

Ray Riley

6 April 2018

Three days ago both Dick Mills and Brian Hodgson rang me, to tell me about the death of Ray Riley, second engineer at the BBC Radiophonic Workshop from 1979 to 1993. I thought it only appropriate to write a few words about my friend and colleague.

Ray was an 'old school' engineer, of the rule, set square, pillar-drill and lathe variety, forthright and entirely practical, capable of making and repairing almost anything, from clockwork mechanisms, all kind of electronics and on to engines. He had a vast collection of engineering tools of every kind, so much so that at one stage he had to reconstruct the shed housing them all, as it was rapidly sinking into the London clay of his garden.

He began with National Service in the Royal Air Force, where his skills in electronics were honed, despite some harrowing experiences. On ending his service he joined BBC Radio, where he transferred live broadcasts onto shellac disks, something that required great skill and coordination, brushing swarf away from cutter-heads and carefully switching disks at opportune moments. As part of Circuit Maintenance Unit he kept the radio studios running, eventually working at the Maida Vale music studios.

In 1979, after only six years at the Corporation I was promoted to Senior Engineer Radiophonic Workshop and Ray was brought in to help install a new multitrack studio for Paddy Kingsland. I could never have filled the shoes of such an experienced engineer or be his 'manager', so he did most of the work, including much of the wiring.

The studio was a massive success, as were the numerous other installations that followed. They would not have been so without Ray, who managed to bring back to earth some of the more outrageous ideas that were sometimes proposed. Our successful teamwork earned us the cringeworthy epithet of 'The Two Rays', which, once applied, could never be fully shaken off.

The other work that Ray did in fourteen years at the Workshop can't be fully covered here, but it did include a computerised equipment schedule and a huge amount of effort on Syncwriter, which allowed pictures and sound to be more easily locked together. He would fearlessly take apart disk drives and other newer technology and get them working again, well at least for most of the time.

But more important to Ray than any of this was his family: he was justifiably very proud of his wife Pat and daughter Samantha, something that was clearly visible whenever they visited the BBC canteen. I know that Pat's trial with cancer almost broke him, but I do hope that the steady world of work helped him through it all.

The greatest of engineers have their monuments around us, the lesser-known, like Ray perhaps, seem to leave only clocks that keep ticking or radios that still sound, at least for a while. But Ray Riley gave much more to all those who worked with him: he has left us with recollections of a unique time spent in creative teamwork, laughter and fun, a lasting monument of happy memories.

Ray White