Ideas in Progress

Paper Number 36

A day in the life of

Wilfred Jones

Denis Loveridge

January 1979

The series constitute ‘ideas in progress,’ after the notion described by I.J. Good in ‘The Scientist Speculates.’ Good also describes ideas about ideas as ‘partly baked ideas’ believing that “... it is often better to be stimulating and wrong than boring and right.” While the papers do not take this tenet as an excuse for licence at the expense of rigour, they are exploratory and the ideas may change as a theme is developed over time. The present note was written in January 1979: a sequel to it is in preparation to explore some new ideas.

Copyright © Denis Loveridge, 2003
All rights reserved
A day in the life of Wilfred Jones

Authors note - The following short story was written in January 1979 to draw attention to some possible developments in ways of living that might emerge during the 1980’s or 1990’s. Many of the ideas are now feasible and some have been turned into socially desirable products. Others remain in the realm of the future but all are permissible within known science. The note is presented now as a precursor to a second of Wilfred Jones’s excursions into the future which is in preparation and will appear shortly.

Wilfred Jones had stayed up late, much later than he thought, but now as he lay enthralled by the story of the return of the spacecraft in C.S. Lewis’ “Out of the silent planet” he shared Dr. Ransoms torture of heat and thirst, so that his mind too drifted away .......

He woke with a start, turned and stretched out his hand to turn off the alarm. “Damn” he thought, “will I ever get used to the alpha-wave alarm system?” It was some years ago that technologists succeeded in reversing the military principal of firing weapons from a pilots alpha-waves and had turned it into a simple, but very effective alarm system; a curious development brought about by a series of other things which now came dimly into Wilfred’s mind.

Slowly, grey light penetrated through his room as the acoustic curtains and blinds were drawn back automatically. These gave a clue to need for the alpha-wave alarm. The passion for silence, that had developed with the environmental movement in the middle of the 1980’s, had led to such a striking reduction of noise inside buildings that the noise from an ordinary clock had become quite intolerable, particularly at night. The alpha alarm of course was completely silent, controlled, as were the acoustic curtains and the blinds, from the control unit in the centre of the house.

At first the acoustic curtains were made of transparent material, so they could at any time be drawn across the windows to reduce the noise level, but many town dwellers found utter silence in their homes virtually intolerable. In the end the curtains were transformed into simple ones, which would make houses much quieter during night hours. Their operation was automatic of course, depending on signals from the alarm system and how light it was outside.

Slowly Wilfred woke and began to look around the room, which by now was warm. The month of September had been chilly and the heating system had started its winter’s work early. Dimly, Wilfred wondered whether his budget for heating for this season would be sufficient in view of how early the system had begun to work. But he put his faith in the ability of the controllers to match his scheduled expenditure to the likely weather cycle during the winter months. He knew he could always override the controls if necessary and ask them to reschedule some part of the heating cycle if the winter became rapidly colder or if there was a long warm period toward the end of the winter. Experience over the last five years with the new controllers, which had been introduced by the mid 1980’s, had helped him to understand far more about how he could not only save his own money, but save a great deal of increasingly precious fuel. He knew that he and his wife and children had roughly half-an-hour in which to wash, dress and make their way downstairs, as by that time the living programme would be heating other rooms in the house, whilst the bedrooms would be becoming cooler. The family had come to terms with the heating controllers, but there had been many arguments about how much money to spend on heating, what really constituted comfort and what was a sensible annual heating cycle.

As he went downstairs he mused to himself that nobody had yet managed to replace his electric razor; science and technology had not overcome the male beard.

As he passed through the hall, he noted an indicator lamp glowing and made his way into the study and switched on the home terminal. There were several messages for him, acquainting him with the meeting with Fisher at ten and also a short letter from his son at university. Handwritten letters were treasured; his mother had refused to change her life long habit of letter writing and today he expected a letter from her. He recollected the joy of opening the mail, even bills, in years gone by and the laughing exchanges and teasing that went on between his children and postman Fred. But then the postal system had become so bad that technology was recruited to provide direct communication through the amalgamation of computers, television broadcasting and the telephone system.

