

Tek Guernsey

By Dave Spinks

Dave Spinks was Personnel Manager at Tek Guernsey Ltd. from 1958 to 1963. His observations about life on Guernsey, business problems, and family adjustments were carried in a series of Tekweek articles in January and February of 1964. Here are excerpts of those articles.

The island of Guernsey, located in the southern part of the English Channel, was the scene of Tektronix' first overseas assembly and manufacturing operation. Today, Tektronix Guernsey Ltd., operating in two large assembly buildings totaling 80,000 square feet and employing more than 285 people, is an accepted and thriving part of the Guernsey business community. There is every indication that much growth still lies ahead for our company-in-kind across the Atlantic waters.

What many people at Tek Beaverton may not know are such things as why Tektronix, Inc. decided to go over seas, why Guernsey was selected as the starting place, how many went over to assist in its development, what were some of the problems encountered, how did the Guernsey people react to our coming, and other questions.

In the five years preceding 1956, Tektronix Inc.'s sales in Europe increased more than 10 times and caused us to focus attention on this market sector. This sales increase reflected the rapid recovery and growth rate of Europe and the United Kingdom following World War II. In view of this, and because it is Tek's policy to provide the best and fastest service possible to its customers, the decision was made in early 1958 to establish an overseas manufacturing and assembly operation.

There were other advantages to be gained by such a move. The proximity of a Tek manufacturing facility to the Common Market and European Free Trade area, producing the same scopes as Beaverton, would enable us to ship instruments and parts to our customers faster, provide much needed customer training and save our customers time and money by means of a complete repair service. These were some of the major reasons for Tek's decision to go international.

Now came the question of location. For our first operation of this type we at least wanted to ensure minimum communications problems. Since the four men who started the venture were not bilingual, location in an English-speaking area would simplify their jobs considerably.

On the other side of the Atlantic the only two English speaking areas are the British Isles (England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland) and the Channel Islands. Each place had its advantages and disadvantages. As it obviously turned out, Guernsey (in the Channel Islands) had the best overall combination of circumstances and, especially important, all these at the time Tek needed them. Aside from those already mentioned, other plus factors were: (1) sufficient numbers of employable population who could be trained to build our product, (2) year-round air service to facilitate speedy shipments to customers, (3) a favorable corporate tax structure and (4) the immediate availability of a good-sized building for the company to begin operations. So was born a completely new industry on this small island off the coast of France.

Building Confidence

To start a company, or set up a branch of a company in another area, is difficult enough just in the US. To do so in a foreign country involves problems and difficulties of an entirely different nature.

What was the initial reaction of the Guernsey people to the coming of Tektronix? Considerable apprehension would probably best describe their earliest feeling. But why, one might ask, why would anyone be suspicious of or mistrust Tektronix? All Tektronix wanted to do was to set up a company on the island! Isn't that a good thing? Answering this question and being convincing about it was not the easiest matter. To do so effectively required dissuading a lot of people of some deep-seated preconceived notions, not so much of Americans themselves, but rather of American "big business".

In the course of my part of the job (Personnel), I had occasion to interview well over 2000 Guernsey and English people. All too often the remark was made: "Ah, you Americans! In World War II you people were jolly well the greatest -- always laughing, joking, such a casual attitude in spite of the difficulties and hard times we both encountered. But in business, watch out! All you're interested in is making a fast buck - and the faster the better!"

This was just one of the attitudes or notions that had to be countered in many Guernsey people, including, I would say, some of its governing bodies as well. Needless to say, it was no overnight job to bring about a change in this attitude.

No more in our favor were other factors. For all practical purposes we were an unknown company (not one of the "biggs;" that is, General Motors, IBM, etc.). Few people had heard of, much less seen, an oscilloscope. A lot of people had never heard of Oregon, or knew where it was located (everybody knew where Hollywood was, though). It all added up to one big question mark: Just who or what was this thing called Tektronix? Would it last?

To a limited degree even the location of our original Guernsey plant was against us - by the power of suggestion! The building had formerly been occupied by a branch of a large English textile concern who had come to the island some years previous. After several years of operation, competition compelled the firm to close down its business on Guernsey, and the building subsequently lay vacant for a period of time. This fact -- that if it happened to one firm, it could happen to Tektronix -- actually discouraged a number of people from taking more than a cursory interest in our firm.

So, if it can be said that Tek had some "settling in" problems those early days, then the first one was overcoming a frame of mind however correct or preconceived it may have been.

