

1) Factory Closure

So in your later days at Courtaulds, do you have any specific memories?

I think the worst memory, well, I was at home here and I had a phone call, I was on night shifts at the time, shift manager, night shifts at Halstead. I had a phone call from the manager saying that it's going to be announced on the night shift that the factory is closing in three months. I think, by that, well I just couldn't believe. You see my world fell apart, I think, I thought from Day One I'd be working for Courtaulds from the day I left school until the time I retired. I had this phone call and I think, well everything just dropped, everything went hollow and I wasn't allowed to say anything when I went back. It was announced to the workforce that the factory was actually closing and on top of that, they actually closed early. I think my worse memory was shaking hands with everybody that night when they all walked out. We went into work and I remained there for a few months afterwards, to run the factory down, all the looms down. But the majority of people left that night. We went in, clocked in and then within an hour everybody left, they were thrown out, well not thrown out but they were asked to leave and that was the end of the job. That was the hardest thing I've ever done I think, to say cheerio to everybody as they all lost their jobs and I shook everyone's hands individually as they all went out.

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And when the factory started to close and redundancies began to happen, what happened to the mood in the factory?

When it began to get depressed, everybody was thinking what would happen to me and things like that. It was, you want to put yourself in that position. In my position I was very distraught. I had been there thirty-six years. I knew it was coming but all of a sudden it came and then, that was it. You had to accept there was not a market for what you were producing so why produce? And I knew it was coming.

2) Factory Closure

What kind of effect do you think Courtaulds had on the town?

A good effect 'cause they employed, half the town worked for Courtaulds. A lot of the food from the town went to the canteen and the, everybody who worked at Courtaulds saved the money in the trustee's bank, that was their little bit. So when it closed, I think it made a big hole in the town's you know, living, I think a lot of the shops felt the pinch.

The trustee's bank?

No, well it has been took over now, but I suppose that everybody felt the pinch and of course there was Portway and when that closed too, it was a double-whammy. But yeah, I had a good time working at Courtaulds, it was like a family and I was asked if I would like to go to Switzerland to train on the new air jets what were coming to the factory, and I with five other blokes, not all at one time, maybe two or three at once went to Switzerland to Rüti, near Rappersville. We trained up on these air jets but when I came back, within six months Courtaulds was closed. So that was a waste of time, well no, not of time but I did have a little holiday out of it in Switzerland.

What were, how did the rest of the staff feel about what was happening at the time?

A lot of them were devastated because, especially if you're a certain age you think well I'm not going to get a job now. A lot of people never did work again, I think they just sort of give up. But I was only thirty-nine so I was able to get a job quite easily over at Crittalls, Braintree and I worked there as a fitter, as a fitter of windows.

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At Halstead it was different because it lost that and Portway which was the biggest thing in town. It enabled a lot of people to get into work.

It had quite an effect on the town?

It did indeed.

3) Factory Closure

It wasn't until there was an exhibition at Braintree Museum a couple of years ago that did a bit about the closure of the Courtaulds, and you know I couldn't remember it, I couldn't remember Braintree closing at all. It was the same year that I left and obviously I was aware of Halstead closing because of course it affected my dad. My dad did his thirty years and he got his silver watch and then was made redundant.

So really the effect on the town was only a personal thing perhaps?

I mean yeah, as a personal thing it, you know I was quite selfish, typical late twenties, you know much more, as I say I was much too focused on what I was doing in this new job. It had a tremendous effect on the area because so many people stopped work and it had been a real community because, erm, it was a generational thing. Obviously it wasn't with us because dad had moved from London, but some of the other families had parents, grandparents, great grandparents all working at the Mill.

So you were still living in Halstead at the time?

Erm, yes we had moved back to Halstead. We had been living in Braintree for a while but we were living in Halstead. To be quite honest I was totally unaware of what was going on, honestly, because I was totally wrapped up in what I was doing in my new job up in town.

You can't recall anything your father might of said in regard to...?

He was just bitter and twisted and blamed it all on Thatcher. We don't mention the T word. No he was bitter about it all but he accepted that it wasn't necessarily the companies fault, it was the combination of a lot of outside factors, which it was.

