

Eddie Sands

Eddie Sands, who had been our Branch Chair for 30 years, died on the 13th January. Despite a love for whisky, wine, cigars and a good dinner, plus the attentions of cancer (twice), he made it to 90. Eddie was one of the most decent, able men I ever met and the generations of Branch Officers that followed owe him so much.

He left school at 14 and then set about educating himself with the help of the local library - something to think about as local Councils consider closing them. He never stopped reading and learning throughout the rest of his life. During the war he served with the Royal Engineers. On the way to North Africa his ship was torpedoed and sunk - luckily, for all our sakes, he survived and went on to serve in North Africa, Sicily and Italy. I guess such things put dealing with problems in a post-war English university in some sort of perspective.

Eddie joined the University in 1950 as a general technician in Zoology. He became a member of the Bristol University Association of Scientific Workers (AScW) Branch - the first incarnation of our present Branch - and soon became its Chair. The association with AScW is something Eddie shared with Sir Alec Merrison (Vice Chancellor 69-84). Sir Alec had been a founder member of AScW at Harwell when he was a Scientific Officer there. He was of that generation of senior academics who felt it was their duty to turn purple and shout a lot at times. I had the privilege of watching Eddie deal with Alec at Joint Negotiating meetings. Eddie would start quietly, putting his point across - Alec would fulminate - Eddie just sat back calmly waiting for him to finish then continued as if absolutely nothing had happened. Eddie said to me afterwards "Look he is just an ordinary bloke like you and me - didn't you notice the egg down his tie from breakfast?" In fact the two had a high regard for each other and negotiations usually went well - Alec reminding us of his Trade Union roots at Harwell.

In 1970, I joined the second incarnation of our Branch, ASTMS - the trade Union Clive Jenkins put together in the back of a London Taxi. Branch meetings back then could be highly entertaining and hotly debated - there were many interesting characters around. I watched with huge admiration as Eddie conducted this circus. He made sense of the often rambling debate and, with his superb people skills and bucket loads of common sense, he always managed to get conflicting egos to pull together and good, sound policy usually emerged.

In 1976 he became Superintendent in Psychology - a role he held until he retired. 1976 was obviously a propitious year for Eddie, as he also became one of the first Non-Academic members of Council - the governing body of the University. His knowledge of the University "at the sharp end" and his wisdom quickly gathered respect. For the first time a member of the technical staff sat at the top table. It was a major step on the road to a University where, if you had something sensible to say, you were listened to - the class divides were breaking down. From Council, he was selected to be on the District Health Authority. He also became a member of the Area Manpower Board and a Board member of Filton Technical College.

We often comment on the fact that the good working relationship between the Trade Unions at Bristol and the University management is pretty much unique. It is built on trust - and Eddie has played a huge role in bring this situation about. We all stand on his shoulders.

He was always interested in helping the young and he was instrumental in setting up a training scheme for technical staff here. It was considered as the best example of its kind in the country at the time. It's sad that we have not been able to sustain it in these straitened times.

Eddie played a large part in ASTMS (to become MSF) nationally. He was elected as the South West representative on the Universities National Advisory Committee (UTNAC). UTNAC set the Union's national negotiating strategy for Higher Education. His worth was soon recognised and he became its Chair - election onto the National Executive of the Union followed.

When he retired in 1985 the University awarded him an honorary degree. A few of us gathered in his office afterwards. Shortly after the whisky bottle came out, he burst into tears and said he felt such a sham. We were all stunned that he did not fully realise the respect he was held in by all who knew him. We were proud of him and pleased that the University had rightly recognised his contribution.

Eddie was a very generous man, finding the best in everyone. I rarely heard him say anything bad about others. If he did, there was usually a balancing statement. Bill Maggs, who ran the Electronics workshop in Psychology and went on to be Superintendent in Engineering, said of him "He taught me to manage people as people and I owe him a lot. Xmas was never the same after he retired. I will remember him for his generosity to all the technicians not only in the Department but the University and other institutions."

For Derek Telling and me who followed in Eddie's footsteps, he taught us just about everything we came to know about being a trade union negotiator. Do your homework - present a cogent case - think how management is likely to respond - understand their concerns - do more homework - refine your case - and then just keep going! He taught us that whilst on some things you may profoundly disagree with management decisions (such as the decision to close Architecture), the University is not the enemy. The success of the organisation is crucial to the success of our members. We learnt from the way he balanced doing the very best you can for an individual with the interests of all the members - sometimes a difficult trick to pull off.

Eddie was a dear man - a true gentleman - and though he is gone his legacy remains.