

Saeed Iqbal
Interview for Lost Mills and Ghost Mansions
on the 23rd of August 2023
By Nabeela Ahmed

I came to England in 1986 at age twenty. It was a shock for me and the weather alone would have been enough to make me home sick, but I arrived into a house full of men who worked nights, slept during the day and left me home alone. I was terribly home sick, but hung in there and in a few weeks' time a few of the lads showed me around and I began attending Bolton Royd College to learn English. I went there for six months.

1987-1989 John Foster, Machine Operator, Spinning

I worked days, the 8-8 shift over five days.

On my first day I was fascinated with the machines. Weaving meant 100,000 threads going at the same time, people stood around, fixing the thread that broke. They were complicated and then this material came out the other end. How did someone make these machines? The workers were given a pattern to make 100 meters of this and that, they changed the thread and adjusted the machine and made cloth. Wow!

I was the youngest. Most people were older than me and welcomed me, offering me help and even food.

Supervisors and workers

The supervisors were white, whilst the machinists were Asians: Pakistani, Bengali and Indians. All very friendly. People looked out for each other and helped new ones get settled. This has changed. It changed in 1995. When I started in the bakery years later, there was none of this. People were selfish and it was each to their own. New staff were not offered help or support. They were targets to meet.

First salary

My first salary was £88 at £2.99 per hour. I offered it to my uncle, who I was living with, as was the custom. He was pleased, but didn't accept it, so I sent it to my family. Then my salary was £90. In those days you couldn't spend £90. Fish and chips cost 99p. There weren't the take aways and restaurants you see now.

In 1989 I went back to Pakistan and got married in 1990. I returned in 1991.

1992-1996 Thomas Ambrel, Wakefield – Drawing

My job was to comb the wool into the machines that made it into thread.

My salary was £160-170 including the night allowance

Food

We had two breaks for tea and one lunch from 12.00-12.30. We worked as a pair per machine and took it in turns to have the breaks.

1996-2000 Benson and Turner, Wyke – Drawing

I moved here as it was nearer to home and better salary. I got £230 for working six nights from 8pm to 7am.

We had a lunch break and one additional break for twenty minutes.

Union

If you joined a union, they kicked you out. This was before my days but people held strikes for an Eid holiday. There was one man who spoke English and who stood up for us. They used his sickness as an excuse and got rid of him. We still had the Eid holiday, but no one else even in my time spoke proper English and we knew not to join the union if wanted our jobs. They would give us extra jobs like cleaning up and no one said, its not a part of our role. Also, there was the cost factor. The union had a fee. In my time the union didn't even exist though.

Food

At Christmas the company sent around sweets and we got a bonus of £50. At Eid we would all pool some money together and take food from caterers and invite everyone including our superiors to join us. For thirty minutes all the machines were turned off and we all ate together.

Normally, we took chapatti and curry from home.

Holidays

1 week for summer

1 week for Easter

1 week at October half-term

1 week at Christmas

Redundancy

Everyone was upset, including the supervisors. As workers we didn't speak much English and had no other skills, we knew we will struggle to find another job. We left two weeks before the managers and I got £1200 for my four years' service.

2001 Speedy Bakery, Agency – Packing

They would call me in two or three days a week

2002 - present Speedy Bakery, Full-time – Production

The shifts are weird:

4 days' work

4 days off

4 nights work

This means they have got rid of any nighttime or any shift allowance. The Union helped make the deal apparently and the salary was increased by £1-2 p/h. In reality this is a loss.

What I miss

The good working environment

The easy work in comparison as there were not targets and not the pressure of today's work

That £250 I earned over six days at Benson and Turner had more value than the £400 I earn over five days now.

People were helpful and supported each other. Now we are selfish and use each other.