

Electricar Manoeuvres

I GRADUATED FROM MAGDALENE COLLEGE, Cambridge in June 1974. I had been living beyond my means and I was gently reminded by the college bursar just as I was sitting my finals that I would not be able to take my degree if my college bill remained unpaid by graduation day. It would appear that I owed the college £156.35 and one half new penny. It has been a matter of ribald comment amongst my friends ever since that this was because of the size of my bar and buttery bill but I see from the final statement of account that my buttery bill was 80p and my bar bill £6.52. Not particularly excessive it seems, even when you consider that a pint of bitter in 1974 was about 15p—that's just over 40 pints or 5 pints a week for an eight week term. Of course that does not include pints consumed in pubs, which is undoubtedly where the damage had been done to my bank account which at that point was under water as the expression has it but which might better be described as being under beer. If one does the opposite calculation and converts the debt into present day values via the cost of a 2017 pint of beer (£4), then the amount I needed to find in a matter of weeks was a little over £4,000, a daunting prospect.

Of course I could have asked my father for the money but that's not the way I liked to do things, so I decided to pull the money together myself. A little research revealed that the best money you could get for a casual job was doing a milk round. The pay was about £25 a week paid weekly in cash in a little brown envelope. That was a lot of money. A year or so later when I was working as a stage-hand at the Arts Theatre I earned about £15 a week. You were expected to work for six weeks without a day off and then had a full week off. So you worked for 42 days in every 49. No previous skill or experience was

needed apart from an ability to get up early, a valid driving licence and the aerobic capacity of a cross-country runner. I just hoped that I was as good a runner as I had always claimed to be.

The job was with the Co-operative Dairy just off Sleaford Street. The site is now the Beehive Retail Park, the beehive being a well-known symbol of the Co-op. A day or two before my last exam I was invited for an interview which in fact turned out to be a driving test. The examiner nodded at a fairly big van—not an electric float and handed me the keys. He said we were going to go out for a short drive so that he could assess my driving. I can't remember the model of the van but it was certainly one I had never driven before. I was not totally inexperienced in driving commercial vehicles. I had driven dumper trucks and agricultural tractors on holiday jobs but had never had the pleasure of this particular model.

There was a notable absence of dials and switchgear in the cab and the gearstick was extremely loose. The examiner asked me if I was OK with a crash gear box. I had no idea what he meant and just nodded. I explored the pedals, revved the engine a bit and managed to free the calliper type handbrake and bang the gearstick into gear. We jerked off out of the gates of the dairy and into the side streets around Sleaford Street. This was nothing like a proper driving test. I wasn't asked any Highway Code questions, no emergency stops or three point turns. But he did ask me to park a few times and to reverse on one occasion. Eventually he indicated that we should return to the dairy and park up. We got out of the cab and he told me that my driving was awful, but seeing that I had been able to start off in second gear every time without stalling and had negotiated the gearbox without double-declutching, he was prepared to pass me. I hadn't even realised that I was starting off in second gear or that I needed to double-declutch. Just as well really. I went back into the office to see the manager and he told me to be at the depot the following Monday at 5.30am for my induction week.

Bear in mind this was the period immediately after finals, indeed some unlucky souls like engineers and medics were probably still doing exams. Those who had completed their finals

were punting, getting stoned and waiting for May Balls and graduation. I should have felt resentful but I don't remember that I did. Probably I had had my fill of punting and getting stoned when I should have been attending lectures or writing essays. For the academic year 1973-74 my friends and I had been sharing a house in Victoria Road on the far side of Cambridge from Sleaford Street. But for successive summers a subset of us had rented a tiny terrace house in Ainsworth from two postgraduates studying Chinese. So before the due date I transferred my few possessions to Ainsworth Street and attempted to get to bed by 10pm on the Sunday evening not an easy feat in a house full of spaced-out graduands.

One interesting feature of the English summer is that a lot of it happens before most people get up. A month before mid-summer sunrise is already 5am. The air is fresh, the light because it is slanting has a wonderful golden hue and there are few people or cars about. Nevertheless on that first morning I trudged uncertainly along to the dairy. My first impression as I entered the gates was of the unpleasant smell of stale milk, an odour I was to become familiar with over the next few months.

