which was his introduction for the job. He would give it to the Father of the Chapel who was the unions elected representative and he would take him along to the management for an interview. If he got the job he would have to send the white card back to the call room to say that he had been accepted for the job.

Every Monday morning the unemployed would have to report to the call room. The call clerk would then give them one, two or three casual nights on the newspapers depending how much work was available. If there was limited work sometimes it would be two nights in the week and also a Saturday night as well.

The newspaper trade in the 1950's was a closed shop with all labour being supplied by the Unions. The vast majority of which was employed on a casual basis especially in the publishing department. Although all of the papers employed regular staff they also employed regular jobbers. These were usually the longest serving members of the union who would be given three regular nights in one paper and also a regular night in a Saturday night paper, the rest of the staff would be made up of unemployed or casual night workers.

If any union member who was in regular employment wanted to supplement his income by doing a casual night on the newspapers. He would ask the union representative at the firm he worked for to phone the call clerk just after 12 o'clock on that day to see if there was still any vacancies available after the unemployed had been given their work and if there was the call clerk would take his name and number and tell him where to report to for a casual night on the newspapers.

All members employed in the printing trade would get a Saturday night permit issued several times a year and once a year the branch would issue a four consecutive Saturday night permit and you would be told what paper you would have paper to report to. On the single night permit you would have to report to the call room at 5pm and wait for a call from one of the newspapers who needed extra staff. Each permit was numbered and you would have to wait there until your number was called. If there was a shortage of calls you would be kept there until the call clerk had phoned around the papers to see if they needed any more staff and if they didn't he would come out with a permit for the following Saturday night with the name of the paper stamped on it where you had to report to. Sometimes you could sit in the call room up to eleven o'clock at night without getting a job.

In the early 1950's there were three Evening Newspapers. The Star, The Evening News and The Evening Standard. In addition there were seven daily papers. The News Chronicle, The Daily Sketch, The Daily Herald, The Times, The Daily Mirror, The Daily Telegraph and The Financial Times and also The Sporting Life. There were eight Sunday newspapers. The Sunday Times, The Sunday Pictorial, The Empire News, The Sunday Chronicle, The People, The Sunday Mail, The Observer and the News of the World.

Fleet Street where most of the papers were printed was a beehive of activity especially on a Saturday night. All pubs and coffee bars would stay open until the early hours. In Shoe Lane there used to be a cafe called The Soup Kitchen which sold bowls of hot soup in pudding basins. On the corner of Bouverie Street was the Black and White Coffee bar. Across the road was Mick's Cafe where all the ladies of the night would gather. Every newspaper had their own canteen where you could buy subsidised meals. In those days there was no security in any of the buildings. You could enter the buildings through the loading bays go up to any of the canteens and order a meal and sit there reading one of their papers without anyone asking you for any form of identification.

One of the biggest problems in the newspaper trade was the culture of drinking. Once the presses started printing it was a continuous process that only stopped for edition changes. Because of this the chapels set up a blow (break) system. During the night a blow hand would go around giving people a break to enable them to get a cup of tea or a meal. The problem was that the vast majority of these people would rush to the nearest pub and consume as much beer as they could in a short time and come back much the worse for wear. I remember one Christmas I was given a casual nights employment at the Radio Times printing factory in Park Royal Wembley where they were printing the Christmas edition of the Radio Times. I went up to the canteen during the dinner break to get a cup of tea only to find all of the tables filled with pints of beer. I was told by one of the canteen staff that the bar had to be closed at 12 o'clock under the licensing laws so the staff would buy their beer and leave it on the tables so that they could come up during the night to drink it.

In 1957 after two years in the RAF doing my National Service. I started at a company in Hackbridge Surrey called H L Vickery. It was from there that I started working casually on the newspapers to supplement my income. The first ever night that I did I worked on a Sunday night at The Daily Mirror building in Stamford Street just across the road from Waterloo Station. I was paid £1. 9 shillings for a nights work as a bench hand.



I worked for three different companies in the general printing trade for 27 years. During this time I worked as a casual on all of the Daily and Sunday Newspapers as well as the Radio Times and Her Majesty's Stationary Office. Where the Hansard was printed. In 1982 after 29 years of membership of the Print workers Union, I was notified by the union that my union number had reached the top of the seniority list and I was given a White card for an introduction for a regular job at the Guardian

Newspaper in Grays Inn Rd; London. L worked for the Guardian Newspaper for 15 years before being made redundant at the age of 63 when I retired.

SOCIETY OF GRAPHICAL AND ALLIED TRADES
LONDON CENTRAL BRANCH
34/44 Britannia Street, London WCX1 9JG

19th January, 1982

~~For The Father of the Chapel~~

Dear Colleague,

NEWSPAPER WORKING

Members will recall Circular No. CN 102/81 which was sent out to the trade in November of 1981, and itemizing Propositions 3 and 9 which were carried at the Special Delegate Meeting held on 17th September, 1981. The Branch Committee have now given serious consideration to the implementation of these two propositions which, as members will recall, related to jobbing and other aspects of newspaper working, and are now inviting members:-

UNDER THE AGE OF 65 YEARS AND WITH A CARD NUMBER OF 8000
OR BELOW to apply for the opportunity of JOBGING WORK.

They are also inviting members:-

UNDER THE AGE OF 55 YEARS AND WITH A CARD NUMBER OF 9000
OR BELOW to apply for the opportunity of 5 NIGHTS, 4 NIGHTS,
AND 3 AND 1 WORKING.

APPLICATION FORMS: These are available from the ground floor office of the London Central Branch, and should be returned to the Deputy Secretary Mr. E. R. Chard, when a receipt will be issued.

CLOSING DATE:- 12 NOON MONDAY 15TH FEBRUARY, 1982

The Branch Committee wish to stress that because of the adverse labour position now prevailing within the Branch, only minimal regular recruitment will take place at this moment in time.

Yours sincerely,

G. H. WILLOUGHBY
Branch Secretary

CN 5/82

I have wonderful memories of my experiences in the printing and newspaper trades. In those days Fleet Street was a fascinating place. On Saturday nights a news vendor would set up his pitch on the corner of Bouverie Street and start selling the final edition of the Sunday papers. Many celebrities would stop on their way home from the shows and buy a newspaper; I remember one night a Rolls Royce car pulled up and Joe Loss the band leader got out and bought a newspaper. In those days there were no parking restrictions in London. You could park your car on the embankment and go to work without fear of traffic wardens putting a parking ticket on your car. The 1950's was another world we lived in the likes of which we will never see again.

David Hall © 2011