By that time breakfast was ready. As he made his way to the dining room, he found to his annoyance that he had to open a door by hand and thought he must have left his magnetic badge off the shirt he had put on that morning. Then he recalled that the actuator on that particular door had jammed some weeks ago and he had to make a temporary repair. Now with growing
impatience, he reflected how difficult it was to get a service engineer to come to replace the faulty actuator.

“There’ll be no toast this morning” his wife called cheerily from the kitchen. “Why’s that” asked Wilfred? “Well the microprocessor in the toaster has given up the ghost, I think” she said. She had already incinerated several pieces of bread that morning and unknown to her the home security system had automatically doused a potential fire on the second occasion. “And what’s more” Helen added “there’ll be no more mending until you get the microprocessor fixed on the sewing machine”. Helen had lost her capability for hand sewing some years ago and had come to depend entirely on the new brand of sewing machines.

One more item in a long list of things to be done. Wilfred thought of the day when he could repair many of these things for himself, but now he knew he would have to go to the special workshop in Skelmersdale, where somebody had been smart enough to set up the only repair agency for the whole of the North West of England. Even his watch had to be taken there to have the batteries replaced, so sensitive were the contents that the slightest misalignment would damage some of the thirty functions that it could perform. Seriously he wondered whether some of these developments were worthwhile, particularly as the journey to Skelmersdale involved the use of precious and expensive petrol.

Breakfast over, he prepared to depart for work, but where should he go today? Should he go to the work centre or should he go into the office of his employers? He looked outside. It was misty, tempting him to go only to the work centre, a bare half a mile away, but he knew there were things to be done which could only be done at his employers office; that would have to be the place to go to today. As the rest of the family prepared to depart to their various places of employment and enjoyment, he thought comfortably that the house control system would shortly take over the management of the house until they returned, and of course it would continue to do it while they were there, unless they decided to intervene for some purpose or another.

In the garage he found the car engine warm and inside warmed as well by the electrical heaters now required by law in every vehicle. As he touched the car management system start button, the electrical heating socket withdrew itself and a moment or so later the engine sprang to life, already working at its maximum thermal efficiency. The car moved forward, the garage doors opened automatically and closed again once the car was outside, to conserve the maximum amount of heat. Wilfred set off knowing that his house would be completely protected from almost any eventuality, by the house control system, during the families absence. He hoped Helen and Julie, his daughter, had remembered to reset the code on their digital keys, after the change last night, as he had an uncomfortable feeling he had forgotten to remind them about it.

By the time he reached the end of his drive, Wilfred was faced with a major dilemma. The mist had thickened. He remembered, with feelings verging on terror, the terrible motorway accident he had been involved in September 1971. Should he go by the motorway guided driveway or should he go through the normal roads to his office? He opted for the normal roads and turned on the route finding communications computer on the dashboard. Already this was reporting hold-ups and places to avoid on his journey to work. At the same time the car control system switched on the short range radar scanner and the necessary lights.

Wilfred set off, following the instructions of the route finding computer and quickly made his way toward the office. Only once did the short range radar scanner cause the automatic braking system to come into operation, to prevent him approaching another vehicle ahead too quickly; the human capability for perceiving distances in misty weather had certainly not improved! Wilfred always found the operation of the emergency braking system very disconcerting, even though it had saved his life on more than one occasion. To feel the control of the car virtually taken out of your hands, alarmed him the first time it happened and he had never really grown used to it.

Before the end of his journey, Wilfred noticed a warning light flashing, telling him that on his journey the fuel consumption of his car was approaching the minimum permitted. Once again he thought “Another visit to a service station” otherwise shortly the car control system would immobilise his car altogether until it was readjusted by a registered engineer. Wilfred thought “Another damn service visit!” Forgetfulness on previous occasions had caused more than one violent argument at home, particularly on the night they were due to go to Julie’s prize giving at school and he had carelessly forgotten to get the car serviced the day before. On that occasion it had taken several hours to obtain assistance from an authorised service engineer who could return the car to the required
standard of performance. He was not at all sure that advanced technology was an unmitigated blessing.

