

### Early days and education

There was no course available [...] The word design was hardly ever used, believe it or not, in those days. Today it's bandied around for every damn thing.

Once I became focused on design as an activity, I found out about the Council of Industrial Design. I went and visited them and they gave me help with what I should be looking at and reading.

I learnt about the Royal Society of Arts, who gave bursaries. They gave a travel bursary of £150. It was essentially for foreign travel. And I entered this. I didn't tell the Principal of Southend Art School because his attitude was: we've never gone in for it and we're not good enough; and I don't want to bring shame upon the school. So I entered without him knowing [...] I'm not sure whether I faked the headmaster's signature on the application form or what, but anyway, much to my surprise I got a wonderful letter from the Royal Society of Arts: David you have won this. Actually I was 19 at the time I got it.

I then had a tour, starting in Sweden, Denmark then across to Switzerland; to Italy and back into France. And during that time I visited the leading... The Royal Society of Arts gave me letters of introduction. It was an amazing moment. France and Italy, they were all in a hell of a state; Sweden and Denmark weren't, they still had their craft intact, they weren't bombed. And I was taken in. I was entertained at lunch and evening receptions... I was a kid.

### Festival of Britain

You were going into another world. Colour: lemon yellow, red, beautiful blues [...] white, black, grey. And the Skylon, this wonderful symbol up there. And of course night time was another thing altogether. The Dome as it was, the shot tower, the Wells Coates cinema [...] And the Ernest Race furniture. And everything... It was so exciting. The concourse, this great concourse; at night time, they had lights set into the pavements, people were dancing and they had the Joe Loss Orchestra [...] It was just: this is wonderful [...] The future was onwards and upwards, and of course it was, for many, many years.

### On Decoration

I grew up surrounded... I lived with my grandmother in North London at the time and it was all Victorian. And of course one of the aspects was the heavy encrustation the Victorians put on buildings and furniture, on décor and carpets and everything. The modern design –clean lines, smooth surfaces – this was an epiphany. It was spiritual.

## Plastics at Ekco

These guys were working on radios and televisions, the good stuff. Plastics was something – okay, you can learn plastics. So I got my first impression of plastics through being in the factory, smelling the stuff in the machines and seeing it around me. The factory was divided in two: one side was the compression moulding where they had these 100 ton presses, three of them, which moulded the toilet seats and the radio cabinets. These were brought over from Germany. They did a lot of electrical equipment as well and, of course, during the war they were making stuff for the military. And the other side of the road was the injection moulding. This was the new side. This was the horizontal presses, injecting material, flowing in. I was there in the middle of that.

I had to cut my teeth by going down into the factory, with what I had designed and having it torn apart by toolmakers, saying “How are you going to get it out of the mould?” I was basically a person who had creativity, and a mind to see things three dimensionally, to see things other people couldn’t see. I had no technical training other than how to use basic tools, but design is teamwork.

The toolmakers would say, for instance... If I wanted to change the design slightly by putting in a stiffening rib, “Well you know that’s going to cost five grand?” Everything you do is cost. And one of the things that was drummed into me [...] one of my mentors, Charlie Hall, would say: “That pen you’ve got – imagine it’s an n mil cutter, and every time you make a stroke with your drawing pen, that is a machining operation. [...] That’s very important to remember. You’re not just sketching up something.”

Obviously you’ve got to think about the end-user. Initially you think about yourself – I’m going to do a good design. As you mature, you’re thinking more about who’s going to use it, why are they going to use it, what’s it going to cost, and the aestheticizing of it. You want to make this look good, it’s got to be saleable. Although saleable and aesthetics don’t go together. So I did learn early on that designing in plastic is a difficult thing. And this is why we had so few industrial designers in plastics.

## British Industrial Plastics

I started (at Ekco) on £4, 1s a week – because I was young I was on the apprentice rate. And I happened to come across a copy of Design magazine, No 60, 1952, in which there was a feature on BIP. In there there was an article about the work of BIP’s Product Design Unit that had been set up by Glassey. The design was originally all done at Streetly because BIP was a vertical company, with tool-making and manufacturing. Anyway, they moved Woody Woodfull, the chief designer at Streetly, into this new Product Design Unit with one assistant. Next door there was mould design – and it was in the factory where they made everything, all the powders. So, I read this article and they showed a series of designs that Woody had done and I thought “This

is really right up my street". Then next month I saw an advert in Design magazine: 'Wanted, industrial designer...' So I applied, went up there.

