

# Big Bang Theories

## And other explosive revelations.

It began in September 1957. I had left school and was working as a cowman milking a herd of 45 Guernseys. Hours were from 5.30am to 5pm six days a week, with a half hour for breakfast at the farmhouse, and a one hour break at 12.30. The farmer was also into forestry, so between the hours of 9am and 3pm I was either felling in the woods or working on council contracts involving treework. At 3pm I returned for the afternoon milking... wage three pounds five shillings a week and a quart of milk to take home each day.

At 18 I decided to start up on my own with small private tree-work company, and at the age of 20 bought an AEC Matador and a Fordson Major tractor.

The farmer I once worked for retired and I managed to purchase the farmhouse, outbuildings and five acres of land for the princely sum of £31,000. My, how times have changed.

The boom years came in the 1970s with the demise of the elm, thousands of these mature trees succumbing to Dutch elm disease. The many sawmills throughout Sussex were overloaded with the huge butts. Sadly most of these mills are now closed, having been replaced by little brick boxes, called houses. Storrington, Partridge Green, Findon and Castle Goring, once thriving sawmills, are now history. The majority of the elm butts were made into pallets, coffin boards and pit props for the coal mines (again an era relegated to the history books). The influx of this extra work demanded investment, so I purchased the most up-to-date chainsaws. The British built Danarm DD8F Mk 1 weighing in at 32lbs was a monster to handle. No anti-vibration rubbers, a steel frame that

could withstand a vehicle running over it, a manual oil pump that resulted in your thumb being on par with that of an orang-utan, a spark plug like those used to fire up a Centurion tank, and a starting rope you could lower limbs on – and of course the contact breaker points that constantly needing cleaning. The only difference between topping and felling saws was the length of solid nosed bar that dragged round the half inch chipper chain. So long as you were built like Arnold Schwarzenegger you were fine.

I think the early years were the most enjoyable, scrambling up the jib of the Matador, bashing your shins on the steel framework, then trying to unclip the bent pin on the snatch block in order to convert it once again from crane to winch truck. After a few years you had the agility of a mountain goat.

I still have my first explosives license, stamped 'paid seven shillings and six pence' for the year, and my first Tree Felling and Explosives Insurance Policy for four pounds.

I could easily write a book on early explosives, but I like this one in particular. An old farm manager in Storrington had asked me to blast out a number of large oak stumps in fields around Fryem Farm. A rough calculation of 21bs of Polar Ammon gelignite per foot diameter resulted in my ordering of 350lbs on an Immediate Use Certificate (must be used within 28 days). The job went smoothly and after 3 days was completed. The only problem was I had 40lbs of gelignite over. My own licensed store only permitted me to keep 10lbs, and ICI, the suppliers, didn't operate a returns policy. After much deliberation, and no more stumps in sight, the old farmer pointed to a huge Cupressus macrocarpa tree some 70 feet high



John Cooper aboard a 1978 MF 1250. It carries a Botex crane which was fitted by Botex's original designer and founder, Gordon Hoy.

and 70 feet wide, that had been dead for years and said... "Yer can use it up on that ther tree." I had run out of Ideas and this seemed the perfect solution. I drew out 2x 8oz sticks of gelignite, drilled out a hole at the base of the tree, lit the fuse and waited. After the bang I returned to the tree, to find a perfect hole, like a badger's sett, under the base of the tree I then rammed in the box containing the other 78 sticks of gelignite, cut off a longer length of sump fuse and retired to a safe distance. The 30 second fuse seemed like 30 minutes, but the result was spectacular. This mighty tree was blown 200 feet into the air, and with it, my problem of the excess explosives was resolved.

Strange as it may seem, crane hire and plant firms frequently rely on tree contractors to winch out their stranded vehicles. Gamble Sadler Cranes, (until they sold up) were one of the largest crane operators on the South Coast. One incident I recall was when a crane driver, returning to the yard at the end of the day, rang the MD to seek permission to carry out a favour for a friend of his, by moving a 20 foot container from one side of a recreational field to the other. Permission was given but unfortunately the crane wheels found a soft spot and became firmly stuck. The driver rang the office and explained the situation; the MD

said another crane would be sent to pull him out. A second 30 ton crane arrived but sank before reaching the first casualty. The second crane driver reported back the problem and a third all terrain crane was dispatched to pull out the other two. You probably guess what happened next... Yes you're right.

This 'state-of-the-art' all singing, all dancing crane came to rest in another part of the field. The MD, contemplating hari-kiri rang me.

I arrived with a Militant 6x6, walked the field, and decided that even with the wide balloon tyres, 6x6 drive, diff locks and cross locks I might not make it. I rang the MD who was now ageing by the minute. I suggested that the only way to recover his grazing dinosaurs, was to deploy my land anchors into the newly laid tarmac of the car park, and from there winch out all three cranes.

