

## **ELECTRICITY IN THE BLOOD** **TWO GENERATIONS OF ENGINEERS IN THE ESI**

*by Peter Lamb*

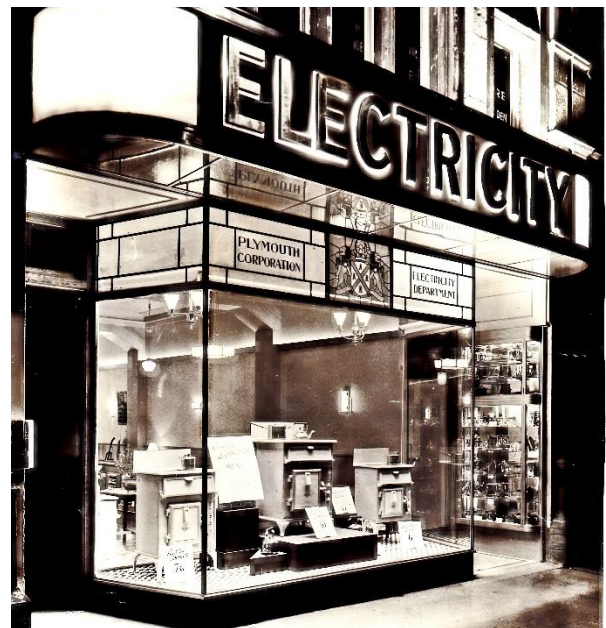
*Gerry and Peter Lamb, father and son spent their whole business careers in the Electricity Supply Industry and mostly at the South Western Electricity Board. Gerry Lamb's career is most interesting specifically because he was never qualified, which he considered eventually to be a considerable disadvantage.*

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Gerry Lamb was born in Wolverhampton, the youngest of 6 siblings in a family who owned a thriving family business, Hardware Wholesale with the father spending much time travelling as a salesman. They were rich enough to send their two sons to Wolverhampton Grammar School. But the father and his brother fell out and Gerry's father left the firm and home!! The business then started to fail and eventually was sold to another firm. Because of the lack of money Gerry's mother withdrew him from school, and he went out to work in a foundry, catching Spanish Flu in 1919.

He survived that and found a job with Wolverhampton Corporation Electricity Department as an electrician. He said that everyone will always need electricity, a very far-sighted remark! After some four years, he decided he wasn't going to get further promotion without transferring to the so-called "Inside Staff" and took a cut in wages as a Showroom Assistant. There he learned that he had a flair for window dressing of electrical goods. In 1928 he applied for the job of Installation Engineer at Plymouth Corporation Electricity Department and gained an interview. The Plymouth Chief Engineer was obviously impressed and curious about this well-spoken electrician/ showroom assistant and even went to Wolverhampton to interview him again at his home. He gave him the job in charge of electricians and meter fixers. Gerry

had a fiancée, Tessa Stead, but nevertheless he went to Plymouth to get into his new job for one year before getting married. Returning to get married he then set up home with Tessa in Plymouth in 1929. Their son, Peter was born in 1933.



**Fig.1 The Second Electricity Showroom at Old Town Street 1934**

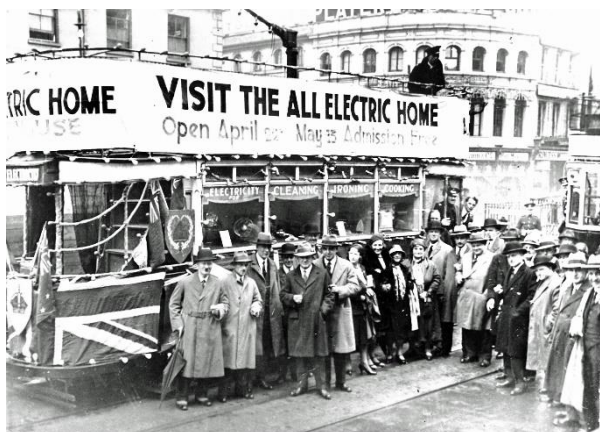
Plymouth must have been an exciting place at that time having been created a City earlier, bringing together the three towns of Plymouth, Stonehouse and Devonport. Electrically it also required to convert Devonport from DC to AC, changing the Devonport DC Generating Station into a Rotary Substation.

Gerry climbed in status in the 1930's convincing his bosses that he could run the Commercial activities and was exceedingly successful with a large showroom being established at Old Town Street, and used his flair for window dressing winning many awards.



**Fig.2 The Chief Engineer of Plymouth Corporation Electricity Department, Mr Midgely receiving the Window Display 3<sup>rd</sup> prize from the Shopping Festival Queen. Gerry Lamb between the ladies.**

During the 1930's he gained promotion as Consumers Engineer with total control of all commercial activity up to the outbreak of war. His wife took on the task of Secretary of the local Electrical Association of Women (EAW), becoming very friendly with Lady Astor, MP for Plymouth Sutton Division, who was very supportive of women's organisations. The EAW were heavily involved in establishing All-Electric Houses, both in Plymouth and Bristol at that time.