The term dairy is a complete misnomer. There was certainly no milking going on. Really this was a milk-transfer facility to coin a phrase in the mode of contemporary management discourse. Large milk tankers discharged their loads into reservoirs which fed the bottling machinery. The filled bottles were capped with aluminium foil and loaded into plastic crates which were then barrowed to the edge of a loading bay alongside which the milkmen parked their floats so that they could load up with the appropriate number of crates for their round. This was still the era of the skittle-shaped bottle before the introduction of the shorter, dumpier bottle. A glass bottle full of milk is quite heavy and a fully loaded crate is not a negligible weight.

I went to the foreman's office and was introduced to the man who was going to show me the ropes. I can't remember his name, so let's call him Ron, but I do recall that he smoked cigarillos, more likely Hamlet rather than Café Crème. I am no smoker so I found the smell of cigar tobacco smoke at this time

of morning rather overpowering though on that particular occasion, it helpfully masked the smell of stale milk.

Ron was a taciturn man. I imagine that being a milk roundsman suits those who have little need for chit-chat. He also approached the job with extreme vigour. Naively I had supposed that the job might give scope to my contemplative tendencies. Not the way that Ron ran things unfortunately. He was constantly checking his watch, working out the best place to park in order to service the maximum number of houses per stop. And when he loaded his bottle carrier he then jogged between houses. It was as if he was participating in an obscure sport or a fiendishly extended version of *Jeux Sans Frontières*. What was particularly puzzling was that it had been made clear to me by the foreman that it wasn't of the utmost importance to deliver milk by a particular time as long as it was all done by 10:00 am. The way that Ron did it, we were finished by 8:30. It was only after a couple of days that I discovered that Ron needed to get finished by 8.30am because he had to clock on for another job. I was aghast with admiration and incomprehension. I never discovered whether he was obliged to do two jobs because he had many mouths to feed or because he had got himself into severe financial difficulties or whether he just liked working and being active. The plan was for me to take over Ron's round for six weeks. I don't think he was taking a holiday or sabbatical for that long, so I imagine he must have been covering some other round. Perhaps a more gruelling one?

The round I was learning in that first week was bounded by Mill Road between Devonshire Road and Mawson Road as far down as Harvey Road then Hills Road on both sides up to the railway bridge and then part of Brooklands Avenue including Clarendon Road and the Botanic Gardens. The Hills Road stretch included the blocks of flats between Coronation Street and Union Road and also Highsett on the other side of Hills Road which was a modern development of executive flats and townhouses set amid lawns and shrubbery. And the final leg was Station Road all the way up to the Station Hotel opposite the station.

I hated delivering to the block of flats off Union Road because

it involved carting several crates into the flats and then running up and down flights of stairs. There was a lift but waiting for the lift prolonged by a considerable amount the time needed to finish the block. On the other hand I loved delivering to Highsett because at that time of morning the scent of honey-suckle was completely overpowering. I also enjoyed delivering to the Botanic Gardens because this was a brief detour into a less urban world. Clearly I hadn't yet abandoned my hippie *Weltanschauung*!

As that first week wore on I began to memorise the route and started to feel that I would be able to cope with the job. Then on Friday Ron announced that for the next two days we were going to collect payment as well, a little on the Friday and the majority on the Saturday. This added considerably to the routine. Instead of just dashing up to a front door and depositing one or several milk bottles and scooping up the empties, you had to knock on the door and wait for a minute or two to see if anyone would reply. A small percentage of customers were organised enough to know exactly what they had consumed and would leave the money in an envelope on the doorstep.

As in all businesses, collecting money was by far the hardest part of the operation. To begin with all the milk was delivered on credit so it was down to the roundsman to decide how far to extend the credit with the implied jeopardy that he was responsible for any bad debts. A student household at that time of the year might suddenly disappear leaving a largish unpaid bill. The other problem was record keeping. Some people had a regular order and so the bill each week was the same. Others had one of those milk bottle holders which had a dial on it which could be set to vary the number of bottles a day. Today two, the next day three. Fair enough. The thing was you had to remember to write it in your logbook when you got back to the float. And then of course even with the regular orders, occasionally there would be a note when you got to the doorstep saying no milk today. Once again it was easy to forget to cancel the order in the logbook. And even if the records were accurate, the customer would often forget that they had varied their order. I was soon to learn that collection day could involve numerous

disagreements as to the amount owed, some of which might turn quite nasty.