How was this surmounted? In the main, by telling over and over again the story of Tektronix: who founded it, when it began, what it manufactured, how it had grown, its guiding philosophy. It was done in those early days without benefit of books, pamphlets, pictures - not even an oscilloscope to show to applicants. In fact, the only thing an applicant could be shown was a building, 80 x 200, cold and empty; not a chair, not a bench -- nothing.

It can safely be said that the success of the Guernsey operation especially in its very early months and for some time afterward,

was based almost entirely on trust, a trust which, fortunately, gained strength with each passing day. In the minds of some of Tek Guernsey's early employees that trust was severely tested, not deliberately, but by circumstances.

For example, while we were awaiting the arrival of parts and equipment from Portland, there were a number of occasions when a Final Assembler or Test & Cal man, or a Shipping Clerk, found himself -- for lack of scopes to assemble, test or ship -- wielding a brush, scrubbing floors, making repairs on the building, etc. The willingness and enthusiasm shown by all concerned was heartwarming and encouraging. And one could not help but feel that in the long run the operation would indeed be successful. **Rumors, philosophy, and wages**

As one would expect in such a venture, there were rumors to contend with in those early days, too. The most common was that we manufactured TV sets; perhaps the wildest was that we made some sort of atomic instrument.

There was no anti-Americanism; there was no attempt, outside or inside, to unionize the employees. Some of the local employers did, however, have some rather grave misgivings to the effect that we were going to "steal" their employees, that we would lure them away by paying them fabulous American wages.

In point of fact, had Tektronix Guernsey paid their employees American wages, in short order Tektronix would no doubt have been ejected from the island by all of said employers. From the very beginning it was, and still is, the policy of Tek Guernsey to pay a wage which is commensurate with the complexity of the job with due recognition being given to prior education, experience or training necessary to perform the job. In some cases the starting rate of pay was actually less than that paid by other employers. In other cases it was the same, and in still other cases it was more. The difficulty in establishing a fair wage standard was due in part to an absence of comparable types of work on the island. Generally speaking, Tek's wage standard was as equitable an arrangement as could be had in those circumstances.

However, it was not so much the wages that drew people to Tek but, rather, the appeal of our unique philosophy, i.e., respect for the dignity of the individual. The philosophy itself was not new to the Guernsey people but apparently the practice was little used. To us as Americans this may seem unusual but when we consider the sometimes rather vast differences between our historical, cultural, traditional and social backgrounds, then the absence of such a practice takes on a different meaning. In other words, what we find good for ourselves would not necessarily work in other countries. For this reason, as we went about the business of trying to establish on Guernsey the same type of Tektronix as in Portland, every effort was made to recognize and appreciate these differences and, where necessary, mold our policies and approaches to suit the local situation.

As time went by, as the story of Tek was repeated again and again, and as the word gradually got around the island, it was interesting to note the change in attitude among our own employees and our friends and associates outside Tek. Soon applicants for jobs were literally beating a path to Tek's door to the extent that seldom was the company really hard-pressed to find people to fill jobs. The only exception was that of technical people. Rarely did the company have to advertise for a position, for our best salesmen were our employees.

One of the best - yet simplest - compliments Tek could have been paid was when an employee said, "I actually look forward to coming to work each day and hate to go home." It was a feeling few had ever experienced.

So much for the business aspects of Tek's move to Guernsey. What now about the personal aspect? For instance, what are one's feelings or thoughts when, in a few short hours, he has been transported from one type of environment and way of life to a small, little known island 6000 miles away, with a completely different background and manner of living? To be sure, such a sudden transition can be a bit baffling.

Perhaps the fairest way to answer this would be to speak of it mainly in relation to my family and myself, rather than for the four families who were involved, although in many ways our experiences were similar.

Briquettes and Washboards

Arriving on Guernsey in early December 1958, the first dissimilarity to hit us, as we moved into our large, two-story home, was the lack of central heating. Heat was available, of course, but only if we chose to carry a "hod" of coal (about 40 pounds) twice a day from the "coal hole" (coal bin) to each of our four fireplaces located, respectively, in the living room, dining room and in two of the three bedrooms upstairs. At the end of the day the ashes had to be removed from each fireplace, carried out and dumped in the "dust bin" (garbage can).

Quite aside from the cost of this amount of coal, just the time involved to keep these fires going was enough to convince us very quickly that we should start "doing as the Romans (Guernseyites) do." This meant wearing more clothing (sweater, heavy socks) and having a fire in one room only when you were going to occupy that room for a length of time, e.g., the living room in the evening. This also meant getting accustomed to as much as a 20 degree temperature drop when leaving the living room and going to the bedroom to retire for the night.