4) First Day

What are your earliest memories or associations with Courtaulds?

My first memory with Courtaulds was probably when I was eight years old and my father had just been made manager of the processing mill in Braintree and we actually moved in the Mill House, which was on the grounds there, which was a large three-storey buildings with eight bedrooms. I think, probably, one of the Courtaulds would have originally lived in there at some point or another because there were servants quarters and there bells in every room and the bells were still there when we were there. It was a very cold house, it had shutters on the windows on the outside to close in the winter. It was close to the river and there was a cellar which used to flood when the river was flooded. We used to end up with six feet of water down there but in those days, in 1958, those were the sort of conditions you lived in. The steam train was still running on the line and I used to lay in bed and hear the Lake and Elliots magnetic crane picking up scraps of off the train wagons.

I spent a lot of my time in the factory from an early age. I learnt how to ride my bicycle on the grounds actually. We had a big garden, must have been at least half an acre and we had a big oval patch of grass in the front drive which is where I learnt to ride the bike. I spent most, well all my school life there. I learnt a lot from there, the factory side of it. When I left school at 15 the natural thing was to be an apprentice with Courtaulds which I did, working at all three factories. At Halstead the weaving, at Bocking the dye house and then finishing bit and then finishing back at Halstead to finish my apprenticeship to become a Shift Manager until the actual closure of the plant. I have a lot of memories of Braintree though.

5) First Day

Well, we lived in factory terrace, because dad worked at Courtaulds – he was an overlooker and he could have a factory house, so we were number seven. I was all set to go onto college to do A Levels and then to become a teacher, and then at the last minute, and he always insists that it was a week before I took my final exam, I announced that I didn't want to do that and I wanted to earn some money and go to work. Must have been mad. Anyway, so I then looked around and he said 'Well you better sort yourself out some sort of apprenticeship or a training scheme of some sort'. So I looked around and in Braintree at the time of course there was Crittalls who made the metal windows and Lake & Elliot who made hydraulic lifting equipment and then there was Bradbary's that made hydraulic lifts for the motor industry. And in Halstead there was Portways Foundry who made the tortoise stoves that were in ever village hall and lots of schools, and then there was another company by the name of Evans and the of course there was Courtaulds who had factories in Braintree and Bocking too. And my main reason, if not my only reason, for getting the job at Courtaulds was because living opposite the factory meant that I could stay in bed until the last possible minute, which as a teenager is the most important thing, and then I could just jump up and go out, I was always late, I was late every day we lived here but we only lived here until 1968 and then we moved to Colne Valley Close and once we moved a bit away I was then early every day.

So, when did you start work at Courtaulds?

I started work at Courtaulds in August 1967, I finished school in July, had two weeks holiday and then I started work when we got back on that Monday. I started work as a general apprentice which meant that I worked in the different departments in Halstead Mill, Braintree Mill and Bocking Mill so I got a broad experience of the different processes that were undertaken to produce the fabrics which meant the print and weaving processes and the dyeing and the finishing as well. I had a go at everything and I rapidly discovered I was useless at anything practical.

Can you describe your first day at Courtaulds?

Well, had to start work at half past seven in the morning, which was a bit of a culture shock because I was used to being in school and we started at ten to nine, I think. Anyway, you worked half past seven 'til half past five Mondays and Tuesdays, half past seven 'til five on a Wednesday and a Thursday and half past seven until half past four on a Friday. I was put into what was known as the spooling department. So spools were the cylindrical some containers which, like a peg if you like, they had the weft thread wound on them, the weft thread being the yarn that goes side to side across a fabric, and the spooling department wound the yarn onto the spools using automated machinery. So, I left school and had two weeks holiday, I was quite a shy, pimply man and there I was in this department where there was, the foreman was a man, the mechanic was a man and then there was me and twenty-odd women. I was petrified on the first day of all these women.