Wilfred’s day passed and his journey home was uneventful, the mist had cleared and he chose to go home the quickest way, using the local motorway. He could have used the car guidance system, but he chose not to, relishing the freedom to drive as he wished, or so he thought. Helen had not reset her digital key, but that only earned Wilfred a mild rebuke, much to his surprise.

Wednesday evening was shopping evening. One time that would have meant a visit to the local superstore with a journey round interesting shelves looking at cheese, wine and so on, with a mild flirtation with the check out girl thrown in. But now pressure of time, with all the family being out of the house all day, prevented that and instead they shopped remotely by television and computer. Many problems cropped up during the early stages of shopping remotely. The wall sized picture and shopping simulation of their superstore had taken a lot of getting used to. Even so the quality of the cheese was not immediately obvious on the television screen, even from close up photographs; you couldn’t smell it and you certainly couldn’t feel it. There was no problem about the price, that was always indicated clearly enough on the screen, but the quality was quite another matter. The sell-by date was always clearly indicated and if an item was temporarily out of stock you would always know exactly how long it would be before a new stock would arrive. If an item was not on the shelves you could search the warehouse to see if it was there. More embarrassing were the numerous occasions when they grossly overspent, often exceeding their overdraft allowance. Needless to say this produced an automatic letter from the banks computer, but then what could you do about it, the money had been spent. Friction at home mounted on several occasions with threat and counter threat of individual accounts accessible only by increasingly complicated codes, but then they were saved more by the bank than by themselves.

The banks and the stores finally resolved this problem by setting up business together so a store had automatic access to your account. Shopping was then carried out by a meticulous routine and every purchase was immediately debited to your account with no possibility of overspending, for as soon as your overdraft limit was exceeded all following purchases were rejected outright. This brought some considerable discipline into their shopping, forcing them to acquire only the essentials in the first instance, dividing up the rest of their current balance amongst those luxuries that could be afforded, between one pay day and the next. Needless to say this caused many arguments with their differing priorities.

The evening progressed. Half way through the shopping session, Wilfred got up to stretch his legs and went for a walk, briefly, to the front door. Opening it, he took a pace or two outside and was surprised to find how cold it was. Obviously the house control system had consulted the local weather centre at some time during the day and had learned that the night was likely to be considerably colder than the programmed pattern would have anticipated. It had therefore decided to raise the heating output to maintain our comfort level. But it placed Wilfred in a quandary; he only hoped the system would be able to cope with his decreasing bank balance and budget toward the end of the heating season, otherwise there could be some chilly nights for them, for the bank’s computer would refuse to allow them to buy any more gas once they had exceeded their overdraft and the controller would query their budget. That too had been a source of friction in the past. The shopping session over, the family discussed the days events. Charles teletext letter contained a plea for some new learning discs for his learning machine - his finances were low too! Julie was having a grand time with the latest electronic dictionary and pronunciation machine, an outgrowth of the early speak and spell machines. These had worried Helen a great deal during Julie’s early childhood and had caused her to invest much more time in Julie’s development in other ways. It was this which had cemented the family’s bonds, which these machines had broken in so many homes.

Once again Wilfred began to wonder, but fortunately Dr. Ransom’s spacecraft came down with a bump and his eyes flickered and refocused; he too was glad to climb out of the future and walk out through the rain into his local pub for a pint of English beer. Emerging some hours later he was asked, by a polite policeman, to blow into a machine the size of a matchbox - he knew what that meant. Happily the machine spoke kindly to him, telling him his alcohol level was within the socially responsible limit (he was unlikely to beat his wife). He went home, feeling the future was nearer than he had dreamt.

Denis Loveridge
January, 1979