

A HEALTH INSPECTOR CALLS



ROBERT CROUCH

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Author's Note

For almost 40 years, I worked in environmental health in the UK, dealing with all manner of complaints and problems, many of them humorous in one way or another.

When I joined local government in 1977, council officers were respected and held in some esteem. When I left the service in 2016, parents put working in the public sector as the second least desirable profession for their children. Only catering fared worse.

I've seen the landscape change. Successive governments have imposed their different priorities. Technology, especially computers, has revolutionised the way we all work. And austerity poses its own particular challenges with new ways of working.

Along the way, food businesses have become more sophisticated and diverse. Health has replaced safety as the biggest threat in the workplace. The environment has become a significant issue as developers and conservationists battle for the hearts and minds of the public. Obesity is now replacing smoking as the biggest threat to the health of the nation.

Yet at the heart of it all remain people. The average person expects much more today, but seems prepared to offer much less. They're quick to blame and reluctant to take responsibility. Intolerance has infected people with little time to understand or care about their neighbours. People want immediate results. When they don't get them they're quick to take action, often on social media. And they don't care who's in the firing line as long as they get what they want, or believe they're owed.

Against this changing backdrop, the work of an environmental health officer (EHO) can seem thankless, mundane and dominated by people fighting each other. But people can also make you laugh, cry and sometimes leave you speechless. I loved and enjoyed almost every moment of my work and I hope this collection of cases shows there is still humanity, humility, and above all, humour in a world where EHOs strive to protect and improve public health.

Robert Crouch

The Student Years
(1977-1981)

The Rebellious Student

It's Monday morning, 5th September 1977. It's the year of the Queen's silver jubilee and I'm blasting out the riff to 'Anarchy in The UK' by the Sex Pistols on my electric guitar. It's not plugged in, as the noise would upset the neighbours. I'm 18 and alive, woken from a mediocre existence by punk rock, which has shaken the foundations of society with its new anthems.

Proudly, I wear an earring to show I've joined the rebellion.

I would spike my hair, slash my jeans and spit everywhere, but I'm starting my first job today.

I'm a student environmental health officer (EHO) with Bury Metro, a suburb of Greater Manchester. I've no idea what to expect. It's over four months since my interview and offer of a job. Four men, all over 50, faced me across the room, asking me questions, making notes about my answers, and generally giving nothing away. Then the letter arrived, offering me the job. Now I have a second letter, asking me to present myself at the council offices at 9am.

It's exciting. Work means wages, money to spend. It means I go to college two days a week to learn the theory, and put it into practice on the other three days. It's an important job, according to everyone I know, and I can't wait to start.

After one more blast of the Sex Pistols, I fasten the new tie I'm wearing over my new shirt, which goes with my new suit and shoes. Not since the school uniform for my first year at senior school have I had so many new clothes. Never before have I chosen what I wear.

This is the power of work.

I say goodbye to my mother, who slips a packed lunch into my hands. She tells me to behave myself, to do what I'm told, and no answering back. As if I would. Once out of the house and around the corner, I slip the earring back into my ear. It says, don't mess with me because I have attitude.

This attitude courses through my veins until I enter the reception area of the council offices. Large, alien and filled with older people, it seems to dwarf me. Looking at the counters and the unsmiling people behind them, I'm tempted to run. I've formed my first band and we could be famous one day.

Then an attractive woman behind the counter catches my eye. She's much older than me, probably mid-20s, blonde, blue-eyed and her smile says she fancies me. Well, that's what my hormones tell me, not that they were any good at giving me accurate information about who was interested in me.

She beckons me over with a sensuous finger. In a soft, dreamy voice, she says, "You look lost. Is there anything I can do to help?"

I can't answer. I'm mesmerised by her white blouse, stretched to transparency over a well-filled bra. Her name badge says she's Annabel and I'm in love. Work is going to be great!

I pass her the folded letter from my jacket pocket, realising we'll be working together in the same building. She reads the letter quickly and smiles again. "Welcome to the council, Mr. Crouch. I'll just ring through and someone will come down to collect you. Why don't you take a seat over there?"

She gestures to a row of hard plastic chairs along one wall. I sit and wait, wondering what it's like to date a woman who works. She's not going to be interested in talking about school, or exams, or the 10-gear racing bike I bought with money saved from my paper rounds. Good job I'm working now, because I can't see her settling for a bag of chips on a date.

Before fantasy engulfs me, I'm interrupted by a stocky man with thick wavy hair, Eric Morecombe glasses, and a smile that reveals even white teeth. He's wearing a brown suit and a matching tie with a huge knot I'm in awe of. He holds out a huge hand and almost crushes mine with a short, sharp shake.

"Welcome to Bury Metro, Robert. Or is it Bob? How do you feel?"

"Randy," I almost say. Thankfully, the pain in my hand has dissipated my hormones.

"Excited," I reply, despite my dry mouth and throat. "Pleased to be here," I add, remembering my mother's coaching. "Raring to go."

He chuckles. "This is the council, not Brands Hatch, Bob, but I'm sure you'll soon fit in. I'm Fred Skipper and I'll be responsible for your training over the next four years."

Four years. That's a long time to be called Bob.

"I prefer Robert," I say, following him to the exit.

"Robert it is, Bob."

As we climb three flights of concrete stairs, Fred tells me about the Health Education section, which is where the students are based. He runs through the names of the other students and tells me what I can expect to do while I train. By the time we reach the third floor, the only thing I remember is that I'm here to watch, listen and learn.

Looks like I've failed already.

The bare stairwell opens into a beige corridor with lots of doors on either side. The notice boards in between are crammed with posters and leaflets about taxation, pensions and NALGO, which is the trade union I'm expected to join. With all the money this is going to cost me, Annabel may have to settle for a bag of chips.

