

Imperial Chemical Industries 1951 to 1963

In March 1951 we regretfully left “Lyndhurst” to live with my in-laws at No 67 Sherbourne Road, Blackpool. We were grateful for their kindness in providing us with a home, but realised that we would soon have to find a house of our own. Finding work in Blackpool before the holiday season started was not easy, and for ten days I tramped the streets seeking employment.

The only offer I received was a post as a trainee sugar boiler with the Dainty Confectionery Company at £8 per week. Income was essential because the DSS would not pay me unemployment benefit as I had given up my job in Lincoln voluntarily. £8 was a good wage and as we needed to pay our way I accepted the job. Fortunately on the Friday before I was due to start work I received a letter asking me to report to ICI at Hillhouse Works near Fleetwood for an interview. The vacancy was for an invoice clerk at £7 per week, with a general pay review imminent. I wasn't very excited at being an invoice clerk, but life as a sugar boiler didn't thrill me either, so thus began a career in the chemical industry. For the next five years I prepared despatch notes and invoices for road and rail tanks of chlorine, caustic soda, trichloroethylene, methylene chloride and a host of other related products. We also despatched thousands of cylinders of CCF propellants so contributing greatly to the pollution of the Ozone layer. Another popular chemical was paradichlorobenzene, which, in its various grades, removed unsavoury smells from toilets all over Great Britain.

Bob and Jessie Sutton, who also worked at ICI, became great friends and will feature later in my story.

The railway station was nearby and at first I travelled to ICI daily by train. Eventually I bought a three speed cycle in a sale for £1.10s.0d. and was able to save the cost of a season ticket, 7/- per week (I sold the cycle five years later for £2).

So, ICI having provided an income, our next task was to find a home. My in-laws were very tolerant but we must have been a great inconvenience. My father-in-law worked shifts at the Atomic Energy factory at Sellafield, and mother-in-law had run the house as a boarding house before we arrived. On the 30th June we purchased No. 6 Chelsea Avenue, Layton , Blackpool, for £1800. We obtained a

mortgage of £1125 at 4% repayable over 25 years, monthly repayments £6.

It was an end terraced house. Three bedrooms upstairs, living room, bathroom and kitchen downstairs. Outside, there was a brick washhouse and a coal bunker. The only heating was an open fireplace in the living room. It was a very hard life for my wife with a daughter, Lyn, suffering from chronic asthma and, later, a son, Barry, afflicted with severe eczema. Winn had to watch Barry continuously as the itchiness of the eczema would cause him to rub his hands and face on any available surface and fetch blood. A quack in Preston eventually gave him some relief with a black tar ointment, and later cortizone cream produced a partial cure.

Financially our life at Chelsea Avenue was a struggle, but we survived, and credit for this must go to Winn. She fed us well by judicious food purchases and excellent cooking. She made clothes for the children and best of all she was a lovely mother to them. Holidays consisted of visits to my parents who lived at Louth in Lincolnshire, a tedious journey by train. Lyn remembers with great delight the days she spent with her grandfather on his smallholding, feeding the pigs and chickens.

(After the sale of Wright's Bus Service my father tried to make a living from poultry and pigs, but his venture was not a success and eventually in 1959 he had to sell up. Fortunately there was enough capital left for them to buy a bungalow at Manby and he spent the rest of his life working happily in the RAF Officers' Mess at Manby RAF station. He died, still working, at the age of 69. My mother died two years later, also aged 69. I was very relieved when I passed the same age.)

We economised by fetching coke at 3/- per bag in an old pram from the gas works and the same vehicle was used to collect scrap wood from a timber merchant. (Coal was still rationed). I built a chicken hut with ten shillingworth of scrap wood from ICI and the six chickens kept us supplied with eggs. Other income came from checking pools coupons in the North Station car park on a Saturday night. You received 2/6d per 100 coupons checked. They were then rechecked by more experienced staff and for every winning coupon you had missed you lost a shilling. I usually received about 30/- for three hours work. One year I worked in the summer evenings for Walls Ice Cream, unpacking vans. It was a bitterly cold task, but I didn't make much money as it was the worst summer for many years.

Winn had no modern labour saving devices. Clothes were washed and boiled in a gas copper and put through a hand ringer before being hung out to dry. If the weather was wet, the kitchen became like a sauna with washing hanging on a rack suspended from the ceiling. Later we bought a tiny Hoover washer with a mangle on the side for £40. I don't remember having a vacuum cleaner and of course the fire grate had to be cleaned out, relaid and lit every morning.

There were few chances of promotion and to improve my prospects I undertook a correspondence course for the Chartered Institute of Secretaries examinations. I finally managed to pass the finals, part A, in accountancy and economics, but never really got to grips with the law subjects. Perhaps, the fact that I caught mumps three weeks before the law exams and had developed eczema on my face from a shaving cream, were contributory factors.

Eventually, in 1956, I was offered a transfer to the Distribution Centre at Runcorn for training as an export operator. The pay was attractive, and we were given help with moving expenses and house purchase, but it was a great upheaval for the family. For several months I lived in digs and travelled home at weekends until we found a semi-detached house that we could afford at 14 Townfield Lane, Frodsham. It was quite a large three bedroomed-semi price £2475 and the ICI Pension Fund granted us a loan of £1800. We discovered later that the main drawback was the neighbours. The laws of libel prevent me from describing the problems they caused. Unfortunately, we lost £215 on the house in Blackpool and had to sell it for £1575.

