

My Memories of Octel.

My memories of the Octel works at Amlwch are more than a little biased as I never found anyone working there that I actually disliked. Please believe I am not being the least bit patronising when I state that my delivery times spent at Amlwch were amongst the happiest days and nights of my working career. As a Chlorine Tanker Driver this was undoubtedly my favourite job, so much so that I asked the haulage company who employed me if they would consider allocating it as my permanent run, and was overjoyed when they agreed.

On starting my run I would phone the Octel weighbridge, with my call being answered by either John Morris, Bruce Bagley, Anne Strawson or Terry Thomas the weighbridge attendants. I would then report that I was on my way and give my estimated time of arrival, telling them I would phone through if I were to encounter any delays. The journey along the North Welsh coast and the stunning scenery that I was privileged to see never ceased to fascinate me and my work became a pleasure.

As my load was of a dangerous nature I was required to phone through to North Wales Traffic Control, who monitored the A55, in order to alert them prior to entering the Conwy Tunnel. I got to know a good many of the team by name and began our conversation by announcing that the Chlorine Road Show was about to enter the tunnel, then on emerging from the other side I would switch on my cab light as I passed the Control Centre to see the operator laughing and waving frantically at the window. On a number of occasions I have encountered sheep that had strayed onto the road and would report this to my mates on Traffic Control. We even began emailing each other but sadly lost contact once the works closed down and the Amlwch run stopped.

I also remember the earlier days when I was an employee of the Chemical Company who manufactured the Chlorine I was transporting. This was

before the tunnel was constructed and Pont Britannia was solely for rail traffic with no road in place. This meant negotiating the walls and narrow streets of Conwy in a large road tanker and crossing over to Anglesey by means of the Menai Bridge. As the cab of the tanker was too wide for the narrow arches encountered in the walls and on the bridge the necessary method of navigation was identical for both. First line up the tanker, then stop and pull in both mirrors, this would allow the driver to slip through the gap with inches to spare. Full ahead, keep her straight and trust in the Lord was the order of the day, and the odd prayer wouldn't go amiss. I never heard of anyone catching the stonework of either wall or bridge. Unfortunately we drivers were all made redundant and the Chlorine contract was outsourced to a haulage company.

On arrival at the works the weighbridge attendant would phone through to the control room to alert the operator of a Chlorine tanker onsite that needed offloading.

At this point I must emphasise the high regard in which I held each of the operators whose job it was to offload my tanker. Through no fault of mine, sometimes I would arrive at the most inconvenient time. Shift Change Over. I can state that without fail the operator, who should have been getting changed to go home, would walk briskly over to my cab and say *“Ok Dave, pull into the offloading bay”*. My reply would be *“Sorry, I didn't plan on arriving on shift change, I'll wait for the next shift”*. I would then be told *“Dave, stop wasting time get this tanker into the bay or I'm going to be late getting home”*. I would then pull into the discharge bay, the operator and I would connect the tanker, test the lines and start padding up (pressurising the tanker) the first stage of the discharge process. He would then rush off to hand over to the incoming operator, change and go home. This sort of dedication was unique to Amlwch Works.

Although I was only a visiting driver I was made to feel like a highly valued part of the Amlwch team, not only by the workforce but also by the Octel management. I can graphically illustrate this by the fact that each time the company achieved a milestone in no lost time injuries at work, not only would Octel's management reward their workforce but the delivery drivers would also be included. On numerous occasions well do I remember being given Tesco Gift Tokens and writing a series of thank you letters to Dr Robert Young, (known as Dr Bob), the Works Manager. Also taking back envelopes containing more Gift Tokens to hand out to the other Chlorine drivers who regularly made the run to Amlwch. Strange to think that Octel valued the Chlorine drivers far more than the haulage company that employed us, as no such incentives or rewards were ever lavished on the driving fraternity by our management.

For safety reasons we were not allowed inside the cab while the tanker was discharging and Octel had provided a well-equipped facility where the drivers could take their rest breaks. I rarely used this as the lads in the control room insisted on me sharing their mess room facilities. This was the part that I really enjoyed as I was gradually integrated into the various shifts whose characters I got to know and who each became my mates.

On one occasion I remember suffering from a severe cold and installing myself inside the driver's Porto cabin during shift change, with the incoming crew all asking me why I wasn't sitting inside the mess-room. After explaining that I had a bad cold I was informed that it didn't matter I was expected to stay with my mates in the control room or the mess-room.

