



# Rochester Avionic Archives Newsletter

## From the Curator.

It is always a pleasure to hear some of the stories of our business from years ago and in this Newsletter. I have put a various notes about three men who were Apprentices around 60 years ago. I am amazed at the detailed recall they have of their time at Elliotts.

In November last year a group from the RAA team visited the BAE Systems Central Archive at Farnborough and also went to the Farnborough Air Science Trust Museum. It was cold and wet, but we had a good outing. Meanwhile we have reorganised our Museum with a plan is to provide more open space for the groups of visitors we get. The old Timeclock has had a new face and that and our two long-case Magneta clocks are all up and running on a freshly painted wall thanks to our team of decorators. Finally, I should like to welcome another Chris to our team of volunteers.

Chris Bartlett

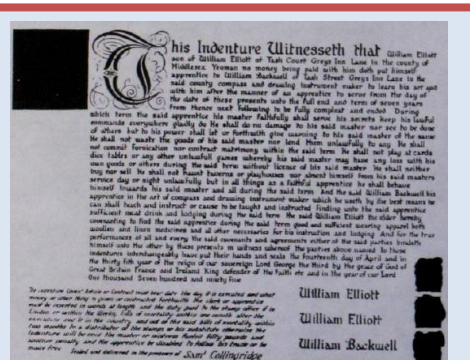
Curator

## The Apprentices

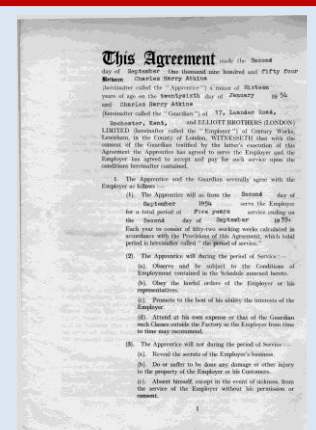
Apprentices have always been important in the Company from the time of William Elliott who was himself an apprentice in 1795. When he started his own business, William Elliott took on a number of apprentices, including, in 1837, his son Charles. Recently the Editor has been in contact with two of our apprentices from the early days of the Rochester site.

Roy Townsend and Bob Shepard were the first apprentices in October 1948. They completed their apprenticeship in 1953 and at a formal dinner they were presented with their indentures. The following week they travelled together to commence two years National Service. Roy has good memories of the time and of the many Clubs and Societies the Company had.

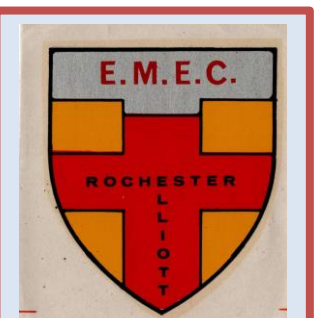
Chas Atkins was an apprentice in the 1954 intake with John Goodhand, Jim Crick among other names. Chas worked in several divisions as a tool and mechanical. Design draughtsman before joining Alf Harrison's outfit, Kent Drawing, then latterly ADD model shop with Dave Marvel. Chas even remembers his Clock Number 153. Chas was a founder member of the Elliott Model Flying Club in 1964 and he still has a model aircraft that he first flew almost 50 years ago in the front carpark of the Company



The Apprentice Indenture of William Elliott signed in 1799



Part of Chas Atkins Apprentice Indenture



The badge of the Elliott Model Engineering Club

Curator: Chris Bartlett, Deputy Curator: Ann Jackson, Secretary Geoff Harvey  
Tel: 01634 203321

e-mail: [info@rochesteravionicarchives.co.uk](mailto:info@rochesteravionicarchives.co.uk)

Website: [www.rochesteravionicarchives.co.uk](http://www.rochesteravionicarchives.co.uk)



The winning team of Rochester's Teccom Engineering Apprentices on 9th January 1981. They are pictured with Bill Alexander and from L-R are Christopher Wink, Martin Kirby, Mark Jenkins and Margaret Spells

Nicholas F. Hamilton-Piercy was an Apprentice with Chas Atkins. He grew up watching the WWII dogfights over his hometown of Crowborough, Sussex. To his mother's dismay, the seven-year-old boy played with the gear the army left behind after the war, hurling mortar shells from a long rope against the cliff face and then diving quickly behind the rocks, shielding himself from the falling stones and shrapnel. He also avidly tinkered with discarded military electronic equipment and old radios his mother would pick up for him at jumble, or yard, sales. By the time he was 12, Hamilton-Piercy was building single-valve radio receivers and crystal sets from kits and his own design. He is also reported as having blown up his school toilets! He worked at Marconi-Elliott UK for 6 years as an engineer in training. He was a Member of the Engineering Consulting Team at Spemby Limited for a year. He is a professional engineer, Fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (FIEEE), and a senior member of the Society of Cable Television Engineers (SCTE).

### The Spemby Works Chatham

Spemby Engineering were Research, Design and Development and Consulting Engineers, established in the 1940s. They had a site in the building they call The Ship (its shape

By 1961 Spemby had 250 staff working on a variety of projects including nuclear power. Spemby seems to have vacated the New Road building in the late 60s and Marconi Avionics established the Flight Automation Research Laboratory (FARL) there in 1968

We used to have a bus that took us from the airport to this building through the gates.