I found the export business quite a challenge. We shipped chemicals to over 60 countries worldwide and were expected to learn the complex documentary requirements for each destination. Errors, particularly in the wording of letters of credit, could be disastrous, and failure to grant the correct commission (bribe) to Middle East agents would result in voluminous correspondence. The amount of paperwork could be mindboggling. I once shipped part of a chemical plant to Rio de Janeiro and sent out 1200 separate pieces of paper. On the next occasion, with more experience I managed to reduce it to 600. The whole process was made more difficult by the frequent strikes of dockers. We didn't make any close friends at work, and I soon realised that export operators were considered valuable people. In my six years in the department there was only one promotion, but the consolation was that we were considered to be the highest paid clerical staff in ICI.

Lyn and Barry both went to the local village school and Lyn eventually transferred to the Grammar School at Helsby. Their asthma and eczema were still distressing but manageable. Lyn attended breathing lessons at Liverpool hospital which helped to control her asthma. Barry had speech problems when he started school but a speech therapist soon remedied his difficulties and said he was a model pupil.

In 1958 we acquired a dog. We were offered a black and white mongrel puppy and we all contributed 5/- to the price of £1. The owner generously returned 5/- towards the cost of dog food. Thus we obtained SCAMP who was to remain a well loved family pet for 15 years.

The Beatles came on the scene about this time and gave a concert at the Mersey View Dance Hall on Frodsham Hill. Of course Lyn had to see them and I was persuaded by my daughter to stand outside the back entrance of the hall to obtain their autographs. We managed to get three signatures which she treasures to this day.

In addition to providing a loving home for the family, Winn occasionally worked part-time. The only jobs I can remember were market research, which provided us with a few laughs, and teaching at Dutton School. She loved teaching and the independence it gave her. She must have been very upset when another house move brought her career to an end.

On 24th August, 1957, we joined the car owning public. Through a contact of my younger brother John, I purchased a 1938 Morris 8 Series 11 saloon DRR 893 for £135. It soon began to burn oil, one pint every 60 miles, and drastic action was necessary. At first I squeezed a chemical called "Piston Seal" through each plug hole. This was supposed to spread over the top of the cylinder and make a perfect seal with the cylinder lining. As a short term palliative it was successful, but soon further measures were required.

After dismantling the engine, I joined a car maintenance class and each week took along different parts for advice and repair. The following Spring, engine rebuilt, we were back on the road again. I used the car for travelling to work, and we also made many trips to Winn's parents in Blackpool and to Wales on holiday. There was no boot, just a luggage rack exposed to the elements. To create further space we

removed the back of the rear seat, filled the gap with luggage, replaced the back and piled the rest around the children.

I taught Winn the principles of driving in this car, but to save her embarrassment and to ensure success in her test she had six lessons with a driving school and passed first time.

We had many adventures. On one occasion we had been camping in Pembrokeshire camping and on the return journey there was a fault with the brakes. If I applied the footbrake all the wheels locked and we came to a sudden stop. I discovered that if I bled the brakes the pressure was released and we could continue our journey. So the answer was not to use the footbrake, only the handbrake. We eventually reached Frodsham after buying several tins of brake fluid and bleeding the brakes three times. On another occasion, also in Wales, we were going up a very steep hill and the car, even in bottom gear, would go no further. So I discharged my passengers, turned the car round and went up backwards. Reverse gear had a higher gear ratio than the forward gears, and so we reached the top.

The starter motor was unreliable, and we usually used the starting handle to save the battery. On one occasion Winn had driven to Runcorn to do her shopping and on her return the car would not start. A friendly coalman offered to turn the starting handle. As soon as the engine started Winn released the clutch and drove off until, in the driving mirror, she saw the burly coalman chasing after her waving the handle. On another occasion she was returning from Runcorn and was puzzled by the stares and waves she was receiving. The puzzle was solved when she arrived home. One of the front headlamps had come loose and was swinging about on the wire connections.

In 1958 we went camping for the first time with Bob and Jessie Sutton, our friends from Blackpool (ICI). They loaned us a ridge tent and after a long journey we all eventually arrived at Sarn Bach, near Abersoch, to find that the toilet was being whitewashed so we were given a bucket for emergency use. Winn and I had army style camp beds and found them so cold that we had to share one bed. But the sun shone and we had a wonderful time

The car got us safely home and in 1960 I sold it for £10 and replaced it with a 1951 Ford Anglia HED 164, price £155. Like the Morris 8, this had no heater, they were considered a luxury on those days. However, it proved extremely reliable and would start first time on the

coldest mornings. Winn used it for two years to travel to Dutton Junior School where in addition to the headmistress, she comprised the whole of the teaching staff.

Early in 1962 I was sent on a weekend Export Procedures course. The last lecture was about computers and their use in business. This fired my imagination and I immediately borrowed programming books from the Chester Reference library and taught myself simple programming techniques. I applied to the ICI staff department for transfer to the computing department but they turned me down, there were too many redundant accounts staff needing relocation. However, I was sent on a systems analysis course in 1963 on which I was placed second in the final examinations. This convinced me that I had the ability to make a successful career in computing even if I could not persuade ICI.

This was the start of a new chapter in my life and once again I uprooted my family.