Fred nods and greets several other men in suits as we walk, introducing me as Bob, the new student. They look at me with in a curious, unnerving way as if my flies are undone.

"I'll take you around the office and introduce you to everyone once you're settled in, Bob."

"I'd prefer Robert."

He smiles. "Of course you would."

He turns left through a brown door and into a long office, filled with desks. The smell of cigarette smoke fills the air as I stand in the doorway, my legs suddenly frozen. In front of me, I count seven

people – one man and six women, all looking at me with interest. One of them has big, dreamy eyes and a smile that turns my legs to jelly.

Fred leads me to the empty desk and introduces the seven student EHOs to me. The only name I remember is Sarah, as she holds me in a trance with those dark brown eyes. I want to sit next to her, but I'm next to the other man.

"Do you smoke?" the woman with long brown hair and red fingernails asks, holding out a pack of cigarettes.

I nod, forgetting I haven't smoked for a couple of years, mainly because I couldn't afford to buy cigarettes. I take the proffered B & H, let her light it for me, and then inhale. For a moment, my head begins to spin, but I manage to avoid coughing. I remember my first cigarette and how the smoke burned my throat and lungs, making me feel nauseous.

"You don't look like a Bob," Sarah is saying, studying me.

"I prefer Robert," I reply, looking for an ashtray.

"We already have a Robert," the woman with curly brown hair and muscles says. "We'll call you Rob so no one gets confused. Do you play any sports?"

Snooker doesn't sound like the kind of sport befitting a student EHO, so I say tennis. I play in the public park on an uneven tarmac surface where the water ponds to add an extra degree of difficulty.

"I like badminton," Sarah says.

So will I, as soon as I get my first pay packet. Mind you, with all the tax, pensions, union subs, and cigarettes for five smokers, I won't have much left for a badminton racquet. When the tea trolley comes rattling in with a huge selection of cakes and chocolate bars, I know I'm going to need a loan.

By the time the Principal EHO, who manages the team, arrives, I can remember all the students' names. The rest of the people in the department are a mystery of nameless faces, apart from Norman. He doesn't remember me from the damp and dilapidated two up two down he inspected over five years before, but he got us a lovely council house on one of the better estates before ours was demolished.

Everyone welcomes me and tells me what they do. I was interested in the job because I wanted to clean up the planet and the environment, but it doesn't look like I'll be tackling global pollution any time soon. Well, not until I've sorted out leaking gutters, blocked drains and rat infestations. The Food Team sounds more interesting, mainly because I'm hungry, until one of them mentions meat inspection.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Working at the slaughterhouse, inspecting the carcasses to make sure they're fit for human consumption."

I can't understand why anyone would try to sell unfit meat. Who would buy it? But I understand carcass and slaughterhouse. Why weren't they mentioned in the book on environmental health that I borrowed from the library?

"You'll be there one day a week," Fred tells me as if it's a punishment.

"It smells repulsive," Sarah says.

"You have to watch out for the slaughter men," Sporty Janet says. "They play all kinds of tricks on you."

"What kind of tricks?" I ask, trying to stem my imagination.

"I wouldn't worry about them," Smoking Melanie says. "A cow broke free from the pens when I was there and charged straight at me. If the meat inspector hadn't pulled me out of the way ... You'll love it," she adds with a wink.

I'm about to accept a cigarette, when the Principal EHO, Gordon Brierly, strides through, newspaper tucked under his arm. "Good morning, good morning, good morning," he says to no one and everyone as he breezes past. He opens the door to his office and closes it behind him. Moments later, Fred joins him.

"What's he like?" I ask.

"He's okay," they tell me. His bark is worse than his bite. He's a stickler for punctuality, good manners, dressing smartly, and he's a lay preacher in his spare time. I've no idea what this involves, but as it's religion of some kind, I could be in trouble.

A few minutes later, I'm in Gordon's office, sitting quietly while he looks at my file, occasionally peering at me over his gold-framed glasses. He's in his 50s, with thinning, sandy brown hair and pale, freckled skin, cracked into heavy lines on his forehead. His thin lips purse as if he's sucking a lemon.

"I imagine people have told you how lucky you are to be working for environmental health," he says. "It's a great job, helping to improve public health and the environment, wouldn't you say?"

"That's why I'm here," I say, struggling to equate his words to his grim expression. Maybe he has a naturally miserable looking face.

"Well, I hope you still feel like that when you qualify in four years time," he says, removing his glasses, "because until then you're going to be a huge burden on this department."

He sucks on the stem of his glasses for a moment, his grey eyes cold. "It will cost us a fortune to train you. And while you may learn about the job, until you qualify as an EHO, you're useless to us. You can't make decisions or solve problems. You can't inspect premises or sign letters. All you can do is pester inspectors to take you out and show you the job. Remember that because they have more important things to do than nursemaid students. Is that clear?"

He doesn't wait for me to answer. He closes the file, slides his glasses over his ears, and opens his newspaper. As I reach the door, he calls to me.

“And take that earring out right now.”

I spin around, unable to stop myself. “I’ll be happy to if all the women remove theirs.”

He looks up from his newspaper and sighs as if I’m the source of all his troubles. I tense, wondering whether I’ll still have a job in a few minutes time. Then he shakes his head and returns to his newspaper, wafting me out of the room with a flick of his hand as if I’m a nasty smell.

Outside, I draw a deep breath, aware of my heart hammering against my ribs. I can’t believe what I’ve just done on my first day in my first job.

Fred hurries over, looking worried. “Is everything okay?”

Now everyone’s looking at me, wanting to know what happened. “I refused to take my earring out,” I say quietly.

After an initial gasp, they start to laugh, making me feel marginally better. When they tell me I’ll make a fine EHO, I feel a lot better. Then, as I’m leaving the office at the end of my first day, I discover the whole department put money on me removing my earring.