### The Streets where we live yet again! Curtis Way

Thanks to Dave Reeves and Robin Davies we now know that Curtis Way was named in honour of the now late Harry Curtis who was a well-respected teacher at Chatham Grammar School (Holcombe Tech). Harry was an accomplished sportsman and particularly gymnastics where he could perform "the cross" on the rings until late in life. The choice of location is quite relevant given that the School used the field adjacent to the factory and of course the School Old Boys Association has the wonderful sports facility and Clubhouse there.



The retirement of the Lewisham Apprentice Manager in 1957

### 'The Weymouth Boys'

In 1954 Elliott Bros acquired the Bristol Instrument Company at Weymouth to strengthen its process control activities. Bristol made automatic recording equipment for temperature and other measurements.

The apprentices from Bristol Instruments were brought up to the Training School at Rochester and were simply known as the 'Weymouth Boys'.

The Bristol Instrument Company was a subsidiary of the Bristol Company of Waterbury, Connecticut, USA and was established in London in 1932. In 2000 it became part of Marconi Radar and Control Overseas Ltd.

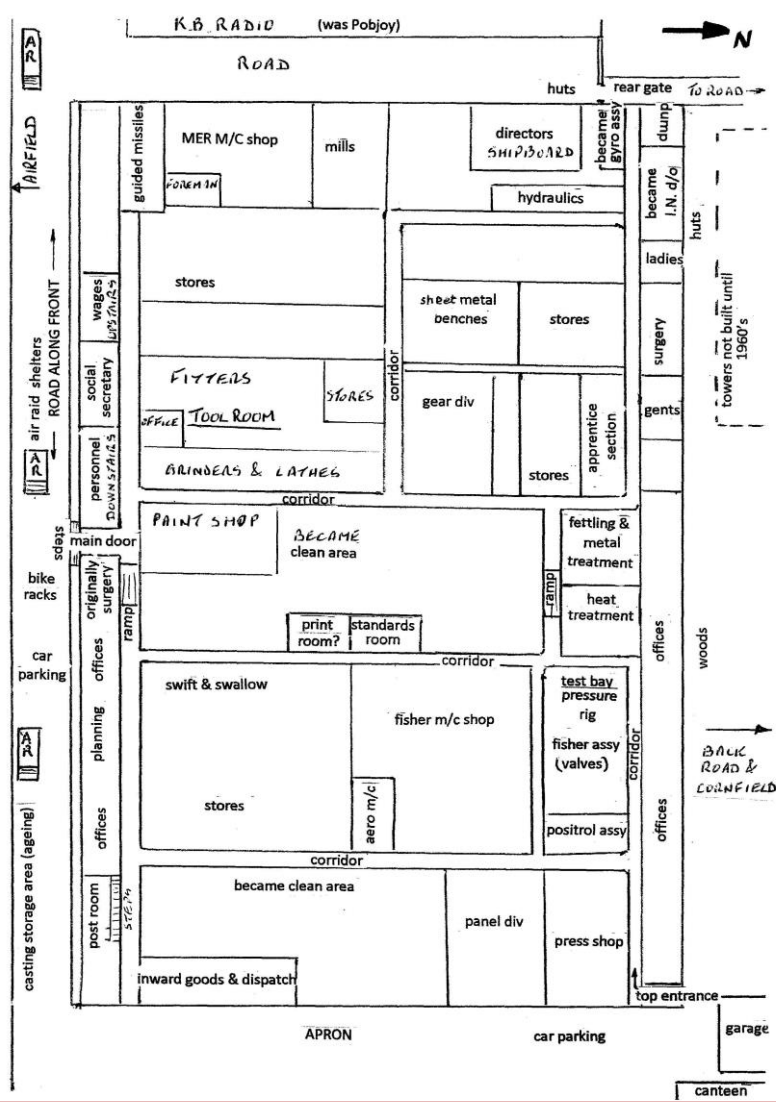


During 1990 FARL changed its name to the Technology and Systems Research Laboratory (TSRL). At the end of the year the Lab left its home at New Road in Chatham, following the expiry of the lease on the premises, and moved into the old Thorn A Building on the Airfield site to the West of the Towers. Incidentally this deprived those on the Airfield the use of a free car park with handy access to the shops in Chatham! The splendid New Road building has now been converted into luxury apartments.