In view of this, daytime activities (cooking, ironing, sewing, writing, etc.) tended to center in the one room of our house which was heated all the time, the kitchen. The source of this heat was our Aga range, a large, heavy, coal-fired stove which was loaded once in the morning and once in the evening with a mixture of anthracite nuts (small coal) and Furnacite (like briquettes). Heating the kitchen was actually a side benefit of the Aga. Actually, its main function was for cooking, plus the heating of all water used for dish and clothes washing and bathing. The stove's only drawback was that it had to be kept going 24 hours a day, 365 days a year! Accordingly, cooking a meal on a warm summer day became a rather hot proposition.

Speaking of clothes washing brings to mind another of our various adjustments to Guernsey living. When we first moved into our house, which we leased completely furnished, there was no washing machine. Until we were able to purchase a machine, a period of about six months, my wife did all our washing by hand, using the kitchen sink as her washtub, and a washboard as her "agitator". Water extraction was accomplished by a hand-cranked wringer and drying was done outside by the sun in good weather; in rainy weather clothes were draped over a wooden clothes dryer set close to the stove in the kitchen. Things were usually dry enough to iron in a day and a half using the latter method.

Pounds, Quid, Shillings Complicates Shopping

Cooking relates to food, food relates to shopping, and so we arrive at the next adjustment to Guernsey life, learning the Guernsey monetary system (which, incidentally, is the same as England's). If this was difficult for us as Americans in a foreign land, let it also be said that even some English people have trouble with it at times. In the beginning it was perplexing enough just learning the names and values of the basic notes and coins; matters were further complicated, though, by trying to learn the slang terms for these items, the use of which is widespread.

To illustrate: We here in America generally refer to a five-cent piece as a nickel, a ten-cent piece as a dime, twenty-five cents as a quarter, etc. In similar fashion, the basic English note, which is a pound (\$2.80), is also known as a quid; a shilling (\$.14) is a bob; sixpence (\$.07), a tanner, etc.

The biggest difficulty lay in learning to think in terms of the English system instead of automatically converting every price into US dollars and cents. This only comes with time and usage, and for us probably two years passed before we were "converted". This same principle applies, incidentally, when one is learning to speak a foreign language.

Shopping was a unique experience for an American woman, especially for groceries. First, there are no supermarkets; most of the stores are about the size of our little neighborhood independents. Secondly, with one or two exceptions, these stores do not afford one-stop shopping facilities as with many places in the US. If you want vegetables and fruits, you go to the green-grocer; if you want meat you go to the butcher shop; for drugs and medical supplies you go to the chemist; for bread you stop at the bakery and for general groceries at the grocery store. With a few exceptions, all stores and businesses (except banks) open about 9 a.m., close at 12:30 (employees go to lunch), open at 2 p.m., and close at 5:30 p.m. On Thursdays all stores are open mornings, closed for the afternoon.

Perhaps the main contrast between the buying habits of an American and Guernsey housewife is that the Guernsey housewife generally buys on a day-to-day basis, the American on a week-to-week or semi-monthly basis. There are two prime reasons for this: (1) take-home pay for many Guernsey breadwinners does not permit quantity buying, and (2) a surprising number of people do not have refrigerators for meat and other perishable foods or, if they do have refrigerators, their size (3.3 cu. ft. average) is limited to storage of smaller quantities. Use of home deep-freezers is practically unknown on the island. In our own house, for instance, the only provision for storage of perishable foods was the larder, a small cool room with several shelves. One of these shelves was fashioned from a thick piece of slate which, because of its natural coldness, was usually the shelf on which we stored our butter and meat. Needless to say, a refrigerator was one of our first major appliance purchases. Shopping, particularly for major consumer goods (furniture, cars, appliances), brought out still another contrast. Until just a few years ago "buying-on-time" was considered taboo by the bulk of the people. If a person couldn't

pay cash on the barrelhead, he just didn't buy an item, however much he wanted it. It has been said that the American influence is gradually changing this concept.

Another difference that became immediately apparent as we settled into the pattern of Guernsey living was the voltage. Since Guernsey was 230 volts and all our appliances were wired for 115 volts, nothing would operate without incorporating a step-down transformer in the circuit. Literally, this meant lugging around a 20 pound transformer every time we used our toaster, waffle iron, electric frying pan, mixer, vacuum cleaner, shaver, or hi-fi. On the other hand, we considered ourselves fortunate that we were at least on AC current; several areas of the island were still on DC!