Ron was more than equal to all these challenges. Apart from the endurance of a marathon runner and the ability to calculate the shortest route with some kind of instinctual GPS he also had a near perfect memory, at least for the vagaries of his customers's orders. He also managed to exude a vague kind of menace so that he seemed to get immediate compliance from difficult customers. I never learned how to develop a similar mien and I'm pretty sure I was seen as a soft touch. On the positive side I don't remember getting any grief from my governor on that score. I suppose he knew that Ron would sort things out when my assignment was over.

I never really got to know much about Ron in the week we spent together, although a couple of conversations remain with me. There seemed to be a mythology that milkmen were quite often fortunate enough to encounter housewives still in their nightclothes. Furthermore it was also well known that many of the roundsmen had houses where they might get a cup of tea or coffee with the lady of the house. And it would appear that some of them, got even more than that including, improbably as it seemed to me, Ron. I lived in a kind of queasy anticipation that I might soon be feebly fending off some Highsett Sophia Loren in a whirl of *négligée*. Alas I never got so much as a glimpse of winceyette pyjamas.

On another occasion a tipsy May Ball reveller festooned in crumpled splendour passed us on his way home from a night of excess. His long lank locks were topped off with a paisley bandana. 'Look at that nancy boy', opined Ron, 'What does he think he looks like?' and spat a shred of tobacco into the gutter. Severely brilliantined himself, Ron was clearly no fan of the contemporary feminised sartorial style for men. But as we drew level with the weary roisterer I realised with faint horror that he was an acquaintance of mine. I shrank down in the cab and made sure that when we stopped for the next delivery that I chose the other side of the road. Fortunately my friend was too woozy to pay much attention to a couple of guys on a milk float and perhaps would not even have recognised me lightly

disguised as a milkman. As I crept back to the cab I wondered how Ron and I would have got on if he had encountered me a few weeks earlier before I had had my own lustrous barnet cropped.

I like to think that Ron wished me well when he finished the round on the Saturday and he handed me over the keys to his kingdom, although I think it is more likely that he said nothing at all. Absurdly I felt confident and also relieved to be out of the constant fug of Hamlet smoke. My confidence was, of course, short-lived. On my own everything seemed to take more than twice as long. To begin with I got into a terrible muddle loading the float. The different kinds of milk were indicated by aluminium foil bottle-tops—silver for whole milk, red for homogenised, red and silver for semi-skimmed (rare in those days) and green for unpasteurised. And a few people required sterilised milk which came in a different shaped bottle with a crown cap like a beer bottle. So it was important to get the right quantities on your float. Unfortunately I had forgotten to make this calculation before arriving at the depot, so I was trying to add up quantities from my log book whilst parked up at the loading-bay much to the annoyance of my colleagues.

Having made a late start I then realised that I hadn't committed to memory all Ron's stopping places. It soon became clear that one minute extra here, two minutes there added considerably to the time the round was going to take. The realisation induced a rising sense of panic. The accumulating time deficit meant that by the time I got to the Hills Road section of the round, the morning rush-hour was in full swing. I got stuck in the traffic, could find nowhere to park and lost even more time. I was reassured by the foreman's assertion on my first day that time was not of the essence and eventually I rolled back into the depot around midday. I think I was the last man in by a long way. After I had parked my float at the charging station the foreman came over to me and said that he had had several phone calls complaining of late delivery. When he had told me that I could be relaxed about the time I took to do the round, he hadn't expected me to be quite so late. The residents

of Highsett were outraged. They had had to leave for work without milk for their cornflakes. Even worse the milk would curdle if left on the doorstep in the summer sun all day long. I had better improve my performance on the morrow.