**Fig.3 Gerry Lamb and EAW Ladies gather in front of a tram advert for the All-Electric House**

As the second world war commenced, Gerry at 38 was retained with his job designated as a "Reserved Occupation" and became a Captain in the Home Guard, due to him having been a territorial soldier at Wolverhampton as a sergeant in the Staffordshire Yeomanry. With the Plymouth Blitz he was in constant demand with his staff working all hours. In 1941 the family with an added child, a daughter, self-evacuated to a farm cottage at Mary Tavy, staying there for two years, but Gerry stayed at home using a concrete bomb shelter he had built in the Summer of 1940.

Immediately after the War, Gerry was heavily involved with his staff in reestablishing temporary showrooms since his pride and joy showroom at Old Town Street had been ruined by the bombing.

With the nationalisation of the ESI in 1948, Gerry Lamb was promoted to SWEB Head Office, Electricity House in Bristol as Publicity Officer. His main job initially was to rebrand all the inherited showrooms in the SWEB image, spending many days on the road with an in-house architect, Tommy Topping. In Bristol he had to find new sites for showrooms, since BCED had only two, one at Staple Hill and the main one at Electricity House on the Centre.



**Fig.4 Whiteladies Road Showrooms with a Window Display for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II**

In the late 1950's Bristol District commercial activity was enlarged dramatically creating 4 commercial districts, North, South, East and Central. Gerry Lamb was appointed Bristol North District Commercial Manager. His first task was to buy an office building, and he bought Redland Vicarage at Redland Road on behalf of SWEB as an electricians and sales base. He had five showrooms or Service centres as they were now called, the main one at Whiteladies Road, then others at Westbury-on-Trym, Shirehampton and two on the Gloucester Road. Gerry continued to win Window Display awards with the SWEB Annual Window Display competitions. In fact he won 21 awards, including 8 Firsts, many in national contests.



**Fig.5 Chairman Bill Irens presents the winning cup for the Best Window Display 1956 by the Bristol North Service Centre**

He took early retirement in 1962 at the age of 61. He was always disappointed that he hadn't made it as a larger District Manager including the engineering side, but was hampered by the fact that he wasn't qualified in any way.

Now his son Peter started with SWEB in 1950 on an Engineering Apprenticeship for 5 years in Bristol studying one day a week at the Bristol College of Technology for a Higher national Certificate. The rest of the week was spent being transferred around the various departments of SWEB getting valuable experience in both the Engineering and Commercial side of the business. Also, to get manufacturing experience, he was sent to English Electric at Stafford for nine months and Bath Power Station to gain Generation experience. It was truly an amazing

apprenticeship. Peter also studied a further year to get his Chartered Engineer qualification.

Peter's first job was as Junior Engineer in Bristol under the District Engineer, Len Irons, where he initially spent a great deal of time cable fault-finding with fellow Junior Engineer Tom Casely at Hartcliffe on new estates; here the new cables had been damaged by new fence posts being installed much later. Certainly, they became accomplished fault finders during the Summer of 1955. He was then promoted as General Assistant Engineer at Bath under Senior Engineer Les Brain, which didn't inspire him to stay, so applied for a 4<sup>th</sup> Assistant Engineer's position at Torquay.



**Fig.6 Torquay Main Office & Showroom**

He was successful in getting the post with an office in the main building behind the Town Hall. His job involved total control of all the labour gangs, jointers and overhead line gangs involving an early start in the morning at their Lymington Road Depot. He was able to show the other engineers how to find cable faults technically with equipment that he found in a cupboard that they never used. One challenge occurred when the District Manager approached him about using labour gangs to redesign his garden!! He agreed to send volunteers on a Saturday morning if he paid them, which didn't go down too well. He did nevertheless agree to deliver their tools there on the Friday before.

During that time, he nearly had a disaster. He was commissioning an overhead metering device covering the 11kV lines through Barton Hall Holiday Camp. With the line finally built he signed off the permit-to-work and went off and closed up the circuit. He then drove back to the metering device at the foot of which had been built a small substation to house the metering. He was greeted by two white faced metering guys who had been up the pole when he energised the circuit at 11kV. They heard the sizzle and duly descended. Very dodgy situation that!!



**FIG.7 Kingswear Castle**

One very interesting supply was requested for a remote location on the banks of the River Dart, Kingswear Castle. The local MP Mr Bennett was converting it into a home for his family to live in. An underground cable was requested, being a protected site and so we laid a 0.0225sq.in. 4 core cable from the nearest road down a wooded hillside through rocky terrain and therefore very shallow.