Driving on the left side of the street was our next hurdle. This however, proved to be a rather easy conversion and soon became quite natural for us. Interpreting and adjusting to the driving habit of the Guernsey people was another matter, though. In short, it seemed to be something like every man for himself, similar to the manner used in Paris. Until about two years ago Guernsey had no traffic lights and even now the two lights that are in existence are purely experimental. Consider for a moment that there are over 15,000 cars confined to 400 miles of roads within an area of 24 square miles, and it would be safe to say that it gets a wee bit congested at times.

Overseas Experience Taught Adaptability

One area in which the American influence has not been particularly felt is in the method of childbirth for Guernsey mothers -- clinically speaking, that is. Insofar as delivery equipment is concerned, the two countries are probably very much the same. However, an American mother would note these differences.

Childbirth takes place either in one's home or, more generally, in the island's maternity home. Assisting at birth would normally be a trained and well-qualified midwife -- a doctor would be in attendance only if some difficulty was expected. A woman has a choice, of course, but it seems more prefer a mid-wife than a doctor for the actual delivery. A doctor enters the picture for post-natal care.

It is in this period that we see other interesting contrasts. For one, all the mothers are in a large ward, one on each of the two floors of the maternity home. There are no private rooms. The mothers are generally not allowed out of bed for 4-6 days. Mothers cannot feed their babies during the night; the last feeding is about 10 p.m., the next one about 5:30 a.m.

During the mother's 10-12 day confinement (this is to give the mother plenty of time to rest and recuperate) a father can see his child only once, usually during the first visiting period after the baby is born. The next time the father sees his child is when he comes to take his wife and baby home.

When a mother enters the maternity home, she is required to bring with her two complete daily changes of clothing for her new baby (or babies). In the evening, when each father finishes visiting his wife, he takes the soiled clothing home, washes it, and brings clean sets back the next evening. It is quite amusing to watch 15 or 20 fathers file out of the building after the visiting period, each carrying his little bag of "goodies." Speaking for my wife and myself, if we have another child, we would prefer the Guernsey system to that of the US. With no intent to slight or under-rate the American medical profession, it is our feeling that Guernsey's more relaxed attitude and approach to childbirth, -both before and after, tends to make the whole ordeal far easier on parents and family combined.

All three of our children were born in the 4-1/2 years we lived on Guernsey; boy, girl, boy, in that order. Such birth entitles them to a rather unique distinction of dual citizenship. They are US citizens by reason of their birth to American parents; they are also British citizens by reason of their birth on Guernsey (viz., British) soil. This dual citizenship can be retained for the rest of their lives or until such time as they renounce citizenship of one country or the other. Voting, holding a public office, or joining the military service are just a few of the several things that would automatically disqualify their citizenship in the other country. Meanwhile they are free to live and travel in either country with entitlement to all the usual citizenship privileges.

The items touched upon in the preceding paragraphs, though indicative of some of the basic contrasts between Guernsey and the US, are but a few of the many more things that could be said. It is, for the most part, a strictly factual accounting of our observations and experiences.

Since our return to Portland, my wife and I have been asked by many people: "Was your experience on Guernsey, and all the ramifications pertaining to it, both business and personal, really worth it?" Our answer to this is an unqualified "Yes!"

While admittedly there were times of frustration and discouragement for us all, there was also before us -- as individuals, as a family and as a group -- the ever-present challenge to make "a go of it" in spite of the difficulties we encountered. In achieving this aim, perhaps our best cue was taken from the men who pioneered Tektronix in Portland. Certainly theirs was no easier task. It has been said that "travel is a real education." Strictly speaking, our experience on Guernsey was not so much one of travel, but it was a real education! From it we learned a number of things about British and European business practices, about foreign attitudes and customs, about people from other lands. We learned, too, adaptability, adjusting ourselves to different living conditions, economic conditions and social conditions. To any person or family contemplating living overseas this factor is all-important, from the family breadwinner right down to the youngest child. We are indeed grateful that, through Tektronix, this education was made possible.

But, strangely enough, one of the most interesting things we learned was about America - how our country is thought of and looked on by people (in this case, mostly British) on the other side of the Atlantic. We learned about "ourselves" through newspapers, magazines, radio and TV. As one can imagine, seeing America as others saw her was most enlightening and, I might add, not altogether complimentary. The irony of it was that in many cases what we saw and heard was true. Fortunately, in the eyes of most Europeans the image of America, while tarnished in some respects is, on the whole, quite good.

Living outside the US as we did was the most interesting and most challenging experience of our lives. We have gained greater insight, tolerance, and understanding of other people, places and things, and of ourselves. Now that we have returned I am certain it will help us to be better citizens. If our experience did nothing else, this in itself will have made it all very worthwhile.