The MD, now on the verge of a cardiac arrest, agreed on this strategy and two hours later the job was completed. One slight problem, the second 30 ton crane had lowered all 4 outriggers to prevent the machine from sinking further, but was unable to retract them when winching started. It reminded me of the old steam ploughing engines as the outriggers ploughed up the playing field and cricket pitch with ease; the huge furrows on the once cared for green now resembling the



One of the cranes that so wrecked the recreation ground.



An AEC Matador which was used to winch out timber. Made during the war, John Cooper bought it direct from the Army in 1967.

battle fields of the Somme. I went home for tea.

Technology may have advanced in leaps and bounds, but communications in those early years were far superior than those of today. For example, if you phoned before 8.30am you could set up a road closure or diversion, telephone wires could be taken down and reinstated at the end of the day by your local GPO engineers, and gelignite could be ordered over the phone, as easily as buying sticks of candy.

About three years ago the local council wanted a dead tree felled. About 6 feet away, a telegraph pole serviced about 20 houses. Eleven of the wires ran through the centre of the dead tree. I rang BT engineers and a young lady with a Scottish accent answered. I was told that I had reached their main office in Glasgow, but the wires could not be dropped until a surveyor had inspected the site to verify that my request was warranted. It subsequently turned out that the surveyor was based at Poole in Dorset... only

110 miles away. Three weeks later it was confirmed that my request was justified.

Another two months elapsed and eventually a call centre in Wales organised a team of engineers to drop the eleven wires. The BT men arrived on the correct day, but two and a half hours late. The first and most important task was of course the boiling up of the kettle and taking a tea break. Finally, fit and replenished, the three engineers quickly dropped the offending wires and retreated back into their second home. Felling began, and by 2.30pm the job was completed, leaving the disgruntled crew to refit the dropped wires. Apparently the annoyed crew had wanted to leave the site by 2pm.

The police officers of 40 years ago were far more friendly and forgiving than those of today.

My long wheel base Land Rover was fitted with a hydraulic pump from the centre power take off. This enabled me to operate a tipping trailer. As I was never stopped

I presumed that the length and construction were not an issue. We had just finished felling a large Cupressus leylandii tree in a private garden, and were about to load it on to this 16 foot trailer. We had argued and taken bets on how many loads it would take to clear the site. "Two," said Colin. "Three," said Bob. I said, "One!"

"Impossible!" shouted the others... When in your late teens, nothing seems impossible.

Having worked on a farm and stacked bales of straw 16 feet high I saw no problem, but a 16 feet high load on the highway was a different matter. The gauntlet had been thrown down and there was no backing out. As the long thin branches were passed to me I stacked them up, allowing the ones on the base to overhang the rear of the trailer (by a mere 14 feet). With careful interlocking of the limbs, the load grew. Like the bales of straw on a farm trailer, I allowed the limbs to overhang the sides of the trailer – I don't know by how much, I could no longer see the sides or the wheels. Eventually, the garden cleared, a ladder was placed against the load and I descended on to *terra firma*.

I surveyed my masterpiece, as did the crowd that had now gathered, amazed at such an achievement. We quickly roped on the load, and without waiting for an encore from the crowd, proceeded down the highway.

It was only 2 miles to the farm; my sculpture in green, 30 feet long, 16 feet high and 10 feet wide, was travelling at a respectable 30mph, and was certainly being admired by other motorists and pedestrians alike. Disaster struck in the form of a shrill ringing bell and a blue revolving light. The local traffic cops also wanted to admire my masterpiece.

The officer approached me and said, "I've just bet my colleague it could only be you." His mate was already out of the car and assuming the standard posture of the local constabulary, (hands on hips and the bending of the knees), said "I don't think there's enough pages in my notebook to write out all the charges. I think the best thing we can do is to give you an escort back to your farm, and you make us a nice cup of coffee..." Fair exchange I thought – and that was the end of the matter.

Both officers and I were members of the 'Chanctonbury Rabbit Clearance Society' and had enjoyed a great shoot the previous evening, culminating in a slap-up feed at the titled owner's Manor House.

It was 8.30pm; I had just finished my evening meal and was emptying the remains of the wine bottle, feet up, TV on, waiting for the evening news broadcast. The two German shepherd dogs threw themselves at the door before the bell rang. I pulled myself out of the comfortable chair and answered the door. A police sergeant and a constable were standing there. "There's been a large pine tree that has snapped off and is blocking the Windmill Bridge," announced the sergeant. The bridge at Rustington was the only access to the town without the long detour that was now in operation. "I need your men with saws and a crane," pleaded the sergeant. "I'm sorry," I replied, "but I've just drunk half a bottle of wine and the lights on my Matador packed up on the way home this evening." I wanted to return to the warmth and comfort of the log fire, but the sergeant was having none of it. He had obviously been instructed to get the bridge cleared at any cost. "You get your men here in 20 minutes and



(Left) Boring a hole with a hand auger to set explosives. (Right) A line explosion – the quickest way to clear a ditch in pre-excavator days. (It probably still is!)

we will escort you." The thought that I was probably over the drink /drive limit and that the crane had no lights didn't seem to matter to the man in blue.