All except Sarah, that is.

The Mystery Smell

Life as a student EHO has its moments. When I'm not at Salford College of Technology, learning building construction and drainage, I get to spend a day each week at the slaughterhouse.

It's an interesting place, situated at the end of a long lane, remarkably close to a housing estate in the north of the district. As we approach on my first visit, it looks like a collection of ramshackle barns with corrugated tin walls and roofs. When you arrive, the road opens into a vast concrete area, occupied by lorries. Some are filled with cattle and sheep, delivering them to the pens around the back of the building. Others are loading up with carcasses for the wholesalers and butchers' shops in the area.

In between is the bit I have to face.

I've no idea what I'll be facing. Oh, the other students have plenty of horror stories about escaped bulls, practical jokes and turning vegetarian, but these mean nothing until I get inside.

The first thing I notice when I get out of the car is the smell of urine, mixed with straw and poo. I can see it on the ground, in the concrete and on the wagons filled with sheep close by. As I walk toward the large open doors of the slaughterhouse, the smell changes. It's difficult to describe. It's not quite like fresh meat, but it's close. There's something else – something I can't describe.

Then there's a rush of noise – hooks clanking along on metal rails, men shouting above the noise of music on the radio, the cries of sheep and the hiss of steam. The concrete floor runs with water. Wherever you walk, it's wet. Then I feel fat squashing into the tread of your shoes and my stomach turns.

And still the smell I can't describe.

Upstairs, in the meat inspector's office, I'm handed a white coat, wellies, full length waterproof apron and a hard hat. I'm not allowed a knife and steel until I've mastered the basics. Mervin, the meat inspector, is thin and wiry, with curly hair and staring brown eyes that intimidate me. He's also full of tips.

"First rule of the slaughterhouse," he says as we thud down the wooden stairs in wellies three sizes too big. "If something hits you on the back of the head, never turn around."

"Why not?"

"Because the next one will hit you in the face. If you're lucky, it'll be fat or a bit of tripe."

"And if I'm unlucky?"

"The partially digested contents of a cow's stomach. Or the contents of its colon."

"Shit," I say.

"Exactly."

I experience the partially digested stomach contents the moment I'm introduced to the head slaughterman, Mad Paddy. This has nothing to do with his Irish descent – his name is Paddy and one look into his crazed eyes will tell you he could flip without warning. Thankfully, he seems friendly enough, welcoming me to his slaughterhouse with a warm handshake.

It's warm because his hands have just come out of a cow's stomach. He smears the steaming green-black sludge over my hand and forearm, massaging it into my skin.

"That's one way to act on a gut feeling," I say.

The meat inspector laughs. "Nice one," he says.

Paddy laughs too and gives me a pat on the back - literally. "You'll live," he says ominously.

Later that morning, while I'm peering inside a sheep carcass, something thuds into the back of my hard hat. Despite the natural instinct to turn, I don't move. Moments later, a lump of bloody fat whizzes past my ear and splatters against the wall. Except it's not fat, I realise on closer inspection.

"Udder tissue with mastitis," Mervin says. "You'd feel a right tit with that on your face."

I'm forced to watch cattle being humanely slaughtered and dressed before a fried liver lunch with the slaughtermen. They happily share their greasy, well-thumbed porno mags with me while we sip dark brown tea from filthy, black mugs. For a moment, it's hard to tell which are the animals in this place, but to be fair, the slaughtermen treat me well, and don't play any more tricks on me.

Then when we return to the main hall in the afternoon, my ears are bombarded by the frightened squeals of pigs as they're driven with sticks into the slaughter pens. I don't like watching this at all, especially when the slaughtermen kick the pigs back in line. The sound is truly upsetting and makes me want to free the pigs.

At least I discover what the mystery smell is.

It's fear.

The Mayor's Fall from Grace

One of the pleasures of the Health Education section is the opportunity to get out and about to educate people about health. I've organised promotions about head lice and crab lice, painting the signs and selecting the most graphic pictures I can find to illustrate the problem.

Everything went well for two weeks, and then a councillor complained. It had to be the graphic photos, or the blunt, hard-hitting text.

When Gordon returns from the ground floor, he has a grim expression on his face. He wields my sign like a sabre and then slaps it down on my desk, almost catapulting my cigarette into the waste bin.

His hands go to his hips. "Tell me what's wrong."

We all gather round to study the beautifully painted sign. I can't see anything wrong with 'HEAD LICE CAMPAIGN'. Neither can anyone else, it seems.

"There's a 'G' in campaign," he says. "Any fool knows that."

I don't mention that he's walked past the sign every morning and evening for the last two weeks, like almost everyone else in the council. "That's how they spell it in America," I say.

"Just put it right," he says, heading back into his office.

After this hue claner – sorry, huge clanger – I'm surprised he lets me anywhere near a paint pot and cork stencils. But a few weeks later, as summer in North Manchester offers a rare glimpse of blue sky, it's time for another HOME SAFETY CAMPAIGN.

As we have no budget, we have to beg, steal or borrow what we need to mount the campaign. Gordon has secured us two weeks in an empty shop on the High Street to put us at the hub of the town centre. All we have to do is fill the shop with exhibits and messages about home safety. We have leaflets in the storeroom from the last campaign, so it's down to the exhibits.

Fred takes the lead. "Okay, what's the most common type of accident in the home?"

"Unwanted pregnancy?" I suggest, based on the council estate where I live.

"Let's not be facetious," he warns. "The mayor's going to open the campaign, which means we'll be in the Bury Times the following Friday."

"Falls," Sarah says.

Fred nods. "Excellent. So, we want to focus on falls. Any ideas?"

"We could have someone falling off a chair as they stretch to change a light bulb," Sporty Janet suggests. "I sprained my ankle doing that."

