Mike Cooke March 2026

Mike Cooke told us about his life and career at Hoffman's

Mike was born in Cashes Green in 1946.

School Days

When I was a child I went to St Matthews School at Cainscross because the primary school at Cashes Green wasn't built until 1957. I walked there at the age of 5. The site where the new school was built was a field full of magnificent elm trees. I lived in Springfield Road and when we were lads we used to go and watch them felling the trees ready for the foundations of the school. Great big trees made such a crash as they came down. That's why Elm Road is named for the trees that used to be near there. We watched all the new houses there being built and we used to play in the building sites. They had a watchman – Mr Wagstaff – who lived down by the garage. He used to patrol the building site and us lads used to hide behind the piles of bricks and shout "Waggy Waggy". He couldn't catch us! We used to play on the land they called "The Dump" waste land with streams running through it. They were going to build on that but it never happened.

Leaving School

My father worked at Lister's in Dursley, so, rather blindly, I followed him into engineering. I was at the Boys Tech School at Downfield. I left school in 1962 after taking O'Levels, passing the two most important ones – Maths and English. The headmaster was very good at making sure the school leavers had somewhere to go to. He would contact all the local industries which we had plenty of in those days (1962). He arranged an interview for me at a place called Hoffmann's, which I'd never heard of. So on that day I went to Stonehouse looking for Hoffmann's. Unknown to me Hoffmann's was at the far side of Stonehouse. Being a Cashes Green boy I never went the far side of Stonehouse! Anyway I found it and had the interview after which I was offered an apprenticeship. I didn't have a clue what Hoffmann's manufactured and didn't really know what I was facing up to. Once I understood what it was all about I thought it was a good thing to do.

Hoffmann's Apprenticeship and Drawing Office

There was a bunch of 8 or 10 boys in my year. We started off in the first year in the training workshop getting the basics of engineering, making, tooling, learning about the industry. Later years we were split into a practical stream or a technical stream. Practical stream went to the Toolroom, Maintenance, handling machinery – the technical stream went into offices, drawing office, quality control etc. I was put into the technical stream and I ended up in the jig and tool design office as a draughtsman until I finished my time. Number one factory was standard bearings, Number Two was aero engine bearings and Number Three was taper roller bearings which was a new line for Hoffmann's then. I got involved with the tooling for that which was a different level of work. Because they were tapered you had to calculate the different angles on the

bearings and on the tools. I have found my notebook of all the different formulas we had to use to calculate the angles.

I can remember there was a front office block by Queen Mary's Gate. Next to the main door was the wages office. They had machines called comptometers, like mechanical calculators, and when the secretaries had to work out all the hours and pay for the workers, they were punching away at these keyboards and it was deafening. Then there was the Personnel Dept, then the staff canteen and then the works canteen. Hoffmann's was the source of many married couples. In the 1960s/70s I went to lots of weddings and there must have been a lot of people in Stonehouse who met at Hoffmann's.

We had a little hobby in the drawing office – an illustrated calendar with the weather. It was a homemade calendar with enough room every day to do a picture of the weather. We had red colours for warm and blue colours for cold. So you could look back and see how the weather had been over the year. I enjoyed doing the pictures as it was artistic and interesting.

I carried on in the drawing office for another five years until computers started to come in. CAD was being introduced and I did not take to that. I spent ten very happy years working there.

Summer Camp

Each year the apprentice group had a summer camp either at Stonehouse or Chelmsford. I'll never forget when it was our turn to go to Chelmsford you could tell exactly what their mindset was. They're up from the country – these are yokels. When we got off the train at Chelmsford station and were picked up by one of their vehicles there were some of their apprentices all dressed in smocks with carrots in their hands and going ooh arr, ooh arr! They thought we were a load of carrot crunchers from Gloucestershire. What a welcome that was! We had bell tents so we all slept with our feet to the centre. It was the one and only time I've been camping. We were on a farm and we had to rebuild a bridge over a stream. The farm machinery had weakened it and it was collapsing. So we had to dig out the road over the bridge, winch the sides back in and put strengthening bars across and fill in the road again. It was up to the host management to find a project.

Educational visits:

Universal Grinding Mills at Stafford to go and see how they produced the grinding wheels that we were using. We had a good time up there, they entertained us and after the tour they said you must stay for our evening social. We had come by coach so what were we going to do in the time between the visit and the social. The coach driver ran us into Stafford. We found a cinema with an X-rated film so we went in. But it was a spaghetti Western – the X-rated film was on next week! The driver had parked the coach in a car park but when we came back they had put the barrier

down across the entrance and we were stuck in the car park. A lot of apprentices are quite strong together and we managed to dislodge the post and removed the barrier!

Ford Motor Works at Dagenham. I've never known a visit like it - they were fantastic. We went round the works and they gave us a three course lunch with beer afterwards. Our supervisor aid we should do a vote of thanks but he picked the quietest bloke there to do it. He said thanks for showing us round thanks for the meal and three cheers for the canteen staff and that was it!

Supervisors' evenings.