Twenty minutes later, this strange procession of vehicles rolled out of the farm entrance. Police car in front, lights flashing, large AEC crane with no lights at all, followed by another blue flashing beacon to the rear, and escort motorbikes. It was five miles to the bridge, and we would be there in 10 minutes. I expect that is the only time I will feel like some great statesman, with police cars and outriders. I was even tempted to wave at the crowd as we approached the bridge.

About an hour later the fallen pine tree had been cut up and cleared off the highway. The grateful residents came out, clapped and waved us off as we returned, under escort, back to the farm, and reality.

The young face of PC Davis belied the years he had been in the force. He had for the last four years been responsible for the section that deals with firearms, shotguns and explosives. I had dealt with him on a number of occasions. As I collected my Immediate Use Certificate from him he said, "I've never seen explosives used before... Do you mind if I come along and watch?" "Sure," I replied. "This lot is going to be used next Saturday on a farm about three miles from here."

The job was at Church Farm. The farmer had decided to turn two small fields into one by removing an old hedgerow and wide ditch line that was overgrown with brambles. I told PC Davis to come along at 10.00am. By then most of the holes would have been drilled and the charges set. The keen officer, not wanting to miss anything, arrived at 9.30. Colin, my colleague, and I showed him how to drill out the remaining holes with the 6 foot auger attached to the heavy duty drill. He also fed the instantaneous Cordtex fuse through the centre of the sticks of gelnignite and rammed them home. "Would you like to light the fuse?" I enquired. He seemed pleased at the honour I had bestowed upon him. The blue sump fuse, once lit, never went out – you could leave it for many hours under the water, as with the Cordtex instantaneous fuse that burned at 3 miles a second. One foot of sump fuse equals 30 seconds: therefore three feet would give you 90 seconds to get clear. PC Davis lit the fuse.

Colin and I retreated up the hill with PC Davis close at our heels. I never turned around to look at the ditch line. I had a habit of counting down the seconds before the bang. Over the years I could predict, within a few seconds, when the charges would blow. 76, 77, 78, 79, 80. I stopped and turned. To my horror PC Davis was only half way up the field. He had obviously thought he was at a safe distance... Wrong.

I shouted to him that he was too close. His brain quickly registered the situation. He turned and had barely taken a couple of paces when the whole ditch line erupted like a volcano, spewing up thousands of gallons of stinking muddy water high into the sky. He stood, frozen to the spot, as the mud and clay rained down on him. There were of course larger clods like cow pats and just as wet.

Colin and I watched in amazement at just how nimbly this officer of the law could dance. He side stepped, quick stepped, gavotted, pirouetted, twisted and turned and jumped so high on one occasion that an audition for the Royal Ballet Company would have secured him a place. At last, his performance over, he slowly came to the top of the field where we applauded him. Obviously shaken, white faced, and clothes splattered with mud he collapsed beside us. Gratefully he accepted the coffee and cheese sandwiches offered.

The telephone bell rang and I answered: it was for one of the strangest requests I've ever had. The Bluebell Railway Company, based in East Sussex, had organised for one of their steam locomotives to be transported from their Sheffield Park Station to Didcot in Oxfordshire,



Bob Eames (right) with John Cooper's son Christopher, twenty years ago, drilling holes in sticks of gelnignite ready to feed white plastic instantaneous fuse through them.

(some kind of train spotters' convention week). The company who had secured the contract to move the locomotive and tender was Leicester Heavy Haulage. On arriving the low loader driver had reversed up to a siding, so the fixed rails on the low loader would marry up to the main railway track.

The winching started but unfortunately the winch gearing cracked and the locomotive came to rest half way up the ramp. The Railway manager enquired, "Have you a winch truck that can haul up our locomotive?"

"How heavy is it?" I asked. "One hundred and five tons, and the tender is sixty five tons," was the reply.

"Sorry, I think that's too much for my Militant." I felt the anxiety in the man's voice. "Please come and try. We'll pay you for your time even if you don't succeed. We've been organising this event for nearly a year."

Another challenge I thought. "Okay, I'll be with you in an hour." I could hear the sigh of relief in the man's voice as I replaced the receiver.

It was a pleasant drive through the Sussex countryside and I arrived as predicted within the hour.

The tractor, with the broken winch, had pulled away allowing me to reverse hard up against the low loader unit. I had modified the standard army winch, with a twelve speed reduction unit, and in the lowest gear, the cable wound on to the drum at only 3 feet a minute. The cable attached, I started to winch and to my surprise this 105 ton monster climbed the ramp and on to the low loader. After this, winching the 65 ton tender was a piece of cake. "Well, that was different," I thought.

**John Cooper is retiring shortly. Full details of his retirement sale in next month's FMJ.**

*Danarm brochure from the 1950s. British made, it was fitted with an 8hp Villiers engine. The One-Man model, fitted with a 2'6" or 3'3" blade, is 'light enough to be handled by a single operator', although funnily enough, the actual weight is not quoted.*

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