When there's no enthusiasm for this, I suggest someone falling off a stepladder.

"That's more like it," Fred says, making a note. "Rob, you're in charge of getting a stepladder. Try the local Do It All. They're usually happy to help us."

"I'll try Burtons as well."

"Burtons sells suits not stepladders."

"I was thinking of a mannequin. We could lay him, or her, prostrate on the floor at the base of the ladder."

"You could paint a sign, saying, 'Don't be a dummy'," Smoking Melanie says.

"I was thinking about a pool of blood on the floor. We could get some from the joke shop."

Fred makes calming gestures with his hands. "Let's keep it sensible," he says. "Rob, just get us a stepladder or we'll have no exhibit at all. Now, you bright sparks, what else causes accidents in the home?"

"Electricity," Sarah says. "But you're not going to break the cable on my iron like last year. It took me ages to mend it with insulating tape."

"You said the iron didn't work," Smoking Melanie says.

"It didn't after you cut the wires."

Thirty minutes later we have plans for over 10 exhibits, and task lists for the equipment we need. With less than two weeks to get everything we need, I'm straight down to Do It All, where the manager offers to do nothing at all. B & Q are more sympathetic, but don't have any damaged stock they can give me – unless I want to do an exhibit on falls from plywood sheeting.

On my way back to the office, I pass Burtons and spot something in their window. Once inside, I arouse the attention of one of the salesmen, who strides over.

"Can I help you?" he asks, looking me over, hopefully to estimate my measurements.

"That stepladder's dangerous," I reply. I rock it to prove my point. "I'm from Environmental Health."

"They look fine to me," he says. "Why are they dangerous?"

"Appearances are always deceptive. They were using a set like this in a warehouse and it just collapsed," I reply, swaying it a little. "Has it been inspected in the last year?"

"I don't think it's ever been inspected." He sighs and shakes his head. "I've been telling the manager to get them checked, but does he listen? He tells me to stop being a big girl and climb up there to replace the spotlight bulbs."

I look up, wondering if the dangling electrical cables are safe. With any luck, I could supply most of the exhibits for the campaign from here.

"I'll have to take the stepladder," I say, taking a closer look.

“Why don’t we just throw it in the bin?”

“Evidence,” I reply. “If there’s a court case.”

He gasps and pushes his fist to his mouth as he squirms. “I don’t want to go to court. I only climbed them a couple of times.”

“Well, I might overlook it if you let me have a mannequin as well.”

He frowns, deciding there’s something wrong with me. “I’m going to regret asking this, but why?”

“I need to do some mock ups with the ladder to demonstrate why it’s dangerous.”

“I see.” The salesman nods, but he doesn’t get it, thankfully. “So, you’ll want one fully dressed then.”

“Excellent,” I say, barely believing my luck. “Will you help me carry them over to the council offices?”

He nods. “You carry the mannequin. I have my reputation to consider.”

When he returns to the office after lunch, Fred can’t believe his eyes. “Where did this lot come from?”

“Burtons kindly donated the lot,” I say.

He fingers the jacket. “Nice suit. And my size too,” he says, checking the label. “Trousers will need shortening, mind.”

No one can believe I’ve managed to acquire all this kit. However, they’re happy to let me source all their items for them. Over the next two weeks, I purloin a sink and cabinet for a kitchen safety display; a collection of charred, broken and damaged plugs from an electrician, along with plenty of damaged cabling; a collection of saws and screwdrivers to show DIY injuries; and a job lot of display screens that were heading for the tip, courtesy of our refuse collectors.

Fred takes Sarah and me out to mock up photos of various accidents. I like playing her husband, even if it means pretending to cut off my fingers with a saw, or stab myself in the leg with a screwdriver. She refuses to pose for a photo in a nightie, about to catch fire from an electric bar fire.

Me too. I don’t have the legs for it.

Once we have our leaflets, photos and exhibits ready, we enlist the help of all the men in the department to move everything to our empty shop. Fred and the women are already there, sweeping, mopping and cleaning the place, which smells both musty and fragrant at the same time. Someone’s used the kettle with the frayed cable to boil some water for a brew.

The noise, bustle and humour create a brilliant atmosphere as Fred goes around the shop with a tape and piece of chalk, marking out the positions for the exhibits with great precision. My stepladder and dummy are going to be the main attraction at the front of the shop adjacent the entrance. He draws a chalk outline on the floor for the position of the mannequin.

“Looks like the scene from a murder,” Smoking Mel says.

“Then stop killing time and pose the model,” Sarah says, tapping her watch.

As hard as we try, we can’t get Manny to fit into the chalk outline. Three of us then try to make Manny look like he’s fallen from the ladder, but without success. None of the poses look natural. Then I hit on the idea of taking Manny to the top of the ladder and dropping him.

Fred bans me from climbing the ladder in case it’s unsafe, so in desperation two of us grabby Manny and throw him up in the air. He hits the stepladder and clatters to the floor, head first. With all eyes on us, we look at the result and cheer. It looks fine. A dollop of red paint on his forehead and on the floorboards and we’re finished – just in time for the mayor and the press at eleven.

Lionel Winterbottom, the mayor, arrives in all his finery at one minute past eleven. He’s short, balding and a little overweight, but that helps to spread out the mayoral chain he wears. His wife, Joan, who wears stilettos for every occasion, walks by his side, her heels tapping a steady rhythm on the floorboards.

It takes them fifteen minutes to walk around, looking at every exhibit, occasionally talking to some of us. As I’m wearing an earring, I’m at the back of the room behind the kitchen sink unit, getting no credit for anything, which turns out to be a blessing when the mayor wants some photographs.

“I think this splendid stepladder fall would be perfect for a publicity photo,” he says, looking to the photographer and reporter to agree. “Are you responsible for this very realistic exhibit, Gordon?”