6) Funny Stories

Well, there was probably one but there was this chap on nights, his name was Fred, that's all I'll give because I don't want to get in trouble. He used to come in at 10 at night, well quarter to ten, and he used to put out several fishing lines out by the river in a particular part where the stream went off to one side, like a little waterfall whooshed down the side. When he had his break at two o'clock in the morning he used to go and get all the lines in and have loads and loads of eels, and he'd take them home and give them to some of his friends who liked to eat eels and he used to like eating them

himself. And then one morning, unbeknown to us, the early shift came in which was a load of girls mainly at six o'clock and all these eels had escaped so they were all wriggling across the floor. We heard all these screams and people running saying there was a load of snakes, but they were actually eels running across the floor. I don't know what the consequences were that was a bit of fun that was.

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We had to train on these jacquard looms, with a clock, we all had a clock to see how long it took us to do each job. I'm afraid me and this other boy we cheated, when it was our turn to do the clock we counted to ten before we started so we'd always beat the girls because they had ten more seconds on their time. So I was a bit of a cheat really but it didn't really matter, it was just a bit of fun.

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I used to take customers round, we used to have visits quite often, and they would get the sort of tour around, and on one of these tours I was taking round someone from Marks and Spencer's in fact, taking round initially to the centre for drying fabric and they went down to the far end to look at the fabric coming off and low and behold a couple of meat pies come through on the fabric where the operettists were using the machine to warm up their pies.

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Part of my apprenticeship with the company was to work in every department and whilst I was working in the department that examined the cloth, we were examining some parachute silk, and it really wasn't very good quality and as we were examining it one of the directors came and saw it. He demanded that we went to go and get the weaver, so I went to go and get the weaver and brought him down and this director tore into him saying 'how would you like to come down in a parachute with all these faults' and the guy who was an ex-paratrooper said 'I've come down in parachutes with holes in bigger than your mouth' and I thought that was a perfect remedy to get the sack.

Did he get the sack?

No.

7) Rescue

This story from the base place, they had to send back reports and they had to report that Courtauld had was going to be relieved but the party had gone up and couldn't find him, but another one was going. Anyway, the press got hold of this, you know man lost in Arctic and all the rest of it, and it became a pretty big story. My grandfather, obviously, got wind of this and he thought everything possible must be done and he found out that there was a very famous Swedish pilot who had flown a lot in the Arctic and so he got onto him and persuaded him to take his aircraft to Greenland and see if he could find him, find the spot which was completely pointless really because I don't think from the air he had anymore of a chance from anybody approaching on foot. Anyway, so he flew up with his aircraft and did indeed fly over the area and actually the day that he, my father, was pulled out and they were on their way back on the sledges with the dogs to the close was the day he flew over and I think they rigged up some ski poles so that they could exchange messages, which was a message on a piece of string which was pulled between the two poles. My father was furious that this had happened because he always maintained that he was never lost, they knew where he was but it had just taken a little bit longer to relieve him.

So, he didn't welcome the press attention at all?

No not at all. No. And actually it is quite a funny story, when they finally got back to Denmark because it was a Danish sponsored, the Danish government sponsored the expedition, after all the shenanigans and everything, they arrived on this ship in Copenhagen Dock and there was this big welcome for them and the King was there and the British ambassador, you know all the knobs. So they were welcomed onto the quayside and the ambassador, the British ambassador, made a speech and said how grateful everybody was that the big effort had been made to rescue Mr. Courtauld and perhaps Mr. Courtauld would like to say a few words. And my father, who was completely embarrassed by this, was given the microphone and said "Everything you just heard from the previous speaker is completely wrong. I was not rescued. That's all I have to say" and he handed the microphone back.

8) Health & Safety

We used to buy barrels of caustic soda and they used to come on a truck, they used to put some old tyres in the yard which they used to push the barrels off the truck. I said to them that if they burst, you know there was a man next to them trying to catch the barrels, you know that would be the end of him because you could never wash him down quick enough. There was awful fuss because they had to lift them off and they modified the yard to get a tractor to lift them off which wasn't much better but a little bit safer. Things like that you know they had just been done, nobody could see you know. I once saw a tractor drive off a loading dock, they forgot to put the dock loader down and they drove off the edge of the and the truck fell between the lorry and the loading dock. You know, things weren't, well the attitude towards health and safety was, well nobody wore ear plugs or anything in the weaving shed. It just wasn't considered.

To be fair it wasn't thought about.

