

RECOLLECTIONS OF FRIZZELL'S IN PRE-WAR DAYS by L.A.Jaggers

I first joined Frizzell's on 23rd February 1933 – was called up to the R.A.F. in November 1940, returning to Frizzell's on demobilization in May 1946. Left Frizzell's at end of August 1946 to enter light engineering industry, eventually returning to Frizzell's on 1st November 1955 to take up the position of staff manager. Because of the long break between pre-war service and rejoining in 1955, recollections of the earlier days at Frizzell's are somewhat hazy.

In those days when you joined the Company, you merely received a very short note to the effect that you were expected to start on the following Monday, and then rather left to your own devices to find someone who would take an interest in you. I well remember being perhaps one of the very few people who, by sheer chance, received an increase in salary from the day of joining. When interviewed and asked what salary I required I said 27/6d per week, but after much negotiating it was agreed that if an offer was made it would be on the basis of 25/- per week. When during the course of my first day I was asked by Mr. Harding what he had agreed to pay me, I said without thinking 27/6d. I could have bitten my tongue afterwards, and stood awaiting the wrath to come. However, no comment was made and my first pay packet revealed that 27/6d a week was in fact the sum I was to receive.

Memories of life in the accounts department at Farleigh House are few and, as a very junior junior working under the supervision of Mr. Adams, I cannot say I was very happy. Slip reducing and, in particular, calculating the premiums due to underwriters and over-riding commissions on the Pithead Baths insurances, and currency conversions on overseas insurances demanded a great deal of concentration and effort in the days before the advent of mechanical calculating equipment. Other memories include the frequent ringing of Bow Bells, Bow Church being almost opposite, which despite the double glazing (unusual in those days) fitted to the windows overlooking Cheapside, reduced my enjoyment in later years to the "distant sounds of etc" - and the greater distance the better. Other recollections are the morning post teams and the leg pulling that went on, mostly at the expense of a certain Miss Smythe whom post people, led by David Jones, would insist upon calling Miss Smith.

One cannot overlook the tremendous rows which used to take place between one of the senior directors and his secretary which, of course, used to arouse a good deal of humorous comment amongst the rest of the staff.

I believe that it was not until we moved to 52/54 Gracechurch Street, that the accounts department was equipped with a manually operated adding machine. This was primarily used for listing purposes, it being considered much too slow to compete with the individual clerks' skills when it came to straight adding up. It was customary in the 'Debits' section of the accounts department for the individual clerks to total and balance the general premiums and day books immediately the first entry on each page was made. If one were tempted to leave the totalling until several pages had been completed, the somewhat lengthy and tedious task and the increasing risk of errors as one became more and more bored with the work was sufficient to convince all concerned that a page at a time was the best way.

Although after the move to Gracechurch Street we also acquired a barrel calculator which was used quite extensively for slip reducing work, entries into the general premiums day books continued as before, i.e. all calculations of commissions, both from underwriters and due to agents were always done in one's head. Relatively simple, of course, were the entries in respect of motor insurance, especially those appertaining to the various schemes. Here it was usually a question of deducting 10% from the premium to allow for the net amount payable to Underwriters and then to make provision for an over-riding commission of 3% to the Association. No commission was allowed on Breakdown Service; this item had to be shown separately. Using double spacing it was possible to make 25 individual entries on each page of the premium journals and during the busy period it was not uncommon to complete a page of entries and add up and balance six columns, transferring the totals to the head of the next page, all in a matter of 12 minutes. If you were lucky a high proportion of the risk entered all carried

the same premium and in this event the ink really used to fly. It was customary, particularly during the busy period, which seemed to extend about six months out of every year, to work overtime until 7 pm. The three of us engaged on the work of debiting the various premiums used to leave the motor premiums until about 4 pm and then have a race to see who could complete, the most number of entries, including casting each page, by 7 pm, by which time one became entitled to receive the princely sum of 1/6d as tea money. We would each put 1/2d in the kitty and at the end of the evening the winner would take the prize, and despite the ludicrous amount involved, the competition was really keen. Tea money at the rate of 1/6d in those days was a really worthwhile sum and I remember on one occasion trying to convince Fred Thompson that I was well aware I would have to forego my tea money if I left at 6.45 pm on a certain day, not long before I was due to be married, in order to keep a rather important appointment. He just could not believe that anyone would be so foolish as to work for an hour and a quarter for nothing when to stay for a further quarter of an hour would qualify one for 1/6d.

