

A special interview with John Ling formerly of Coates

Dan: John, thanks for talking with me today. First of all I have to ask, aren't you a competitor to Taiyo America? So why would you do this? I have to say this is extremely gracious of you.

John: Well, thank you. At Coates we regarded all our competitors with respect, and when we commenced operations in North America my colleagues in Arizona certainly found it an uphill battle to gain any market share from Taiyo, but in pursuit of the 80/20 rule we didn't do too badly.

As with so many companies, Coates (UK) disappeared from sight after its merger with Lorilleux (France), and subsequent acquisition by Total (France), then sale to Sun Chemicals (USA), who are in turn owned by Dainippon (Japan), so one hundred and twenty-three years of British ink making became mere history. We live in a transient world, do we not?!

Dan: We sure do. So John, tell us something about yourself, what is your background?

John: My background is in printing. I studied at the London College of Printing in the late '50's and after an opportunity came along, to become involved with the conversion from rotary letterpress to web-offset printing at a number of newspaper companies in the UK. In the 1960's I went off to Nigeria as part of a team setting up a new national daily English-language newspaper. Equipped with a duck-egg blue press from Miele-Goss-Dexter in Chicago, we produced many editions in full-color, to the delight of our advertisers, and the obvious approval of the Graphic Arts Foundation of North America (a prestigious organization who deemed us worthy of a very impressive framed certificate for technical excellence which hung proudly on the wall of our reception area). I think that out in darkest Africa we were rather ahead of the game for full-color printing on a daily newspaper in the early '60's!

From there it was on to the Middle East, also involved in printing, working in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Jordan. I came back to the UK in 1972, and found a wife and a new job, this with a venerable company called Coates Brothers.

I remained with them for 28 years, serving with various divisions, culminating with the Circuit Products Division of Coates Electrographics where I looked after export sales and marketing. Coates had produced a screen-printable solder resist known as XZ15 which had been approved by IBM in the early days of PTH PCB production and had become an industry standard. On the back of this Coates entered the market for LPI SM, required by the move for higher production capacity of fine-line circuitry. The product was Imagecure®. As this division exported 90% of production, the responsibility was intensive and we competed with worthy companies such as Du Pont, Ciba-Geigy, Dynachem, Tamura and of course - Taiyo.

I retired in 2000, then joined the editorial team at Printed Circuit News until 2003, after which I was Associate Editor of Circuit World until 2014. I have been looking after the marketing side of EIPC for some time now and edit their regular on-line newsletter called 'Speednews'. Paper and ink do seem to have been very much a part of my working life.

Dan: So you have been in the business for many years. Can you tell us something about what it was like then, as opposed to what it is like today?

John: The main difference is the one of mass. The reduction in the number of PCB manufacturers in the last 12 years has been dramatic. Where there were thousands of them in Europe, there are now just a few hundred. The loss of skills, garnered over the years of fast-moving and demanding technology, was palpable. Whilst many found work in the few remaining companies, many went elsewhere into other industries. The companies who survived the downturn were ones of strategic importance, operating for the most part in the defense and medical spheres, but with obvious historic links to the European automotive industry. Quantity does not always go hand in hand with quality, and whilst volumes could be handled in Asia, quality was often a missing ingredient. Many a European company formed associations with Chinese operators, offering low-price volume boards along with the most sophisticated circuitry, the latter from within their home country.

Dan: Interesting: How and what are your thoughts about North America?

John: I have not been to the USA for some time now, but recall the magnificent IPC exhibitions held in various locations, San Diego being a favorite, Long Beach too, and the sheer scale of the supply side to the industry which at that time led the world. I know that the USA has contracted (with China) just as much as Europe, but now I tend to cheer whenever I read of a company repatriating its' manufacturing, it reflects the curved ball that is the global market, and where the size of the planet has been seriously underestimated. I think that North America, and the U.S. specifically is doing a better job at this.

Dan: What do you see is the future for the solder mask industry? Can you talk about new industries that will be using these products?

John: There will have been those who could not have imagined an alternative to camera film for capturing an image. There are those who cannot imagine an alternative to solder mask for protecting non-conductive areas. Digital imaging or direct imaging is the beneficiary of a great deal of research, and the number of installations around the world tends to mirror the same parabola of change that curtain-coating and double-sided screen printing brought along in the 1980's and 1990's. Quarter of a century later, imaging is under constant radical alteration, and the world of 'green paint' will require some deft management to adjust accordingly.

Dan: Okay I have to put you on the spot, after all this is a Taiyo Newsletter, can you tell me what you like about Taiyo and its products?

John: I think that Taiyo has done a great job of keeping not only up with technology, but ahead of it, as well. As I mentioned in my last answer Dan, this is the key to being successful in this business and from what I can see Taiyo has done a very good job at this. Taiyo is well-placed, taking the inkjet system to a new level of application. As an example I just watched an interview where Pete Starkey of PCB007 interviewed Don Monn at the recent IPC Expo in San Diego, and it would seem from his review that Taiyo's many years of development in cooperation with equipment manufacturers have resulted in a successful solder mask inkjet formulation. I congratulate them for that.

Dan: Well John, it has been a real pleasure talking with you, one of the true legends of our industry. And I especially want to thank you for your graciousness when it comes to doing this for Taiyo America, your one time competitor.

John: It's been my pleasure Dan.