

HC Allens

My first 'real' job was in HC Allens Motor Factors in Joy Street, Belfast. My dad got me the job through a friend of his who worked there. Danny was a motor electrician and he taught me a lot about car electrics. My dad was fed up with me tinkering with his car so he wanted to put my 'skills' to better use on other people's cars.

HC Allens taught me a lot about cars. Mechanics and garages would come to us and buy car parts. I sold huge numbers of Ford exhaust systems in my time. We were very busy and everything was sold with cash, no electronic devices then.

Someone would come in to get a part and we would have to look up the part number in various specialized books. To get the right part we needed the full details of the car, even its chassis number. Some parts changed so often that we would nearly need to crawl under the car to identify a part. Ford changed their exhaust systems so often it was nearly impossible to stock all the variations but Mr. Allen tried to! The exhaust store was huge with all sorts of pipes and exhaust boxes. I worked part-time each Saturday but full time during school holidays. There were four of us behind the counter and being the youngest I was usually the 'gofer' – having to fetch parts from various locations in the huge shop while the senior men built good relations with contacts.

Many cars at that time did not have radios fitted out of the factory. One of the best radios was the Radiomobile models. They came with a fitting kit for certain cars and when fitted looked very neat. Danny showed me how to go about fitting radios and I was soon doing them on my own. Sometimes we had to take a radio out of a car and fit a better one in. Because of this my dad's cars always had radios as I 'liberated' the unwanted ones from the bin.

Sometimes delivery orders were made up and the items were stacked at the rear of the shop so they could be loaded into the firm's car. This was a beautiful metallic blue Cortina estate. Mr. Allen's son usually drove this and he would bring it up the rear entry and park at the rear doors for us to load it up. The entry wasn't straight but had a bend in it and I always admired the way that the wide and long Cortina would still be able to get up and down it. The week after I passed my driving test I was thrown the keys of the Cortina and told to bring it up to the back door. Up until then most of my driving was done in an old Morris Minor and I was scared stiff to scrape the Cortina. I chickened out and gave the keys back. I was slagged off unmercifully for not driving the car. I was also never asked to do so again.

We knew most people who came into the shop or else it was very obvious from their clothes or hands that they were car trade. The general public could come in and buy but our stock didn't usually lend itself to browsing. However one Saturday morning it was very busy and two guys came in and stood back from the counter a bit looking at all the parts we had on display. Soon after they left without buying anything.

Later on I mentioned this to some of the others, but we just shrugged our shoulders and thought nothing of it.

By 12.30pm every day, nearing lunchtime, things started slackening off and few customers came in. Just before closing for lunch the two guys from earlier came back in however this time they removed a shotgun and a large Webley handgun from under their coats. It sounds like a cliché to say it but honestly things seemed to go into slow motion. The guys were screaming at us and pointing the guns and my first reaction was to hit the floor. As I did so I could see the others being slower than me but getting down just the same. One of the guys came around the counter and opened the till drawers and took all the money. As they were leaving they warned us to not phone the police nor leave the shop for 15 minutes as there was someone watching us in the street. We all sat on the floor looking at one another and then someone got up and phoned the RUC.

We were all in total shock at what had happened. Armed men had pointed weapons at each of us. We could have been shot and possibly killed! We closed up for the rest of the day. The following Saturday when I turned up for work a new security buzzer had been installed on the door. None of us were exactly clear on how this would stop us being robbed again.

HC Allens kept going and closed it's door finally in 2020.