One particular driver had a reputation for eating any food left on the mess-room table, he was even known to raid the fridge in order to pilfer meals, which failed to endear him to the various shifts. One day word came through to control from the weighbridge that he had arrived, and before he came into view a packet of polo's was opened and shared out amongst the

members of the shift with two or three sweets being left over. These spare sweets were unceremoniously inserted into a human orifice within the rear of someone's trousers, then amid some sniggering were placed back on the table and left. No one actually observed them being eaten, but miraculously they all disappeared.

Gareth was a larger than life character, and while I sat at the table one night he asked me what I had brought for my meal. He said he had something that he knew I'd never tried before, when I asked what it was, he replied "sheep's bollocks, want to try some?" In for a penny in for a pound and always up for a challenge, I accepted. Half an hour later I was served a plate full of fried sheep's testicles and found them to be excellent. Individual members of the shift strolled nonchalantly into the mess-room to be confronted by Gareth and I devouring a hearty testicular meal, they rapidly vacated the room with hands clasped over retching mouths mumbling words like "*unnatural and filthy*". On finishing the meal I was supplied with a bagful of this culinary gourmet delight to take home. Having watched my mate Gareth prepare the meal I did exactly the same at home, but didn't tell my wife what it was until after she had eaten it. It proved to be so popular that I phone Gareth to ask if he could supply any more. Several days later we returned home from shopping to find a message on the answer phone and listened to a scintillating voice shouting "*Its Gareth here, I've got a big bag o bollock's for you*". Pure Magic.

Before being permanently allocated the Amlwch job occasionally my work would be cancelled, and I once remember getting a phone call telling me this, then giving me the choice of either staying at home on 8 hours pay or taking a load of Chlorine to Amlwch. Many drivers would have seized the opportunity of a night at home on pay, but I enjoyed the job so much that (to my shame) I elected to work. While sitting in the mess-room with the tanker discharging I casually mentioned to the shift that I could have been at home with my feet up on pay but enjoyed coming to Amlwch so much I decided to work. I remember John Chucks saying that given the

same opportunity he would have stayed at home, and then progressed to calling me one sorry, sad, pathetic bastard. He then proceeded to make me a brew.

On many a warm summers evening we would stroll out from the control room, each equipped with a mug of tea or coffee and watch the magic of the sunset, as the orange orb of the sun dipped slowly into the sea directly across in Bull Bay. On one such an idyllic evening we stood gazing seaward holding our hot brews when I exclaimed “*What we really need now are tables and parasols with easy chairs, and on each table a pint of ice cold beer followed by chasers of rum or whiskey*”. In response H*** the shift manager, normally of an amiable nature, grunted “*Why don't you F-cough Dave?*” Puzzled by H*****’s uncustomary retort I turned to the lads, who explained amid much grinning; that poor H***** had been called in and should have been sat at home doing precisely the very thing I had suggested a few seconds earlier.

Each stock tank had its own weight scale where the weight was record by the operator prior to offloading and again when the discharge had finished. During the discharge process the stock tank would be vented to prevent excessive pressure build-up. This meant that some slight weight loss was bound to occur. I invented a little game commonly known by all those participating as the F-king Stupid Scale Game. The idea was for both driver and operator to each use a marker pen to mark on the glass of the scale where he anticipated the weight needle would come to rest at the end of the discharge. Sometimes the driver won, sometimes the operator, but one particular operator became so proficient that he ALWAYS won. No matter how hard I tried I could never get the better of young A***. When I mentioned the much talented A***’s success playing the Scale Game the rest of the shift burst out laughing, then told me that the young bugger was cheating. Apparently he would wait for me to mark the scale then placed his mark just below mine, and during the discharge he would divert a small amount of product into another stock tank, thereby

guaranteeing a lower weight and winning the game. So the next time I encountered young A**** offloading me I waited until he had marked the scale first then placed my mark just below his. On seeing my ploy he spun round with an ear-splitting grin exclaiming “Oh you canny bastard”, and with absolutely no cheating involved, for the first time ever, I beat him fair and square.