Cabaret, entertainment etc and they had the apprentices acting as stewards. We would stand there in our black tie and smart outfit and take drinks orders. As the night went on they got more lavish with their expenditure. They would buy crates of beer. We had to get money from them to pay the barman. We were told there would be tips for that. We would take a crate of beer down and it they didn't give us any extra money we picked up the crate and took it back again! We did take advantage of them!

Apprentice Association

When I was an apprentice I was involved in the social side. There was an Apprentice Association and a committee and we organised lots of things. I have kept some things from those days which I can show at the meeting. We arranged coach outings to pop shows. Dances were held in the works canteen. We had live music – I have a ticket for a dance on Friday 30th September 1966 8pm to midnight, at which we had two groups, The Strange Fruits and The Road Runners. Admission 4 shillings (20p). Licensed bar. In the 1960s there were a lot of new groups like the Beatles and local lads used to start their own groups with guitars and drums and play at our dances. The biggest one we did had the two top groups in Gloucestershire – The Ravens and the Swingbeats. There was great rivalry for who took the top spot. There was a lot of discussion and eventually we decided to do it alphabetically so the Swingbeats took the top spot! Once I got on the committee I was proactive. I became Secretary, then Treasurer and finally Chairman.

The outings – we used to go to the Colston Hall in Bristol – they had all the big names. We saw The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, Chris Montez, Tommy Roe. I've got the programmes in a box somewhere. In those days you could phone up the venue and say I've got a party of 40 people, book the tickets and pay on arrival. We were trusted to pay when we got there. I can talk about it now because the factory has gone – I used to spend a lot of time walking round collecting money off the people participating every week. They would pay in instalments of about 5 shillings per week until the total was paid off. I would take great pleasure on a lovely sunny day, walking round the factory with a clipboard under my arm collecting the money and ticking it all off. We did Blackpool weekends going up on the Friday evening and coming back Sunday morning for the sum of about £3 or £4, including bed and breakfast. We normally took a coach full of about 40

people from Hoffmann's plus their wives, friends etc. We did two coaches to Bristol Hippodrome to see The Sound of Music film. It was receiving such rave reports that everyone wanted to see it before it came to Stroud.

Activities

Skittles matches and table tennis in the club room. There was tug-of-war and also potholing or caving run by Tony Cave. I didn't choose to do that – crawling in the bowels of the earth getting wet and muddy – no definitely not.

I didn't get involved in the sports side of things. I never played sports mainly because I had a Saturday job. My cousins ran a flower nursery up Dudbridge Hill called Sunbay Nurseries and I used to go up and do weeding, tidying etc and, when I passed my driving test, deliveries. We sold cut flowers and plants and did wreaths and bouquets. I stopped working there after I left Hoffmann's in 1972.

Lunchtime drinks

This would never happen today. Every Friday quite a number went up the Spa Inn at lunchtime. They got their pay, went for a lunchtime drink and then came back to work in the afternoon. On the day before the Christmas break it was like a tidal wave of people going to the Spa. And they all came back in the afternoon to operate their machinery! The surgery was quite busy! Sister Hoddinott was in charge there. She was a bit of a witch and what happened was if you were a little bit wobbly on that Friday afternoon you were sent to the surgery and Sister Hoddinott would sort you out! She would sit you down and feed you Worcester sauce because the shock of it would suddenly bring you back to life! She had a roomful of people but they all got away with it in those days.

On a Friday afternoon the drawing office crowd would go to the Ship Inn. We took it in turns with the cars – driving as well! When I passed my test I didn't own a car so when it was my turn to drive I had to go and borrow somebody's car. You could drive anyone's car they didn't worry about insurance. One of our colleagues, Pete Statham, had a Reliant Robin and I took five people in it along to the Ship Inn. It was scary – three in the back and two in the front and that thing was rocking! When we came out I couldn't find reverse gear. So with five people what did you do? We lifted it up, turned it round and drove back. We got back – "Everything OK?" "Yes fine!"

"Foreigners"

That's what they used to call doing outside jobs for people on the side. What used to go on! In the maintenance shop they had a production line of golfing trolleys. They used to take orders, cut up the metal and take it to be welded. In the drawing office we used to do housing plans, model

aircraft plans, model locomotive plans. It was an extra bit of interest – you would do your work and then a bit of work on a house plan or a garage extension.
Also every Friday there was a man going round, "*Something for the weekend Sir?"* He spent all his Friday afternoons going round the factory selling condoms.
In the drawing office we had the polo eating contest. I hold the record for that – I made a polo mint last for three hours and ten minutes! I used to put it under my top lip and just let it melt gradually.

Railways and Hoffmann's Siding

My railway interest started as a child. As I said, I went to St Matthews School at Cainscross which involved walking by the railway line, then the Boys' Tech at Downfield – by the railway line, and as I said, I didn't have a clue where Hoffmann's was but lo and behold – it was by a railway line! It's the story of my life; I ended up in the drawing office overlooking the railway line. When I started at Hoffmann's in the office was Margaret Mynett whose father was Cyril Mynett who was signalman at Burdett Road Station. The signal man in the LMS line box was Theo Sparrow, he lived at Cam. When they closed the station he found a job at Hoffmann's as a progress chaser.
In the 1960s it was the end of steam and out of my window I could see the convoys of steam engines being taken to South Wales for scrap! My colleagues around me soon got used to it "Hey up – scrap trains coming!" We got paper and pencil, jotting down the numbers – generally about half a dozen at a time. We made a record of every locomotive that came past going to scrap. There would be one engine, which could have been steam or diesel, with about 6 steam engines being towed behind.
One time in the drawing office, diesel time by then, there was one express from Bristol ands to say he was screeching to a halt was an understatement. He had just killed a person down by Frocester. The remains of the person were on the front of the train and it was outside our office window while Forensics examined everything. The line was blocked there were police everywhere.