To be fair, my Head of Service doesn’t say he is, but his polite cough suggests he is responsible.

The mayor and his wife position themselves next to Gordon for the photographs. The photographer steps back to fit them all in and bumps into the shop wall. “Can you step back a little so I can get you all in,” he says, gesturing with his hand.

He gets a much better photo than planned as the mayor steps on Manny’s lifeless torso and falls backwards, knocking over the steps.

I can’t begin to describe the look on Gordon’s face, either during the fall, or after when the mayor tears chunks out of him. Let’s just say that the photo on the front page of the Bury Times shows how much he can laugh in the face of adversity.

The Expelled Emission

From time to time as a student, I'm called upon to broaden my horizons. This means Admin are short staffed and needed someone to answer the phones. I don't mind as the all-female team make me feel welcome, bake terrific cakes, and chat about things they've read in Cosmopolitan magazine.

Late one Friday, while the universal grey outside becomes even more dreary, the phones begin to ring in earnest. It's not long before I have to answer. I take a deep breath, run through the mantra I have to chant, and pick up, a little nervous when Fred enters the room.

"Environmental Health Department. Robert Crouch speaking. How may I help you?"

"It's a little bit embarrassing," the woman says, sounding more than a little hesitant. "I won't mind if you laugh, honestly. In your position, I'm sure I'd laugh too, even though it's not that funny from this end, if you see what I mean."

I don't, but she has me intrigued. With her cultured tone and address at the posh end of town, I'm trying to imagine if Trudy Williams looks as good as she sounds, still wondering what embarrassing event has befallen her.

"Do you watch *That's Life*?" she asks.

I've been known to watch Esther Rantzen and her crew deal with public safety issues, along with a plethora of silly pranks, jobsworth attacks on public authorities and unusual poems from someone in an armchair.

"Occasionally," I reply, keeping my options open.

"Please don't be afraid to laugh," she says, "because I really won't mind, but this week they featured something called Dr Windbreaker's Fart Powder."

I smirk as I write it down. Fred, who's beside me, reads the note and snatches it away. Soon, everyone in the room's saying the words and laughing. I hope Trudy can't hear them.

"Have you heard of it?" she asks.

"No, Mrs. Williams."

"But you can imagine what it's supposed to do."

I can. Maybe she's ringing because it didn't work.

"Well, my darling 11 year old son, Toby, saw the programme and bought some powder," she explains. "He thought it would be fun to mix it in my lunch. I didn't know he had and he didn't tell me."

I want to ask her how she found out, but I suppose it's obvious.

"Well, in case you're wondering, I haven't farted," she says. The word sounds almost sensual the way she says it. "In fact, I've spent most of the afternoon with severe stomach pains."

“But no far ... wind,” I say.

“No, but that’s not why I’m phoning. I think you should analyse this stuff because it could be dangerous.”

An outbreak of farting could have public health implications, I suppose.

“When Toby saw me curled up on the sofa in pain, he told me what he’d done, but he used the whole packet, so I don’t have any to offer you.” She pauses and groans. “He said he bought it in the joke shop in the precinct, if that’s any help.”

When I put the phone down, everyone wants to know the details. Only Fred takes it seriously, telling me to grab my jacket. We leave the office and head over to the precinct. Once inside the joke shop, we soon see the display for Dr Windbreaker’s Fart Powder, as seen on *That’s Life*. The packets contain small sachets of powder, which is meant to be mixed into food.

“We’ve never had any dissatisfied customers,” the shopkeeper says, as if he’s tried it on numerous occasions. “It’s perfectly safe.”

“We’ll let the Public Analyst be the judge of that,” Fred says and we buy two packets.

It takes a week to get the results back, but Dr Windbreaker’s Fart Powder contains a substance that could cause acute abdominal pain. We relay that information to Trading Standards for them to deal with, but before they can the product’s withdrawn from the market.

Presumably, the manufacturers got wind of the problem and took action.

The Bemused Headmaster

Another of a student EHOs jobs is water sampling. Most people are on a mains supply, which the water companies sample from time to time. For those living in more rural locations, their water often comes from private sources, such as springs, wells or underground aquifers. This water, which seeps through the ground, is subject to all manner of pollution from farm animals, pesticides used by farmers, and any nasties lurking in the soil or rocks.

For one primary school in a small village, bordering the Lancashire Moors, the pollution continues for months. Though acidic in nature, the water's no match for the intestinal bugs from the local cattle and sheep. Sitting at the foot of the hills, the water seeps down from the moors and into the school's catchment area.

Every month we take samples in bottles, send them to the lab on the other side of Manchester and hope the results come back negative. Every month, the results show the water is still contaminated. The school continues to boil its drinking water. Parents supply their children with bottled tap water from home and until the problem can be resolved.

Throughout this sampling period, I work with the EHO for the district as he tries to get the farmer to move his silage pit and relocate his herd of cattle to another field further away. Slowly with time, the numbers of bugs in the water reduces. During the summer we get our first negative result, which arrives late in the afternoon.

"Go tell the headmaster tomorrow morning," Phil says. "But remember to tell him we'll continue monitoring and can't declare the water fit for consumption until we have a few more negative results."

I nod, delighted to be out on my own and in charge of the situation. Phil has already rejected my idea that the teachers and children should drink the water and build up immunity to loads of nasty diseases, so I'm delighted he trusts me to break the good news.

I aim to reach the school early, but due to a traffic accident, I arrive as assembly's in full swing. I sneak into the back of the hall to wait for the head to finish addressing the pupils. When he spots me, he waves me up on stage.

All the children watch this mysterious official in an ill-fitting suit and earring clamber onto the stage. The head comes over, an expectant look on his face. "It must be good news," he says in a low voice.

"Why do you say that?" I ask.

