

Can you imagine rows of desks, looking scarily like widely spaced, long, brown, rotten teeth in an open mouth, growing out of a wall under a window which is so long it stretches the entire length of a huge room? No? Well start by picturing one desk, the oblong, table-like wooden sort, with its short edge against the wall under the window. Got that? OK, put another one next to the stickie out end of first one. Now add a few more so you've got 5 of them in a row jutting out from the same spot in that wall. Add a chair behind each desk making sure you leave a bit of space behind for people to reach all the desks in the row. Are you still with me? Put loads of these desk rows one behind the other, each starting further along that wall underneath the window and you've got an idea of what it looked like to me at my first day at Burroughs Machines Ltd. in London's Oxford Street.

It was my first proper job after leaving college and it was scary. Even the desks were different. These didn't open so you could put stuff under the lids, they were more like tables with drawers underneath on one side and a space for (human) legs on the other. Some of the desks had typewriters on them. Machines of different shapes and sizes were on others. Even the size of the room was different. Six classrooms would've fitted in this one room and there were so many people. And so much noise, - nothing like I'd ever experienced before. My ears almost ached from the clattering, clunking and rattling of machines together with the sounds of voices.

All the company's departments: admin, sales, accounts, etc., were in this one room taking up one, two or several adjacent rows of desks depending on how many staff they had. I s'pose it was only natural that each manager got the best desk by the wall under the window but this was always at the back row of his or her section so all their staff could be seen. (Put on that imagination hat again and picture meerkats in action scanning 'their' rows.)

The desk I'd been given was at the end of one of the rows about two thirds of the way up the room. There were desks in front of me as far as I could see and several more behind me. Natural light fell mainly on the two closest to the window. On dull days I thanked heaven for the strip lights above.

My job description was Figure Clerk but I soon found out that included filing. They probably chose my desk with that in mind because on the other side of the walkway between it and the wall, beside the door which led out to the corridor, were huge metal filing cabinets. Being in the back row of the accounts section also meant it was easy for me to pester our middle aged (to me anyway) sandy haired, (very patient) manager when I needed to ask him how to do stuff.

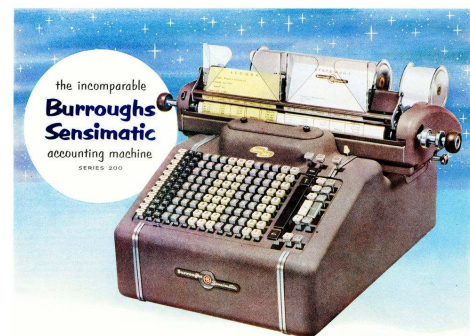


Filing was easy-peasy so I soon got the hang of that. Then I was taught how to use a comptometer, one of the machines the company made. Small enough to sit on my desk, its top was covered in lots of rows of keys. A few of these changed what the others did, but most of them were arranged in columns from 1 to 9. The column on the right was single numbers, the next one in was tens, the next was hundreds and so on. Using the fingers and thumbs of both hands at the same time, the keys had to be tapped

quickly, (making really loud clattering noises) to do calculations. My first attempts were dreadful. Even after I'd cut my fingernails, I still hit the wrong keys, or my fingers slipped off them, or I tapped the wrong number of times, too many or too few. But eventually I got quite good at it and after a while, didn't notice the clatter as I tested myself to see how fast I could work without making mistakes.

People in each section usually stayed together at break times, so as a shy newby I didn't socialise with anyone in other departments. I'd had prejudice many times at school but one of my fellow accounts clerks gave me my first experience of it at work with a unpleasant remark about Jews. Fortunately this was quickly sorted out by our manager and was never mentioned again.

When I first started, Betty took me under her wing. Older than me, she sat in the row in front of mine using a machine called a Sensimatic. So big it took up the entire space of a desk, it looked really complicated, shuddering and rattling with the best of them. Behind a roller similar to a typewriter was a bar with notches at different places along it. Small keys, which Betty told me were Stops, were pushed into these. Surprise, surprise, Stops made the machine stop when it got to them. The clever bit was that each one did something different with whatever was entered when that happened. Text Stops would wait for you to type something in. Number ones added, subtracted, multiplied or divided what you'd entered. And if you didn't like what they did or where they did it, you could take them off, move them or replace them with different ones.



Betty had to put each customer's record card into the roller then enter stuff from their invoices or other documents so it printed out on the card. At the end of a batch, she'd press a few keys and the entire thing started chuntering to itself for a while before spitting out totals. Most of the time it worked fine, but every so often I'd see Betty's head with its light, curly hair drop onto her arms and hear a few choice words and I'd guess the Stops had played up or totals didn't balance. If she turned round with 'that' look on her face, I knew what to do - go and sit with her and help her check her work.

In the middle of an urgent job one day, Betty got called away. From helping her I knew what she did and was excited to be able to take over whilst she left her desk. She was gone for about 20 minutes and in that time I had my first ever experience of using a Burroughs Sensimatic on my own. Have you heard of the butterfly effect where the beating of a butterfly wing on one side of the world can change events on the other side? Who would've guessed that this would be a butterfly wing moment for me a few years later. But more of that in good time.

I stayed at Burroughs Machines for a year earning the grand sum of £30 a month. But I'll have to know you much better before I tell you what I spent my first month's salary on!

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