I was absolutely shattered. I went back to the little house in Ainsworth Street and went straight to bed. I did not get up for many hours. On that first day on my own I had determined at several points to jack the job in. But after a good sleep, I decided to give it one more day. Somehow I got through the rest of the week. I was dog-tired most of the time and when I wasn't working, I kept to my bed. The life of an undergraduate had not prepared me for a job involving a considerable amount of physical activity. In fact it took a couple of weeks for my body to adjust to the new regime. As it did so I improved on the time it took me to complete the round. Soon I was getting finished by 9.30 to 10. And as a bonus my consumption of beer plummeted thus further improving my financial standing. Despite these improvements I never came anywhere near Ron's finishing time of 8.30 and my admiration for him went up considerably.

I can't actually remember when graduation day was, but I had accumulated enough money by then to settle my college account and attire myself correctly for the great day. My parents were able to enjoy the public recognition of my modest degree without concerning themselves with my lack of good husbandry. And I was able to proceed to the stage of financial independence without any career plans whatsoever. Bliss.

The six weeks sped by and I actually came to enjoy the routine of getting up early and getting my round done. Money collecting days were tedious but no more than that. And I was driving my float like a pro now. The vehicles we had were Morrisons. The top speed of an electric milk float is nothing to write home about although its acceleration from 0-15 mph or so is considerable. There was no gear stick, just a switch for forward and reverse, an accelerator pedal, a brake pedal and a hand brake. The cab had a windscreen and a roof but was open at the sides. One of the things I had admired about Ron was the way he drove standing up with the log book in front of him and a pencil behind his ear. And I concluded one of the reasons why

he got around so quickly was the way he would jump in the cab and stamp down on the accelerator whilst checking on his next delivery. My attempts to emulate this advanced technique brought me to grief on two occasions.

On the first of these I was parked at the top of Station Road pointing towards the station. I had just delivered to the Station Hotel on the other side of the road. I crossed back to the float jumped in and without sitting down aimed the float at the mini roundabout in front of the station. As I went into the roundabout I realised that I was going a little fast to be going into a 180 degree turn. To make matters worse because I was standing up I was thrown off balance and my weight came down more forcibly on the accelerator. A milk float with its attendant batteries is too heavy to turn over but I had not been particularly meticulous in stacking and restacking the crates on the flatbed of the float and as I careened around the roundabout one of the crates toppled off the back of the float and crashed onto the road.

There was broken glass everywhere though fortunately not too much milk, the uppermost crates being for the empties. I brought the float to a halt and went back and surveyed the damage. I scooped up as much glass as I could without lacerating my hands and kicked the rest into the gutter and then I made off back down Station Road a little more sedately, vaguely aware of the stares of commuters heading for the London train. I lived in dread for the next couple of days that complaints would flood into the depot from taxi drivers and motorists about broken glass in Station Road causing punctures. Fortunately there were none as far as I was aware.

An even more embarrassing accident lay in wait for me a few weeks later. The last task of the working day before driving the float to the charging station was to offload the empties. Once again I was a little late in getting back and a large tanker was already parked at the loading bay. I pulled in front of it and then had to back up to it to get my crates off. Space was tight but I was only going to be a few minutes. So I got very close indeed to the tanker and then set about getting the crates off. Split splat. Done in no time at all. I jumped into the cab once again and in full emulation of Ron's technique stamped on the

accelerator and reversed rapidly into the tanker. Once again broken glass everywhere, this time the brake and the rear side lights of the float. I had had to switch to reverse to back up to the tanker but had forgotten to switch to forward before leaving the cab.

I was conscious of incredulous guffaws from around the depot. As I discovered then it is not a good idea to screw up in front of workplace colleagues. The event was almost immediately mythologised. Workmates I had never spoken to before came up to me over the next few days to congratulate me on a fine bit of driving. What they were implying of course was that they knew I was just another student tosser. In fact I never really lived the incident down. Crashes were not unknown. You could even display a bit of swagger about a public highway prang, whereas a smash in the depot was beneath contempt. I was also afraid that I would be sacked or that the cost of the repairs would be docked from my wages. The foreman had a fairly low opinion of my capabilities but on this occasion he just laughed wearily and told me to take the float over to the workshop. The tanker was unscathed.