I went to work for him (Woodfull) and immediately I was on £500 a year. I was only 21. Back at Ekco, we were sitting there having tea and a bun, and Johnny Grant, who was Jake's right-hand man, said "I reckon Dave is going to be earning £1000 a year by the time he's thirty." [...] You had to move to earn money. You hadn't got inflation in those days.

Birmingham, that was a culture shock [...] The building was set amongst – a great metal scrapheap opposite. It was heavy industrial. The smoke coming out of the stacks was yellow and grey. Anyway, design was what I wanted... Woody helped me a lot. He gave me a very free hand. He didn't really do any designing then. He had John Vale, another good designer who had just come out of the army, and myself. That was the whole of BIP's Design Unit.

From there I was told I had to enter the Horner's Award. Well the Ancient Company of Horners goes back to the days of horn and shell and God knows what. And Woody had won it. John Vale had won it. And Woody had won it again. So we had three winners. And I had to win it. So we all sat down and we went over all sorts of ideas and Woody said "I think you ought to design a greenhouse". BIP made the materials the greenhouse would have been made out of, of course, so I sat down and I produced a model. Anyway, it won this award. And eventually a full-size model was shown at Interplas and it created tremendous interest. But BIP were only there to promote the use of their polyester materials so it was never a commercial job.

Everybody was crazy about this wonderful new material that could do everything, but of course it was used in the wrong way: breakages, failure, catching on fire, all these things ... A lot of tacky stuff had been done. Post-war the wrong things were done. [...] There were so many things that should never have been made in plastic, but it was the easy option – colour, low cost, one press of the mould and out it pops.

BIP knew the future of their industry depended on good design; correct mould design as well, not just the item, but that the moulds were designed in such a way that they had proper cooling. So this was the service they set up to ensure that the industry got a good reputation. And of course eventually it did.

### The Ranton Cup and Saucer

John Vale and myself were two of the few designers who ever went abroad. Woody arranged that we went to the Milan Trade Fair, we went to the Cologne fair, we went to design fairs. We got proper expenses, flew out BEA or whatever it was. Here again that broadened the mind and kept us together because we were a team.

In the mid-40s America really took off [...] It was developing new materials: Lucite or what we call over here Perspex. There was Perspex furniture,

bathroom equipment. It was part of the modern world – aluminium, steel and all that stuff. And there was a company called Boonton, Boontonware it was called. They brought out a range of tableware in the Fifties. And at that time, plastic tableware, I'm told, was 50% of the American tableware market. And they went to Madison Avenue and they had the treatment as far as advertising was concerned. And I remember seeing in McCalls and the American magazines these wonderful pages of their stuff in pastel colours.

So, BIP had a relationship with American Cyanamid on material, transfer of ideas and what have you.

Into the picture comes Roy Midwinter. Now Roy Midwinter was a recognised, accomplished designer of ceramics. He approached Streetly. He knew what was happening in the States and he saw the future for plastic tableware, that it was going to be the same here. As it happened it wasn't. He came to Streetly. [...]

Woody and John took the Midwinter ceramic cup and saucer.

Now the saucer was in fact a quartic, this sort of form, which was very fashionable based on what had happened in TV. Believe it or not there were a lot of products that were like that. That was basically what they started from. And they created this design, which was single colour; it was in quite heavy colours. And it won the Design Centre Award the first year it came out, 1957.

BIP was excellence. They trained some of the best people in the industry.

Ranton had a range of plastic tableware already and I think Woody had designed some of that stuff. Very conventional. They wanted to get into the tableware market in a more modern way but at that time it was suggested that we could actually go two colours. And this was new. Boonton hadn't done that. [...] The first Midwinter designs were single colour.

It's one of my favourites, believe it or not.

At this time Woody and John were working on exhibition stand design, because one of the things about Woody was keeping the prestige of the department up. We didn't have a product range, we were a service; so in order to maintain our image he convinced the management that they shouldn't go to consultant designers for stand design, so the department did the stands for BIP Chemicals, BIP Tools, Streetly, what have you. These were for Interplas, the various big exhibitions that came up. John and Woody were fully involved.