It was not long before the outbreak of war that the firm decided to employ a comptometer operator. The amount of calculations had increased enormously, as had, of course, the corresponding amount of casting which had to be done in the premiums journals. Instead of welcoming the assistance, however, we all very much resented it, regarding it as a slur on our capabilities. Every effort was made to keep as much work away from the operator as possible and we would do anything, even to the extent of giving up part of our lunch hour or even working on later in the evening, in order to avoid giving the operator any work to do. Looking back now it seems incredible that we should have taken this attitude but we were products of our times when intense pride was taken in one's work, a pride which was heightened by being able to do anything better than any machine could do. Certainly when the comptometer operator first arrived we could beat her and her machine on almost every aspect of the job. What Miss Hamilton's memories of those days were I often wonder, but the outbreak of war and the early call up of several members of the accounts department made her and her machine a very valuable acquisition.

I think perhaps I have said enough about the work side and should now turn to the formation of the Norman Frizzell Sports and Social Club, which from inception in the early days of 1937 until the late 1940's was very successful indeed. I am not sure who was the prime mover in calling the meeting at which the formation of the club was approved but I do remember that the attendance at this inaugural meeting was both large and enthusiastic. Aims were outlined, officers appointed and a committee formed. It was decided to start first of all with table tennis and, although all those who wanted to play were quite prepared to pay a small subscription, it was quite impossible to purchase the necessary equipment without assistance from another source. The first objective was to purchase a table of good quality - even in those days a very expensive item. There was nothing for it but to go to TNF, accompanied by the Financial Director, Mr. A.J. Harding, and try to present a case for an unprecedented expenditure of this nature. Although I had been appointed Secretary and Treasurer I was, nevertheless, still a relatively junior clerk, and to be ushered into the presence of TNF and to talk to him direct was almost unheard of in those days; although he showed great interest and kindness, it was still a daunting experience. However, we got the table, one of the very best, and to our great surprise and delight, TNF presented two silver trophies, to be awarded to the winners of the ladies' and gentlemen's events. It is, perhaps, of interest to record that in 1963 these trophies, which had not been awarded for the events since prior to the war, were suitably inscribed and presented to two schools in the Billericay area.

To start with we were allowed to use part of the office to play table tennis on two evenings a week. The only space available was in the Commercial Motor department and before we commenced play a number of desks had to be moved out of the way to allow the table to be erected. At the end of the evening the process had to be reversed. We were not permitted to commence our activities until 6.30 pm and we had to be away by 9.30 pm with everything cleared away so that the office would be ready for use first thing the next morning. The Club

atmosphere was engendered by the girls buying cakes and making tea, paid for out of Club funds, whilst it was the chaps' task at the end of the evening to see that everything was properly stowed away. The proceedings were occasionally enlivened by the unexpected arrival of a certain individual's wife who was quite obviously bent on checking up that her husband's activities were solely limited to playing table tennis.

It has been said earlier that working late until 7 pm and after was normal for a large part of the year and as a result it was not long before it became inconvenient to erect the table in the C/M department especially as we were not permitted to start play until every person in the department had ceased work. As we thought then, there always appeared to be one awkward so-and-so who would work on until after 8 pm, causing frustration and irritation all round. We were, however, extremely fortunate to be able to find really splendid accommodation at Talbot House, the TOC H headquarters, and from then until the outbreak of war we enjoyed perhaps the finest playing conditions in the City of London. There was already in existence an Insurance Offices' Table Tennis League, but as brokers we were not permitted, under the Rules, to compete. However, playing relationships with several of the Insurance Companies were very good and, thanks largely to the efforts of the Scottish Union & National, the rules were changed to permit our entry. We were looking forward to a successful first season during the winter of 1939-40 when war was declared. The Club Championship Finals played in April 1939 in respect of the season 1938-39 were played at Talbot House and were attended by over 100 people who were charged 1/- per head admission. In addition to our own Finals, two Internationals were engaged to play an exhibition match. All Frizzells' top brass were present and it was altogether a memorable evening.