Then six months later he heard that two engineers were coming to Torquay to sharpen up the operations of the Torbay District, which apparently wasn't in good shape. Unfortunately, the two engineers sent by the Chairman were Len Irons, District Engineer, Bristol, who Peter knew well and Gerry Lamb, Commercial Manager Bristol North. Peter was then embroiled in being asked about these two gents. Their coming to scrutinise the District operations didn't do his career any good. Peter had shown Len around the Torquay system involving 2kV lower HV system still in place. Len Irons had recommended Peter to be promoted to 3<sup>rd</sup> Engineer to oversee the

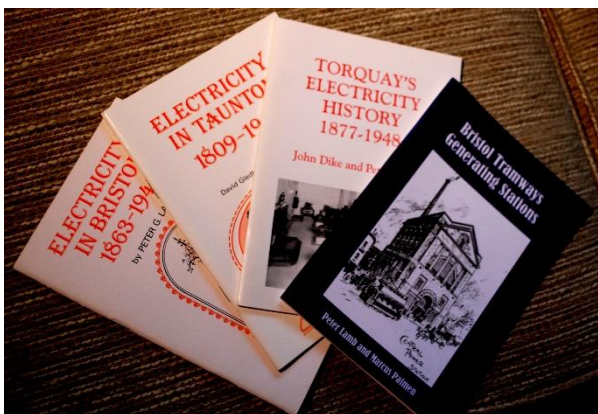
scheme for removing the old 2kV system but when it came to the interview, the job was given to an unqualified engineer within the District. Instead, he was sent out to the countryside between Totnes and Kingsbridge to carry out Rural Development being directly in charge of two overhead line gangs. A sort of demotion, but nevertheless he thoroughly enjoyed the job, but decided that he should move on after a year.

However, one incident stands out. Whilst switching at the Salcombe Quay substation, he was surprised to find a three hulled Catamaran in the substation. The building had held a small generating plant in the past but now only had a small amount of equipment there. He went back to see the District Engineer to complain, only to be told it was the Chairman, Bill Irens's boat and did he wish to continue the complaint?

Peter then returned to Bristol getting a sideways move into Group Planning under George Haynes who set him doing long hand mathematics for network analysis. This of course was before the advent of computers. Some part of his time there was spent being sent out to help Bath and Weston Planning offices, where he learned to design and plan new network reinforcements. In fact, you could say that Peter then found his forte. Still he was told that had not had sufficient operational experience and opted for a 4<sup>th</sup> Assistant's job with Bristol District involving standby duty, where he worked alongside Mike Hield. At last, a 3<sup>rd</sup> Assistant (Planning) came up and he got promotion into Bristol District Planning Office.

At that time in the mid-1960's a Senior Engineer from Cornwall was appointed Group Engineer and decided that Bristol, Bath and Weston needed to have more of a team spirit and he asked Derek Goldsworthy, Chief Draughtsman to organise an Annual Dinner get-together with entertainment from each department. Since Peter was then "treading the boards" with the Bristol Amateur Operatic Society, Peter was asked to write a script for the Planners. He wrote the first sketch based on the Dick Whittingham Panto story and further

ones for some years with John Haynes as the leading man. Eventually one was based on the history of electricity in Bristol, promoted by his then immediate superior, Bruce Merrick, in charge of Group Planning, to which Peter added some humour. This went down so well that the Manager Cliff Brazier insisted that Peter researched it in more detail to put a talk together for him on the history of electricity in Bristol. This he did reluctantly but got hooked on it nevertheless, and subsequently wrote a book of the subject, "Electricity in Bristol 1863-1948". He then became the unofficial historian for SWEB.



**Fig.8 Four Electricity History Books, 3 of which were co-authored with colleagues**

He was later promoted to Second Engineer in the Bristol District Planning Office at the time they were moved from Electricity House to the new Feeder Road Offices in 1970.



**Fig.9 Feeder Road New Offices in 1970**

In 1976 Peter was promoted to Senior Engineer with the task of amalgamating the 4 planning offices, Group, Bristol, Bath and Weston, a not too popular task! But of course, it was the start of reducing SWEB's

engineering structure and promotion became extremely difficult from then on.

When it was decided to vacate Electricity House as its SWEB Headquarters and move to a new building on the outskirts of Bristol, they found a fantastic trove of archives. It was all the Minute Books, Accounts etc., of the old undertakings that SWEB had taken over at nationalisation. He was called and asked if he would take care of them, if they were relocated in the basement of the Feeder Road Offices. He felt that he had little choice, but was more confident with Paul Hulbert's assistance, even though he considered it a considerable burden.

Peter remained Senior Engineer until 1992 when he was offered early retirement, but managed to extend this by two years by a move to Head Office then at Aztec West.

Peter then retired in 1994 having set up the South Western Electricity Historical Society with John Haynes and Paul Hulbert with a base at redundant switch-rooms at Cairns Road, Redland, Bristol, where the archives were moved together with many old electrical appliances that had been collected in the Stores by Gordon Bacon creating a superb Museum of Electricity, thus the Society shared the burden of looking after all the important historical material as it does today.



**Fig.10 The Inaugural General Meeting in March 1994 with the late John Haynes and Peter in the centre with speaker Dr Harry Nabb Chairman of the Gas Historical Society, and fellow founder members. Paul Hulbert was behind the camera!**