Looking at the book *The Nailsworth and Stroud Branch* by Colin Maggs

How the Hoffmann's Siding worked

This is Stonehouse LMS Railway Station 1905, that is the footbridge from what is now Park Estate, and that is the Dudbridge Donkey line to Stroud and Nailsworth. This is in 1962 showing Hoffmann's siding. What happened was – the train would come down from Gloucester, it would stop there with wagons for Hoffmann's which they used for taking the steel scrap away. So what they had to do was reverse over that crossing there and shunt the empty wagons into the yard there. Then they connected up the full ones and took them away. Off they went down to Dursley to Lister's factory. The engine in the photo took the full wagons from the factory up to the siding and then brought the empty ones back. The trucks are shown in the photo on page 39 from Colin

Maggs book. It was all controlled by the signal box to make sure no other trains could pass while the trucks were being manoeuvred.

The row of trees shown in the photos separated the factory from the playing fields. All that area is now an industrial estate. Number two and number three factories were built against the edge of the railway line behind the main factory.

Going back to photo of the engine at Hoffmann's. The Muirhill etc. What is that doing in the photo? The answer is in the Colin Maggs railway book.

Maggs, Colin, *The Nailsworth and Stroud Branch,* Oakwood Press, 2000. ISBN 0853615594

Rebuilding the railway bridge

During that time (late 1960s) they rebuilt the railway bridge over the Bristol Road. It was a brick arched bridge with a low clearance. So when they widened the road to go to the motorway it was going to be a dual carriageway so the new bridge was built to accommodate that but it never happened. I watched every stage of that from my window at work. I have a collection of photographs of the construction from start to finish. They demolished it with dynamite overnight and I was down there and got a photograph. The next day they were clearing the debris, they had already built the buttresses and they were lifting in the beams for the bridge. They put new drainage pipes going down to the canal.

Driving instructor

In 1972, I left Hoffmann's and became a driving instructor and was self-employed as that for 23 years. Something totally different. To become an instructor there was a two part test theory and practical. The practical was quite demanding as the examiner not only judged your driving but he acted as a pupil and you had to explain things and pick him up on all his faults. I passed first time. I had to display a certificate in the window of my car. When I started out after working at Hoffmann's I got most of my customers from there. I went round the factory getting people men, women, young, old,- people who wanted to learn and people who didn't even want to learn and I recruited them. I went round with application forms for driving licences and got people to sign them. I was charging about £1 an hour for lessons.

Bus and Coach driving

I did driving instructing from 1972 to 1988. During that time I got involved with the Stroud Carol Bus. A bit by "accident". In 1982 I was involved in a head-on crash by the Prince of Wales pub in Cashes Green before they widened the road. My accident was the prime cause of them widening the road. There were two lads escaping from the police. They had been chasing them from Lightpill up to Cashes Green. When they came over the railway bridge they sped up and met my car, with a pupil driving, coming down the road. The driver had leg injuries and I had a face full of

glass from the smashed windscreen. I was in hospital for two weeks and out of work for three months. So when Christmas came I got involved with the Carol Bus collecting for the hospital. I could take the bus all round the local routes. I did 11 years with the Carol Bus. Then the manager of Stroud buses asked me if I fancied driving a bus and I said of course. I did a preliminary drive and they asked me to take a test. I passed the test and got a big shock when he asked me to report for work on the Monday at 7.00 am! I said, “Hang on I’ve got people I’m teaching to drive and tests to book!” “Oh no - you work for us now.” So I became a bus driver “by accident”.

I carried on doing both jobs for 8 years until 1996 when the bus depot moved from London Road to Bowbridge. I couldn’t get to the bus depot in time after my driving lessons so I gradually gave them up. Then I started driving coaches which I enjoyed and I’m still doing some driving now after 38 years. Mainly school runs, just when they need someone to fill in covering sickness and holidays.

Pathfinder Railtours

Another thing I was involved with was Pathfinder Railtours which is where I met the photographer Jack Boskett. I used to volunteer with them and ended up running their souvenir shop. Before that I was lucky enough to drive the coach on railway tours so I got to go abroad working my passage driving. One time we went to the South of France and I was doing what they call the graveyard shift from midnight to 6.00 in the morning. It was thick fog and when you are driving on the wrong side of the road trying to find your way it was difficult. I was relieved when we got there safely.

I’ve got a collection of photographs, mainly transport, most of it catalogued.

Mike gave a talk to Stonehouse History Group in April 2026 - a summary of which can be found on our website.

Photo shows Mike Cooke at his home in March 2026.