Activities were later extended to football and cricket and a ground was rented at Edgware. Neither the cricket nor the football teams enjoyed anything like the support or the success of the table tennis section, largely because of the necessity to travel out to Edgware, for most people a journey in the opposite direction to which they would normally go to get home. We were permitted under an arrangement with London Transport to issue special cheap rate railway tickets valid on the Underground to Edgware at a cost of sixpence halfpenny per member for the return journey. The issue of these tickets was strictly controlled and permitted only to bona fide members of the Club. Evidence of membership had to be produced on demand and no one was allowed to travel on any train leaving London before 1.30 pm. The tickets had the name of the Club printed on them and were of a distinctive colour.

As with table tennis equipment, the majority of equipment for both cricket and football was provided by the firm, but despite this, tremendous efforts were made to raise funds in order to keep down the cost of subscription and, therefore the overall cost of taking part in the Club's activities. Many things were tried but probably the most successful was the sale of chocolate and confectionery. At that time there were several shops in the City of London where, if you bought bars of chocolate etc by the gross, you were able to obtain a discount of something like 40%. By selling this confectionery at recognized retail prices an obvious source of revenue was guaranteed provided we could ensure adequate sales. That Management should have permitted the sale of confectionery during working hours was quite a remarkable thing in those days and the availability of this 'shop' on the premises was so much appreciated that the daily sales reached an astounding level until in the end its very success caused it to have to be abandoned. Although Committee members took it in turns to sell the confectionery, so much time had to be devoted to this that their work suffered. It is perhaps significant and typical of those days that when a member of staff offered to carry on the 'shop' for his own profit and to make up any time lost by working over in the evening, this was very much resented by the customers and before very long sales dwindled almost to nothing.

All the work of the Club officials had to be done in their own time, there being little or no opportunity, except for a short period towards the end of the year, when they could expect to get anything done in office hours. Late work and, of course, working every Saturday until 1 pm did not leave much time for leisure, particularly as in most cases in those days young people usually attended evening classes on at least one evening a week. Wandering perhaps somewhat from the

point as far as the Sports and Social Club was concerned I would just mention that dress in those pre-war days was strict and although we were allowed to pop out in the afternoon for the traditional cuppa there was no such thing as a morning coffee break. On Saturdays however these regulations were relaxed and one was able to turn up in Oxford bags and sports jackets, or, if one had the courage, in plus fours. A visit to Joe Lyons for coffee was also permitted during the morning. Incidentally, senior staff and managers tended to take their tea and coffee in the Mecca café, which was considered a cut above the Lyons establishment just across the road.

To conclude I would mention one or two incidents which were considered highly amusing at the time, but which now in a different age may seem to have no point. Working conditions and the way we had to provide our own amusements have changed so much as to make it impossible to recapture the atmosphere of those pre-war days. An annual highlight of those days was the football match played by Frizzell's against Service Motor Policies. Because the match was played mid-week both sides were able to call on players who on Saturdays played in some of the top amateur leagues; in consequence, the games were always keenly contested. Coaches were laid on to convey both the teams and a not inconsiderable number of supporters to the ground. After the match came the social activity, and a very convivial evening was enjoyed by all. On one occasion three of us adjourned immediately after the match to a nearby bar, accompanied by three of the young ladies from the typing pool. It was expected that others would join us there but as time passed and nobody came we investigated and found the coaches and everyone else had departed. It is difficult to describe our feelings, especially as we had no idea where we were. In the office the sexes were segregated and it was only on social occasions that we were able to meet. To miss the coach on an officially organized trip could have serious repercussions in the office. The young ladies' reputations would certainly suffer. Obtaining directions, we set off to walk the mile or so to the nearest railway station and were all feeling pretty glum, especially as we were doubtful if we had enough money to pay the fare. To our surprise and delight, when we arrived at the station we found the coaches parked outside the adjoining pub and everyone inside having a high old time. No one had thought to tell us the coaches were going on there after the match and it was only when they arrived at the pub that our absence was noticed. They thought we would turn up eventually and we were so thankful to link up with them again that we raised no objections to the coaches pulling away without giving us the opportunity to get another drink. We made up for it on our arrival in London, however, and by the time we went our various ways we were all happy but broke.

It was, I think, in 1938 at the time of Munich ("Peace in our time") that we arrived at Edgware to play cricket only to find anti-aircraft gun emplacements had been set up on the pitch. At that time too, we spent much time filling sandbags and placing these against the windows of the offices overlooking Leadenhall Street; in the event they were not needed then but sales of 'home grown' mustard and cress were considerable.