Another shift incorporated 3 characters known as the Three Tenors. One being of a volatile nature and the other two taking great delight in a course of good humoured provocation. The frequent and inevitable arguments started at a noisy level, getting progressively louder in volume until reaching a deafening crescendo but never becoming the least bit aggressive. I remember A**** another quieter member of their shift confiding in me “*Dave, they give me a headache*”. While offloading one night I noticed that S****, one of the trio, shared a similar literary taste to me, sword and sorcery books. Then during our meal break I described a board game in the same genre where four heroes enter a dungeon full of monsters to achieve a set objective. While describing this game, another one of the trio, G*** walked into the mess-room and announced that he knew which game I was describing. He was right, and we sat for a while chatting about the game. The next time I encountered this shift I learned that G*** had brought the game into work, and if the plant were running problem free, during the course of the night they had started to play the game, with the shift manager becoming one of the heroes exploring the dungeon. A few nights later I was enlisted to play but shortly after the game had ended I was confronted by R**, the third tenor. “*I don't know what you see in taking the role of fairies and elves in a children's game*” he announced, “*Why don't you all grow up and start acting like adults instead of being little kids.*” This was too much for S**** who went directly into a loud verbal counter attack “*You're only jealous because you've had several attempts at playing this game but you're not intelligent enough*”. Then G*** waded in and the decibels increased “*Yes R**, every time you play, somehow you always get killed*”. In came S*** once again “*Even children's games are too complicated for you R***”. Without

knowing that I was about to make things much worse I pitched in with my 10 pennyworth *“Well at least we’re playing a decent game, not like the sad gits who enter pub quizzes”*. My world erupted as little R** exploded in a furious outburst, and I later found out that I had inadvertently hit bull’s-eye. He was part of a team who loved entering Pub Quizzes! Eventually the storm subsided and it all simmered down and R** retreated to sulk and rumble like a miniature volcano in the control room. He eventually popped back into the mess-room and with a cheery smile asked me *“Dave, if I were to call you a filbert what would you think?”* My luck was in, and the gods were with me, as we had a filbert growing in our garden. *“Well R**”* I chirped, with a self-satisfied smirk *“I’d think you were being insulting, calling me a nut”*. As he stamped back into the control room, noisily grumbling to himself I felt a little sorry for R** NO I didn’t!

With the Discharge Bays being situated directly on the coast and overlooking the sea there were sometimes problems. A loaded Chlorine Tanker weighed in at 44 Tons and obviously became lighter while discharging, unloaded the tare weight was 17.5 Tons. The two bays were fitted with gas detectors also movement sensors and during offloading when the wind gusted it would cause the tanker to sway slightly on its suspension. This instantly triggered off the movement sensor resulting in an automatic shutdown of the discharge process. Another problem occurred when the wind was blowing from the sea towards the land uprooting and washing in huge clumps of seaweed. This seaweed would block the intake pipes to the plant cooling system and the plant process including the tanker discharge would have to stop. Many drivers became frustrated because of the inevitable but unavoidable delay, which resulted in an extended working night. My mates on the Octel site could never understand why this delay never seemed to affect me, and on various occasions during the seaweed shutdowns I tried to explain. This was the job that I enjoyed, had asked for on a permanent basis, and was fortunate enough to have been given precisely what I wanted. So why should I

complain? I never knew if they completely accepted my explanation, but it was 100% true.

The haulage company that employed me ran on the basis of minimum workforce i.e. drivers, coupled with maximum work output, this often equated to long working hours. There were frequent times when two drivers were given three deliveries to Amlwch, which meant working a 14.5 hour night. The second driver would leave the Widnes depot arriving at Amlwch with a loaded tanker as the first driver was vacating the discharge bay with an empty tanker. While the second tanker was discharging the first would travel back to Runcorn to reload with Chlorine, both would then rendezvous at a prearranged point midway between Amlwch and Runcorn. They would change over tankers, the first driver returning to reload at Runcorn and the second returning to offload at Amlwch, after which the second driver would berth the now empty tanker for reloading at Runcorn and return to the Widnes depot with a loaded tanker for the day driver, who was usually pacing up and down cursing all bloody night drivers. Even this arduous job the shift teams at Amlwch seemed to smooth out. I was normally allocated the second run, and while discharging my first tanker one of my mates would enquire if I wished to join them for an Indian meal on my second delivery. My answer was always an unequivocal yes. I would pay for the cost of the meal and would find it awaiting me piping hot in the microwave on my second delivery.

The only aspect of my Amlwch job to worry me was; when I finally reached retirement age would I really want to retire from the job that I loved. I need not have worried, that decision was taken out of my hands. The American company of Great Lakes had taken over the Amlwch site from Octel, and in 2005 closed the works permanently. I was completely and utterly devastated. The Amlwch Works was later demolished.

I have maintained friendship with a few of the gang but unfortunately I lost contact with so many others.