

Constructional education at father's knee

It was wartime. My father loved to make things in wood. Amongst other things he taught science and woodworking at a small secondary modern school somewhere in the south of Luton, where he was deputy head. When I was a toddler he made me from scrap wood a magnificent ride-on red locomotive and a green wheelbarrow: unhappily I have no memory of them whatsoever, but the photos are there to provide the evidence.

When I was just about old enough to hold onto things without breaking them – let's say about six - he made two or three balsa wood and tissue paper gliders or so-called "endurance" models for me – actually of course they were for him to fly but for me to watch. I don't know why they were called endurance models because the one thing they sure as hell didn't have was endurance. They were powered by a large multi-folded strip of rubber that turned a balsa wood propeller, which in turn had to be energised by rotating the propeller in a reverse direction. The building instructions issued dire warnings about ensuring that the aircraft would glide properly before attempting powered flight, and not applying too many reverse turns to the propeller until the "rubber motor" was properly run in. Generally it was always too windy when we were ready to become test pilots. Eventually the day dawned when the wind had subsided and no rain was promised. Despite our (his) best endeavour to preset the glide path of the finished model the first powered flight was nearly always a disaster. Invariably, on the very first flight the plane would either soar skywards, having had too little balancing weight applied up front, or contrarily, descend too rapidly after launch, like a Japanese Zero kamikaze eagerly seeking destruction on the nearest patch of unforgiving tarmac. Either way lay disaster. The upwards soaring flight always resulted in an inadvertent crash landing in the unforgiving and knarled upper branches of a tree, rendering the model either lost for all time, or causing it to descend earthwards, totally out of control with a broken wing; missing tail fin or a smashed propeller. The kamikaze "Early Landing Whilst Still Under Power" occasioned with the downward launch syndrome usually proved terminally catastrophic, though entertaining to other small boys. The mighty internal tension of the tightly wound rubber motor would cause the flimsy fuselage to compress like a concertina with a noise like – well like a balsa and tissue paper aircraft being scrunched up. So much for endurance models! What I really loved about watching the construction was the smell of balsa cement, and even better the heady aroma of cellulose dope. I am sure that this guided me towards my future love of organic chemistry.

Despite my father's love of woodwork, and his other love – amateur radio, he never involved me in the making of things or explained how tools should be used or cared for. This was, I am sure, responsible for the numerous scars which I bear to this day through the abuse of tools. I remember him just once whittling a propeller for me out of a piece of kindling firewood, and only then to take my mind off a new horror - it was a sultry summer afternoon and the air was full of flying ants, which filled me with terror, having never seen them before.

The only thing we shared was an affection for Meccano: I had inherited an old cardboard box full of rusty Edwardian strips, brackets and cogs, which came together with an equally rusty "O" gauge Hornby clockwork trainset. My father could occasionally be cajoled into building something or other for me or helping to layout the rail track. But Meccano is used for *assembling* things, not *making* things. So you don't learn how to use tools or materials. Nowadays Meccano has been superseded by Lego of course, and you don't even need to use a screwdriver or spanner for Lego. And model railways are far more sophisticated, with microprocessor controlled electrically powered locomotives. Anyway, today's youngsters just want to be celebrities or footballers, if you can drag them away from their playstations; MP3 players or some other latest gadget or fad.

My father had some odd culinary persuasions. He would not have cheese or onions in the house, disliked milk in any form and had an ultimately fatal penchant for applying excessive salt to his meals. Long before we knew how dangerous this could be, at the tender age of just forty nine he suffered a severely disabling stroke. Life was never the same for us after that date. He continued in his job for the next few years but retired through ill health and eventually passed away aged fifty five after suffering a further two strokes whilst on holiday in the Isle of Man. I never really knew my father during those five formative years and I still find it difficult to talk about such relationship as we had during those precious years before he died. I am sure that at times I really hated him. I remember once firing an airgun directly at him. Happily it was a feeble bit of kit: I was fifty yards away, and he was the other side of a thick glass window. But the thought was there...

However what was most important for me after his death, apart from my having to pass "A" levels, and work towards a place at university, was that I had had to learn how to use tools and how to fix things up about the house. My poor widowed mother had very little income so we literally had to make do and mend. As a teenager, prior to his death, I had had very little interest in fixing things up, although I did have a fixation with amateur radio and the then burgeoning field of electronics. But after my mother had been widowed I had no option. So I found myself in a position that is perhaps very similar to the position in which you find

yourself. Nowadays all the DIY “sheds” will provide you with advice sheets for particular projects, and of course Google will open up the world for you. But you might just find that I will be able to help iron out a few wrinkles or clarify some of the mysteries that seem to be taken for granted elsewhere. You might even find a few of my following anecdotes amusing – assuming of course that I haven’t told you them before, which might be highly likely.

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