Well no it wasn't even considered. Nothing was thought about in that way.

What year was that when health and safety became an issue then?

9) Huguenots

I do have many memories, particularly the emphasis that we were Huguenot and that we were tied up with the French and we were told to like onions and we were told to stick to the truth, being the Courtauld motto which I think was to stop children telling what were called fibs in those days. My father very much so, because after my mother's death until he remarried, I had five years essentially alone with him, he was a great countryman as well as a politician. And I learnt a great deal from both my parents.

So that, very strong identity being a Courtauld family member?

Yes, there was, as I say it sounds stupid but the thing about the onions and a feeling of being a Courtauld and we knew where we get, I knew about La Rochelle and we knew the thing about religion. We were very much taught this. We were taught at one point not to say the creed unless we believed in it because they weren't Trinitarians, they became Unitarians as you know. And we were very much taught, even if we weren't historian, we knew what had happened and that we fled and had to come here where we set up and what we did and the whole history of Louisa Perina who we reburied. But how the switch from silver to silk that was very much in my, you know what's it, about the factories. I think I knew more about our heritage possibly than what was going on at the time. The religious side was extremely important because as I said this whole thing of holding to the truth in other words because they left after the removal of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, the fact that we had to stay with our own truth, and when I was being interviewed by the Japanese for the Courtauld exhibition in Japan we got deep into non-conformity and why Courtaulds became Unitarian. Essentially, faith always meant a huge amount, and now we have Courtauld Catholics and different things, but I think it is still very much still in the Courtauld genes, the idea of faith.

10) Noise and Smells

One of the things I can't really recall about, but I remember it was there, it's the smell of the place. It was certainly true of Courtauld's in Halstead because when I was at school we used to walk past the Halstead factory to the swing bars and the doors of the factory were open in summer and you could all smell Courtaulds. It had a smell about it. You kinda, going forward in time, you can always recall, you know you've got photographs that show you what things looked like and so forth, but you've got nothing that says this was the smell. And I think it was true of the dyehouse as well. The dyehouse also had a smell and I can't sort of recall it but I'd recognise it.

Did you take it home on your clothes with you?

No, no I don't think so. It just stayed in the factory.

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There were different smells actually, depending on what you were weaving. If you were weaving cotton, it had this particular smell to it, other cloths had different smells again so everywhere was a bit different. And when we used the water jets it was like a damp atmosphere because of the way they spread the water out of the jet.

11) Noise and Smells

So Halstead Mill would, the looms would all start at 6am on a Monday morning and then they would be running 24/7 until 6am on a Saturday morning. I remember coming to on a Monday morning just before six and laying in bed and hearing that the looms were actually starting up.

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You said when you first went into the weaving shed it was terribly loud. Could you try and explain that a little bit?

You could smell the oil. The noise was, I don't know the decibels, but all the conversation was lip reading. You had to get very close to people and speak deliberately. You looked at them and they looked at you and you just looked at each other's lips until you could work out what they wanted.

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The only problem was the noise. Nobody told you at that time of day, or didn't want to tell you or didn't know, how damaging the noise was. And apparently what it does is that it kills high frequency hearing. It damages the nerve endings in your ears and killing your hearing, anyone who worked in there for any period of time came out deaf.

And the noise was caused by the looms?

Yes. When the machine was in full mode with all the shuttle looms, I think there was about 600 shuttle looms in there. I think at the time it was the biggest weaving shed in Europe. And the noise was absolutely horrendous. We used sign language to communicate with people.

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In the latter years of Courtauld, I think they began to think a bit more about health and safety. We were issued with earplugs or earmuffs. But in the early part we worked without any hearing protection at all. I think a lot of people became deaf. I don't think that people were aware of what would happen to you because of the noise, but it did get better that way.