### The Rochester Hangars

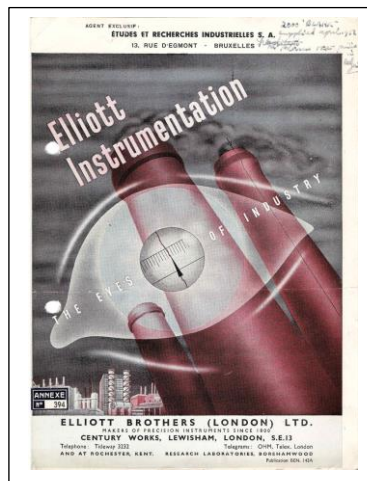
We have no further update on this investigation, but the Medway Archives & Local Studies Centre are looking into it for us

## The Rochester Main Hangar in 1954

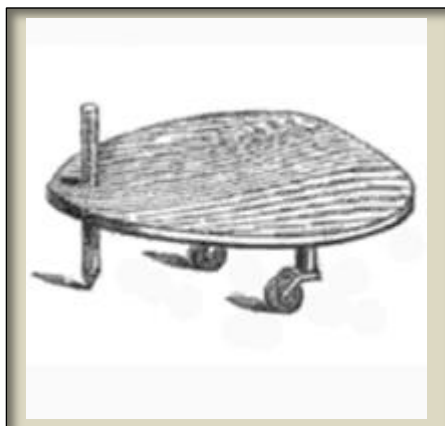


This plan was produced by Chas Atkins with a remarkable memory! The Hangars were built in the 60s to the Right of this plan and the Airfield is to the Left. Swift and Swallow are still there, and Fisher Control Valves take up a major area. Apparently Naval Gunnery Director work was being done at Rochester although it is not clear if this was the hangover from the wartime equipment largely done at Lewisham as that factory was now in decline or work on the new MRS5 Admiralty system.

The original area for the Apprentices was in the place marked 'Toolroom'. The Surgery was staffed by Sister McGarry and a very young Harry Staff who had trained as a Chiropodist. Even then the Social Secretary was Jim Collins. The old Pobjoy Engine works was occupied by Kolster Brandes who made radio sets.



## The Planchette



A planchette (from the French for "little plank"), is a small, usually heart-shaped flat piece of wood equipped with two wheeled castors and a pencil-holding aperture, used to facilitate automatic writing. The use of planchettes to produce mysterious written messages gave rise to the belief that the devices foster communication with spirits. The devices were popular in séances during the Victorian era.

The author of an article on the Planchette in a magazine called "Once a Week" returned from America with one in hand and handed over his specimen to the Elliott Brothers who reportedly produced the items for sale in response to the increasing popularity brought on by the publication. There is but a single newspaper account—that of an editor directing an inquiring reader to the firm for purchase of a device—to know that Elliott Brothers produced planchettes, and they undoubtedly made at least a limited number of the boards.



## The Wickham Rail Bus



The firm of David Wickham & Co Ltd produced a small number of railbus bodies but one was fitted to a much more substantial underframe, for use as a 'Track Recording Coach'. The vehicle could pinpoint and record the smallest of irregularities in track. By a system of electronic measurements, the coach verified and recorded on a moving chart the width between the rails, the regularity of track curvature, and by relating axle movement to a high-speed gyroscope, cant (where curved lines are banked to exactly the right angle for express speeds). The British Transport Commission placed a design study contract with Elliott Bros. (London) Ltd. In April 1957 they placed a development contract with Elliott Bros for the manufacture of the prototype coach for operational trial. The vehicle appeared about March 1959, in a livery of bright yellow, red and brown (later carrying the red and blue BR Research Department colour scheme). The vehicle is now in private ownership having been converted to a passenger railbus.

Measurements of curvature, gauge and cant were obtained as AC signals from synchro type pick-offs. These signals were linearly demodulated and the resulting DC signals applied to high sensitivity mirror galvanometers. The record was then produced by these galvanometers on a special photographic paper by the reflected beams from an ultraviolet light source.

In addition to the main measurements, the record included the speed of the vehicle, distance marking, facilities to indicate events such as stations, and space for making notes. The new record together with the 'play-back' of a previous record were both fed through the recorder by a drive taken from one of the axle boxes; a choice of scales was provided.



A Postcard sent by Chas Atkins to the 1954 Apprentices. The other Postcards are of the 'saucy' seaside variety!

## RAA visit to BAE Systems Farnborough

In November last year a group from the RAA went to Farnborough to visit the BAE Systems Archive and afterwards we went to the Farnborough Air Science Trust museum. Some of the RAA team are in front of the replica Cody Flyer at the FAST Museum at Farnborough. L-R Martin, Alan, Phil, (Mr Cody), Chris and Mick. John was taking the picture.



On 16 October 1908, American-born Samuel Franklin Cody became the first man in Great Britain to make a powered, controlled, sustained flight in a heavier-than-air machine when he took off and flew for 1,390 ft at a height of up to 50ft above Farnborough Common. This was accomplished in British Army Aeroplane No. 1A and the flight lasted just 27 seconds.



This is around 8 tonnes of Concorde drawing which the BAE Systems Archive has recently acquired and catalogued

BAE Systems Central Archive is located in The Black Shed G29 which is a Grade 2 Listed Aircraft Hangar built in 1912. It is one of the only two remaining early Aircraft Hangars dating back to the First World War. It is the first recorded purpose-built Aircraft Hangar in the country and located at the site of the home of British aviation in Farnborough Hampshire. The building is a large timber framed Royal Flying Corps Air Hangar built for the Air Battalion, Royal Engineers. Historically, the building is of national importance, in terms of its heritage. The Central Archive moved in during 2011 in order to provide a safe home for the artefacts acquired from the many deceased companies that came together to make BAE Systems. The RAA at Rochester has created a museum for the local product which is linked to this Central Archive.