"When it's bad, Phil always rings. So, is the water safe?"

"The last sample's clear," I reply.

Before I can tell him we will continue monitoring, he's turned to the children, clapping his hands for silence.

“Boys and girls, I’d like to introduce you to Mr. Crouch from the Environmental Health Department. As you know, we’ve had problems with our water for over a year now, but this morning Mr. Crouch has passed all our water. Isn’t that great?”

The head looks bemused when the children start laughing.

He’s even more bemused the following month when the water fails once again.

The Quick-witted Undertaker

Environmental health covers so many areas it's hard to keep track of them all as a student. Unlike the students who attend university, I rarely miss anything unusual or different because I'm at the office every week.

One morning in May, during my third year at college, Phil calls me over. "Would you like to attend an exhumation?" he asks, making it sound like a privilege.

"A what?"

"An exhumation. It's when we lift someone who's already been buried and move them to another cemetery or even another country. It's highly specialised work and EHOs have a key role to play. We're in charge of the lime."

"Lime?" I query, sensing this isn't about a refreshing summer drink.

"Lime. We spread it over the ground and coffin to kill any nasty bugs that might be around."

I nod, realising why environmental health have a role. Bugs, as usual. "So, who does the lifting?"

Phil explains how the undertaker takes charge, obtaining permission from the Home Office for the exhumation. Then, a date's agreed with the family requesting the exhumation. The undertaker supervises the digging and lifting of the coffin, ensuring it's transferred into another coffin for transportation. We attend with lime to deal with bugs, and the police are present to make sure there are no problems.

"For obvious reasons, it's done at the crack of dawn before the public are up and about," Phil tells me. "So, I'll pick you up at 5.30 tomorrow morning."

I've gone to bed at this time, but I've never risen this early in my life. My mother's not happy about this, even more so when I explain why. "We shouldn't disturb bodies," she says. "It upsets the souls."

It's going to upset my digestive system, I realise, eating a hurried breakfast at 5.15am. Phil arrives, looking bright, alert and in good humour. "I like exhumations," he says. "Even in misty, spooky cemeteries where ghosts and ghouls lay in wait."

"You don't believe in all that, do you?"

"No, of course not, but I thought you might."

He laughs and takes us to the cemetery. We're right out on the edge, at the top of a slope. When we arrive and park behind the hearse, there are already several cars there.

"Looks like we've got a good turnout," Phil says as we walk past a group of people at the bottom of the slope.

We head up the long, winding path, meeting the undertaker and his two helpers at the top. A couple of young WPCs are there on behalf of the police. Neither looks comfortable or warm in the early morning chill. The sun's about to rise and the grey light begins to lift.

Phil stops me getting too close as the sides of the grave are unsupported. "The coffin's been down a couple of years, so it shouldn't be too rotten," he says. "I attended one last year where the coffin disintegrated and the skeleton fell out. A dog came past and ran off with the poor bloke's tibia."

It takes me a moment to realise he's joking. It was the humerus.

It soon becomes clear there's a problem. The undertaker leaps into the grave, landing with a thud, and emerges a few moments later. The pallbearers strain, there's a strange sucking sound, and the coffin's free. They haul it up slowly and steadily under the undertaker's watchful eye. The bottom end appears out of the grave, but not the top end.

"Damn! It's stuck," he informs the police officers.

The undertaker gets on his knees and reaches down, trying to free the coffin. When he steps back and nods, the pallbearers pull. For a moment, nothing happens. They strain a pull harder. Then, without warning, the coffin bursts free, scattering soil everywhere.

The undertaker's relief lasts a few seconds.

One of the pallbearers loses his grip and the coffin thuds back onto the soil. The wood disintegrates and the end falls away. As the other end of the coffin is still in the air, the skull rolls out and down the slope towards the family at the bottom.

The undertaker reaches it in three strides, dips and scoops it up like a bowling ball. When he turns, he punches the air with his fist and lobs the skull into the coffin.

It's only when I finish laughing that I realise the two WPCs are throwing up in the bushes alongside Phil.

It seems we all have our own ways of dealing with shock.

Strange Noises

I've no wish to sound negative, but me and noise don't get on.

The moment the lecturer said noise was measured by a logarithmic scale, I switched off.

"If you double a sound, it increases by 3 dB (decibels)," he said, demonstrating this with complex mathematical calculations that could have been ancient hieroglyphs. I chose to remember the rule of thumb. If two machines, producing 60 dB were put together, the combined noise would be 63dB.

And because I can think laterally, I realised that any new sound over 3dB above the general level would be more than double the noise emitted. Or so I thought. I'm not sure anyone else understood it enough to challenge this bold assumption.

So, when the council decided to measure the impact of road traffic noise on the town centre, I jumped at the chance to do something else. Unfortunately, being a menial, boring task, it fell to the students.

On the morning in question, Terry Davies, the Senior EHO in the Pollution section hands out identical noise meters, together with tripods to mount them on, spare batteries and wind shields for the microphones. He gives us specific locations for the monitoring, guaranteed to attract the attention of shoppers, dog walkers and the local vagrants.

"What do we tell people if they ask what we're doing?" Sarah asks.

"Tell them it's a noise survey."

"And what if they ask what kind of noise?" she asks.

"Or what kind of survey? You know what people are like about surveys. That market research bloke's still in hospital."

Terry raises his hands to calm the worried students. "Call it noise monitoring. Say we're monitoring noise."

"Why not tell them it's traffic noise?" I ask.

"Because car drivers will think we're trying to ban them from the town centre."

"But I thought that was the idea," Sarah says.

Terry's voice rises by over 3dB, according to my meter. "But we don't want them to know, do we?" he says. "Under no circumstances tell Joe Public what we're measuring."

