

T.L. Howson – Physics teacher – a memory



I started in Form 1c at Trinity in 1951 and after O levels, went on into 6th Science in 1956. As I recall it, sometime in 1956, Mr Howson appeared as a new physics teacher, replacing Mr Mayes. I had got on quite well under Mayes, but Howson turned out to be a refreshing and more inspiring teacher. With a rotund figure, round smiley face and round pebble-lens spectacles, gown-wearing Howson had a somewhat eccentric appearance, but with a good strong voice and confident demeanour, he was liked rather than lampooned. He quickly became referred to as “Fred”, or “Chinese Fred”, names that probably derived from the radio series, The Goon Show, which was still popular in the late 1950s.

One change that Howson introduced was a new set of physics text books, authored by Michael Nelkon. I forget what they replaced, but they were much more amenable, relevant and modern. I can still hear Howson’s voice as he strode to his front desk, “Get out your Nelkons”, usually greeted with wry amusement. I half-remember a story that Fred had taught in the military before coming to Trinity and maybe that had been in the Far East, but perhaps that’s a confusion with his ‘Chinese’ name.

I left Trinity in 1958 with quite good A levels and worked for two years before starting a full-time degree course. I worked as a lab assistant at the electronics research facility known as Standard Telecommunications Laboratories (STL) at Enfield, which was an amazing place to be when the revolution in solid state electronics with transistors was taking place. In 1959 STL was preparing to relocate to a new purpose built complex at Harlow and was disposing of some less than essential scientific equipment. Thinking of the relative sparseness of the apparatus at Trinity, it occurred to me to see if some of the equipment could be of use there. So, I re-established contact with Trinity and Howson and all was arranged.

By summer 1959 I had also acquired my first car (a 1936 Morris 8 - cost £25!) and heavily laden with equipment I parked up in Trinity Road, by the back entrance to the school. The equipment included: an oscilloscope with a 6inch cathode ray tube (made by Cossor Ltd, which weighed more than 30kg), an electronic signal generator (made by Advance Ltd) and a test instrument known as an ‘Avometer’. A troupe of 6th formers duly carried it all up to the science lab, and rejoicing in the sense of being both benefactor and big boy local-hero, I duly set about connecting it up to show what it could do. It was easy to demonstrate how the oscilloscope could display a sine wave on the screen and I think Howson, the lab assistant (I can’t recall his name) and the attendant 6th formers were impressed. I was then able to use the signal generator to impose another sine wave in such a way to create a circle and other shapes (Lissajous Figures) and they were doubly impressed. This really was the Twentieth Century!

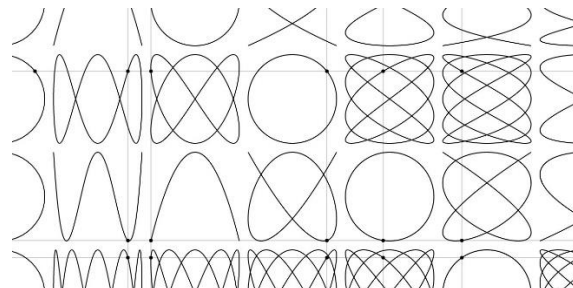
Howson seemed to be delighted by it all and I still have an image in my head of his rounded figure and him smiling like a Cheshire cat! I walked away from the school with a somewhat puffed-up sense of achievement and was relieved that for once, the battery of the Morris had not gone flat, and I was able to start it without the handle and drive away. I never did find out what use Howson and the school made of it all. I wonder now, more than 60 years later, if anyone has any memories of seeing any of it in action?



Cossor oscilloscope ~ 1950s



Advance signal generator ~ 1950s



Lissajous figures