I retain no memory of my week off, but in all probability I just slept until some unfeasibly late hour like 9.00am and luxuriated in the ability to stay in a pub until closing time. Soon enough the week was over and when I returned to the depot I was told that my route had been changed. For the next six weeks I was to supply the Cherry Hinton customers. Because I was now an experienced roundsman, no one showed me the round. I was given the log book and told to get on with it. I took a look at it to work out what I was going to need to load and was pleasantly surprised to see that there were many fewer customers than on my previous round. Thoughts of equalling Ron's 8.30 finish time began to fill my head.

I should have known better. What I hadn't taken into account was how far away Cherry Hinton was in a milk float. I had been to Cherry Hinton once in my student career but in general it was one of those mythical areas of Cambridge and environs to which undergraduates seldom penetrated. I knew roughly where Cherry Hinton was but the individual street names

meant nothing to me. In the event they turned out to be the residential roads on either side of the High Street.

My first problem was what route to take. By now I knew every inch of Mill Road and Hills Road. But for all I knew beyond the end of Mill Road there be dragons. So I drove to the end of Mill Road and turned right onto Perne Road and carried on until I got to the Cherry Hinton Road where I turned left and trundled along until I got to Cherry Hinton High Street. That first journey seemed to last forever and I wasn't really sure whether I was going in the right direction or not. I didn't reach the first delivery address for more than half an hour. I realised subsequently that the route I took meant that the distance was probably 4 or 5 miles. With the anxiety induced by the first day on a new round the float seemed to go considerably slower than its notional 15 mph. I was beginning to seriously doubt whether I would actually get the round finished and be back at the depot before the evening.

My worry dissipated when I reached the High Street and I realised that most of my stops were close to each other on modern housing estates and that traffic was light. So the delivery didn't take as long as I feared. Nevertheless I was far from breaking Ron's record. For the return trip to civilisation I decided to try going back down Coldham's Lane. This was a strangely desolate road and for a while I thought I'd got lost but eventually I worked my way back to York St and Sleaford St.

In due course I came to enjoy those runs out and back. On this round I could actually let my thoughts drift and I no longer had to steel myself for the guerrilla warfare of city centre delivery. And though the Coldham's Lane route was undoubtedly shorter, for some reason I stuck to the route I had inadvertently devised on the first day—out on the Cherry Hinton Road and back via Coldham's Lane. This meant that each morning I drove by Cherry Hinton Hall. Since 1963 this had been the site of the Cambridge Folk Festival. The Hall was not actually part of my round but I was aware from the many posters that the festival would be taking place during my Cherry Hinton tour of duty. The line-up was right up my street—Arlo Guthrie, Loudon Wainwright III and Alan Stivell. I was starting to work out ways

that I could do my round and still attend the festival. In the end common sense or apathy won out and I had to resign myself once again to observing gilded youth frolicking in a sylvan setting while I got my finances in order. At least I got to sleep in a comfortable bed.

The real problem with the milk round was the havoc that it played with my social life. I found that if I didn't get up at 4.30am the working day would lurch out of control, which meant I needed to be in bed by 9.30pm or so. This was not easy in a demob-happy household. My housemates always seemed to be sloping off to the pub just as I was having to go to bed. The last straw was the present I gave my father on his birthday. I had bought tickets for *Die Fledermaus*. We had a meal in Covent Garden and then had a lovely evening listening to Johann Strauss's sparkling music in the burnished comfort of the Coliseum, a far superior auditorium to the Royal Opera to my mind. After the show my parents headed back home in their car while I got the last train back to Cambridge from Liverpool Street. I eventually got back to Ainsworth Street in the small hours.

I was now in something of a quandry. I realised that if I went to bed at this late hour I might find it difficult to wake at 4:30. So I decided to sit up and get to the dairy as early as I possibly could. The hours between 2am and 4am were terrible because of course I had been up early the previous day for my round. I could hardly keep my eyes open. Towards 4am I doused my head under the cold tap and had a couple of cups of strong coffee and headed into the dairy. Even though I lived close by I had not been one of the earliest starters so there were a few quizzical looks in the dawn light. As I lugged the crates onto my float I realised that I had made a terrible mistake. My body was leaden, my brain, never too good in the morning, was stuck in neutral. I wasn't even sure that I had the energy to get through the next five or six hours. Somehow I managed to complete the round without crashing the float, went straight to bed when I got back to the house and slept right through to the next day.