"I thought we were monitoring," Sarah says as we file out of the office, tripods under our arms. "Now he says we're measuring. I wish he'd make up his mind."

We go our different ways and I make for the gardens, which are a collection of raised beds, bounded by engineering brick walls. Some have statues on plinths in the centre, some have waste bins on the edge, most have empty beer cans and crisp packets among the plants.

I set up my tripod in the centre, next to a rusty bench, where I intend to sit and watch the young women stroll past in their tight and short summer clothes, I hope. A small crowd of uninterested people, waiting for a bus, watch me struggle to extend the tripod legs equally. Then I screw the meter to the tripod, adjust it so the microphone is vertical, and pop the soft, round windshield on the top.

After making a few noises of my own to make sure the meter's working, I set the parameter and step back, watching the needle fluctuate as buses pull in and out of the station. Each time people walk past, the noise level increases and then drops back to its ambient level.

Within five minutes I'm bored, standing there, watching a needle flicker. I can imagine reporting back that the noise level increases whenever anyone or any car, bus or delivery van passes nearby. With any luck, I'll be star traffic noise monitoring student.

Except I mustn't mention traffic noise.

"What are you doing?" an elderly woman asks, stopping to watch the needle.

"I'm from the council," I reply, not sure what I'm allowed to say.

"Oh," she says in a tone that says it must be a waste of time and money, whatever I'm doing.

When the next person asks me, I tell them there's no cost involved, even though I work for the council. "But you're still a waste of money," the man points out.

Though tempted to tell the next person I'm wasting council money by standing around answering questions about it not costing anything to stand around doing something I can't tell them about, I figure this could backfire.

For the next ten of fifteen minutes, I ponder what I could say, oblivious to the young woman with the snug blouse and short skirt, standing beside me. Her smile more than doubles my heartbeat, which adds at least 3dB to the ambient noise.

"Is it a noise meter?" she asks, running her fingers over my windshield.

"I'd be happier if you didn't touch my equipment," I say.

"Why, what are you measuring?"

"Nothing. It's all free and without cost."

"The woman over there," she says, pointing to Sarah, "says you're recording ambient background levels. Why?"

"To see if they're ambient enough," I reply.

The woman stares at me for a few moments and then moves on, clearly unimpressed by my quick thinking. But Sarah's given me an answer I can use on the public. But after a couple of hours, I'm bored rigid and desperate for a toilet break and lunch.

Then an older man walks up and studies the meter and tripod in great detail before fixing his piercing eyes on me. He strokes his bushy moustache before puffing out his chest, straining the buttons on his corduroy jacket.

"Tell me, young man," he says in a voice that could belong to a sergeant major, "what the devil are you measuring with that instrument?"

I glance skyward, sensing one of those retired people with nothing to do, determined to seize any chance to badger someone.

He looks up too. "Are they out there?" he asks.

"That's what we're trying to find out," I say, lowering my voice. "We don't know who or what, but they're trying to communicate with us."

He watches the needle fluctuate as a bus passes. "Do you know what it means?"

I nod and tap my nose. "It's top secret, I'm afraid. I mean who's going to believe that they chose our town centre?"

"Exactly," he says, taking one last look before marching away.

Thankfully, I'm allowed to go for lunch and leave Terry with my meter. The afternoon passes uneventfully as most people realise we're doing nothing of any interest. The rest of the week ambles by until Terry marches in with Friday's edition of the local newspaper.

"Who said this?" he demands, staring at me as he slaps the paper down.

The headline says, *Council staff monitoring alien communications.*

"Not me," I reply, realising the speculative story doesn't identify environmental health as the culprits. "But it's a lovely photo of you, Sarah."

Terry mutters something about making noises at a higher level and leaves us to read the story, which makes the council look useless, inept and pointless.

A bit like the traffic noise monitoring we carried out.

Hot Turkey

I'm sitting there in the office, studying the Clean Air Act 1956. It's one of my favourite reads, second only to the Offices, Shops and Railways Premises Act 1963. I'm reading this dynamic legislation ahead of my final written exams the following week when Sid walks into the office. He's an inspector on the General Duties North Team, which occupy the south side of the main office.

"I've got a busy morning dealing with food complaints, but you're welcome to join me," he says, frowning at my choice of reading. "Unless you'd rather wait for the Pollution Officers to take you out to a Smoke Control Area."

I'd rather stick pins in my eyes. "Food complaints sound great," I say, grabbing my jacket from the back of the chair.

Off we go, heading north out of the town centre. Sid, who's not noted for a neat and tidy car, placed his briefcase in an empty boot before we set off. More puzzling was the appearance of a plastic liner in the boot.

"Are we collecting some food samples?" I ask, wondering if I'll ever get to like Steely Dan. He plays nothing else on his cassette player. "Only I saw the liner in the boot."

"Yes," he says, nodding his head to the rhythm of 'Reelin' in the Years'. "Well worked out."

We discuss all manner of things Steely Dan as he continues to drive north. We're lucky in Bury to butt against the Lancashire Moors, where the roads wind through bleak landscapes that offer little of interest to a 21 year old lad with a passion for snooker and tenpin bowling. However, the moors contain an army assault course, used by the TV show, The Krypton Factor.

This is nickname EHOs gave me when I started as a student because I wanted to know everything and do everything. I only discovered this nickname a couple of weeks ago when I was told it was being abandoned as I had proved myself to be a good student. In other words, I'd accepted I couldn't learn everything, which is why I started reading the Clean Air Act.

We head up into the moors, leaving the industrial landscape of soot-covered stone buildings with huge chimneys behind. It's a cold December morning with a bright sun and a widespread frost across the grass. The road bends and sways on a chicane that takes us to a huge layby filled with familiar cars.