12) Philanthropy

My father said that everybody should have at least twenty percent of their time or their money devoted to other people, their community and so on. We set up this sort of group for the Essex girls. And the name Essex girl is a bad thing, when I was chairman and trying to get business, new business always said that they didn't want to be on the Essex side of things because they didn't want their wives to be considered Essex girls, they were always from Suffolk. An enormous amount of girls and women work in London and didn't like being teased. My daughters and granddaughters couldn't care less you know, if anybody made the Essex girl joke or it was a nerd or a geek or any of that kind of thing. But anyway, we set up this thing and they wanted to call it EWAG, I don't know why they wanted to call it EWAG but I think it had something to do with WAGs and wives and footballers and things. And we've raised one-hundred thousand quid and we handed out, from our nesting, around eighty thousand pounds. We help everything from beaten up women in hospices and refuge for the ones who wanted to get a bit of an education but their parents can't afford it. It is a very good organisation.

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My father definitely had very big philanthropic streak, he founded a thing that he called the 'Do Good' fund whereby he hired off quite a big chunk of his capital into it and he was assured that the Bishop of Chelmsford, the Lord Lieutenant of the County and about four other people would be trustees. That's still going on and I chaired that. It's continued to give money to Essex based voluntary groups. It's now called the Augustine Courtauld Trust, but he called it the Do Good Fund. He would always, I think that philanthropic feeling that the wealth of the family came from a lot of different sources but we owe it to give as much as we can of it back. And I think that still holds.

13) Socials

It was hard work but the friendship side of it, we used to have a lot of outings, you know Blackwell's Coaches once or twice a year, we used to go to the seaside. Three or four Blackwell's coaches used to go out for the day, it was there I met my wife to be when I was sixteen and a half. She actually worked in, she was supervisor on the processing side and we got married in 1971.

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As a youngster, when we were at Braintree, we had, every factory had its own canteen where food was made on site, meals were made on site, and we had a recreation room where we could play darts, cards, table tennis and that was set aside for the youngsters for your lunch hour. You had your dinner downstairs in the canteen, you went upstairs to the recreation room and you had time to spend with each other there. A bit of you time, sort of thing, and I suppose, I probably wasn't the only one who met my wife down there, probably a lot of other people did as well, met their wives to be or girlfriends or whatever down there. The social side was very important and I think with the outings they had, and it wasn't just the outings once or twice a year to the seaside or whatever, there were lots of other functions too. There were dances and you were encouraged to take part in these. In that day and age television wasn't so much, we didn't have much entertainment so we made our own entertainment. I think the recreation side was always very important, the company fostered the idea of that more. I think a happy worker is a much better worker, you work a lot harder that way, it makes all the difference.

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And obviously, did you get involved in any of the social things at Bocking, you know the bowls club?

Well you couldn't not get involved in the bowls club because Nigel, sort of department head, was a fanatic. We helped him with his annual dinners and all sort of things. And of course we had the big Courtaulds' fashion show. We had a marquee up on the sports ground. Those were the sorts of jobs that I used to get involved with because they said they'd need someone on the door.

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In the early years they ran a nice shop at Halstead Courtaulds. One of the two ladies from the office would open up the shop one day a week for the employees to buy cloth or tins of paint or gloves. I remember buying a nice dress for the wife, well she wore it so she must of liked it.

14) Working Day

I went to the Courtaulds at Braintree in 1943, for two years and then I went to Bocking Courtaulds in 1948. I was there until 1952/3.

Tell me about your time there.

Oh, we used to have fun there. I've even permed people's hair there before now. We used to set people's hair but there again it was long hours, but that was better it was more typing and putting labels on bails of material so that was a lot easier than what I was doing at the Braintree factory.

How did you feel about that? What they did? What you did? The people you knew.

Well, there was lots of people I knew at Bocking but sadly a lot of them are not with us anymore. I worked with another person named Peggy and we used to have, we were put on a special machine with a special material that came from abroad and we had to seal up in Clingfilm but see-through paper, very strong stuff, the rolls of material were six-foot wide and they were heavy, very heavy on the machines. We had to shoot them off the machines onto the trucks for the men to take away. And if the men weren't there then we had to do it. But we didn't do that very often.

Were your wages good? Can you remember?

When I first started at Braintree Courtaulds they were 8s 4d a week. I always had to bring my wages packet home sealed up and give it to my father and then he'd give me my bus fare and a shilling for the week and that was it. Courtaulds at Bocking by the time I went there to work the wages were much better, and they were the best wages we had the whole of our married life.