I'm a form man – and I learnt about plastics; Woody impressed upon me that it's a material that has to flow. It has to flow in the mould. The tool will often set up in a product potential failure. If it has a corner which is too sharp, when the polymer hits that it sets up a memory, it sets up an internal flaw which you cannot see. And the other one of Woody's pet theories was that one shouldn't be hampered by the tools of the trade, like the lathe and the en miller.

In other words, everything doesn't have to be turned on a lathe, it doesn't have to be milled. There is room for freedom of expression. But fundamentally it has to flow. Now Woody's belief was that the ideal moulding form was an egg, or half an egg, you can't go wrong there.

I felt having looked at the history of ceramics, having done pottery and ceramics at school, I knew that you stick things on. I'd made beakers and stuff and the handle was a separate thing, stuck on. And I felt that was the flaw in what had gone before. I thought, why can't the cup and handle be one integral part? The whole flow of one thing to the other, like a chair back into a seat. And that's what gave me this idea of bringing this form out into the handle. And, of course, there's two types of handle grip we used to talk about in those days – there's that one, and there's that one [a sort of fine cup grip and a mug grip]. So I modelled this up and it was accepted.

We turned that up in wood and we made the rest out of a form of hard modelling clay, it was what they used in the automotive industry. And you can work it and it can go very hard.

That (the mould) was done by drawing. And it was Woody, my old buddy Woody, who did the drawing.

This was breaking new ground. It had never been done. Of course, first of all you mould the red; tool comes out, the white powder goes in, the press comes down – boom – high pressure.

That called for very sophisticated, detailed, hand work on the mould. Now a lot of manufacturers, if I'd put that up to any tom, dick or harry... if I'd been a consultant, they'd have said "Oh Christ no, we're not paying for that. Can you do an easier handle?" But because of BIP, the skills of the toolmakers and Woody, I think Woody's persuasion, because Woody knew a lot ...

It just went ahead and they (Ranton) loved it. And of course BIP made the tools for this. They gave the copyright to them, there was never any argument about that. [...] Today it might be different, but they were in the business of selling materials, keeping that structure and their company going. So Ranton made it themselves.

Woody and John went to the Milan trade fair. And I happened to have met Pat, who had come to work as a temporary secretary. And we really hit it off. And John Vale loaned me his TF MG car and his flat. And we had a really good weekend... (laughs) But what happened:

I should have been in at eight o'clock on Monday morning. I didn't get in till eleven. In the meantime, Woody and John had come back from Milan. Woody had come in the office and said, "WTF", presumably he said that, "Dave hasn't finished his bloody drawings". So that's how Woody came to finish my drawings.

The Ranton and misattribution

It's taken me years to sort out my authorship of this. Because Woody was really pissed off with me, the photographs were taken and they went into *Design* magazine; two of them appeared in *Design* magazine and they were accredited to the chief designer, Woody Woodfull [...] I threw a fit about this and I was prepared to resign. And John Vale said, "I tell you what Woody, Dave's really upset about this". "Yeh, but it's a mistake, a mistake." So I phoned up *Design* magazine and there on page 83, "Re caption, blah, blah, blah" ... you know how it goes.

Rolling the years forward, before (Sylvia Katz's) book came out ... Claire Catterall, she was a historian at the Design Museum when it first opened, they had all these on display accredited to me. But it caused me some embarrassment because people were saying to me, "Why is it that you've got the V&A, and the Sylvia Katz book saying this ...". And Sylvia Katz knows but it's too late, the bloody book is printed. And also not only did they put Woody's name to it, it came out under Ron Brookes's name, Ronald Brookes. [...]

On the underground, when the V&A put on an exhibition of plastics, there was a bloody great poster on the underground. I turned round and there was this cup, my cup there; and round the saucer it said "Designed by Ron Brookes". I thought, bloody hell... I spent so long [...] It took me years and years and years. Eventually I wrote to the Director [...] That got things moving, didn't it? In the meantime I wrote to Woody, who was still alive thank God, and he wrote back and said "Dave, you were the author of the cup. That was your design. Sylvia Katz messed it up in the book. All I did was to persuade the toolmakers it could be done." So that was it.

It is something I'm really proud of because I broke new ground with that. And not many designers get the chance. Okay, it's only a cup and saucer – but the first time I ever went to Athens, I went to one of the museums there and I saw the artefacts were about the way people lived – the cups and saucers, their chairs, their knives and forks, their hair-grips; how you looked at a culture, years and years into the future.