It looks like the whole of environmental health is here – with the exception of the Chief EHO, his deputy and the other managers in the department. As I'm now in my fourth and final year, I'm top dog, and the only student present. Whatever is about to happen, it's clearly something you have to wait for as a student.

"What's going on?" I ask Sid.

"Patience, Rob. The van shouldn't be long."

I dismiss the idea of Santa Claus on an early run because clearly he wouldn't drive the beat up Ford Transit that pulls into the layby ten minutes later. By now, we can hardly see outside for the fog of cigarette smoke in the car.

Moments later, everyone is crowding around the back of the van, stamping their feet against the cold while they wait with plastic carrier bags in hand. I can't really see what's happening until one of the EHOs walks past me on his way to his car, carrying a bag stuffed full of ... what?

He laughs. "Turkeys, Rob. Frozen turkeys."

I join Sid in the huddle and find a carrier bag thrust into my hand. "Freezer breakdown," he says, as if this explains everything.

I've been on a couple of freezer breakdowns before. The freezer goes down overnight and the owner of the shop or supermarket calls us to condemn the food. We issue a certificate, which allows him to claim on the insurance. The food is then collected by our refuse collectors and dumped on the local landfill site, much to the delight of the seagulls.

I wasn't aware that frozen turkeys had a dispensation, but I'm uncomfortable with the idea of accepting any for two reasons. Firstly, it seems immoral, if not illegal, to take food that's supposed to be going to the tip. And as it's technically unfit for consumption, surely I shouldn't be eating it.

Sid must sense my unease as he places two frozen turkeys, a bag of peas and some potato croquettes in my carrier bag. "Don't you want a free Christmas dinner?" he asks.

"Is this legal?" I ask.

He sighs and shakes his head. "This food was going to the tip when there's nothing wrong with it. How can that be right?"

"But if there's nothing wrong with it, why's it going to the tip?"

"Well, technically, as the freezer broke down, we can't say the food was kept at its best. So, rather than make someone ill, we have to take it out of circulation. But the risk is negligible," he adds, anticipating my next question. "Feel the turkey. It's still frozen, isn't it? If it had defrosted, I wouldn't take it," he says, taking a bag with five frozen turkeys.

He places the bag in the boot of the car. "Now, we have to get this home fast before it defrosts."

Then I understand why Sid's taken me. We live half a mile apart.

"Imagine how pleased your mother will be when you give her this," he said, patting my bag.

As my mother doesn't do pleased, she'll complain about having no room in the freezer. That means the turkey will have to defrost and we'll be eating it all week, only to repeat the procedure again in three weeks.

"You take mine," I say when we reach my house.

“Don’t be silly,” he says. “We’ve all earned it. Think of it as a Christmas thank you from the local supermarket.”

It still feels wrong, taking something for nothing like this.

“Look, if you’re worried you’ll get food poisoning, forget it. None of us would be touching the stuff if that was the case.”

“But you don’t know when the freezer broke down,” I say. “What if it was six o’clock last night? That’s nearly 16 hours ago.”

He looks at me and smiles. “I know exactly when the freezer broke down,” he says. “And if you take a look, you’ll see the food’s hardly defrosted. Now, go and take this to your mum. I’ll be back in ten minutes for you.”

It’s only after he drives away that I realise what he meant. Of course he knows when the freezer broke down because it never did.

When he collects me in ten minutes time, I don’t tell him I rang the local soup kitchen.

The Free Lunch

During my four student years, I often heard the expression, 'there's no such thing as a free lunch'. Well, try telling that to the local EHOs.

It's a sign of respect, I suppose. Working for the council's an esteemed job, more so when you're an EHO protecting the public and making life better for local residents. The respect starts with the free breakfasts most EHOs have each day. Naturally, to make sure no one loses out, they go to a different café each day, though the meal never varies from a full English breakfast with toast and butter.

After the most important meal of the day, officers then work through their complaints and inspections, always finishing at the pub come lunchtime. Free food, accompanied by free beer, reveals the deep reverence publicans have for EHOs. Once again, in the interests of fair play, the officers share out their goodwill.

After more complaints and inspections, it's time for tea and cake in a local confectioner at 3pm. This allows officers valuable time to reflect and review the day's work to make sure they haven't overlooked anything before returning to the office. And as tradition dictates, EHOs make sure they visit every confectioner on the rota over time, so no one feels aggrieved.

On some days, EHOs are given samples to try so shopkeepers can elicit professional opinions and feedback on the quality of their goods. While the samples are mainly food and alcohol, it's not uncommon to test gift ideas for wives and occasionally children. Naturally, wives have to be invited if you dine out in the evening. Some restaurateurs can get quite uptight if you don't bring your wife or girlfriend. Worse than that, they can go apoplectic if you try to pay for your meal.

And who says size doesn't matter? Trying telling that to the owner of the local steakhouse I visited with several friends. After a day of free breakfast, lunch and cake, the last thing I need is a sirloin that's twice the size of everyone else's.

I often wonder what would happen if the EHO found rats in the kitchen? What if the place needed a good clean? What if the EHO discovered that the local police constable got extra black pudding with his breakfast?

No doubt I'll find out when I qualify. I have a feeling I'll upset most of my colleagues by refusing the free meals they seem to take for granted. People don't like those who refuse to conform, seeing them as a threat, I guess. Well, as a student EHO I've learned an important lesson – once I'm a qualified EHO, my colleagues can't tell me what to do.

All I have to do is pass my finals.

The Final Interview

I've learned some useful skills during my four years as a student EHO.

I've learned how to compress a month's work into two weeks. This leaves half the month free for important work like restoring old cars. Naturally, records have to be amended to make it look like the work's carried out across the whole month. It means having to spend hours, maybe days, adjusting mileage readings and calculating the miles travelled on fictitious visits around the district for the days not spent on council business.

I've learned that meeting a colleague while shopping in a neighbouring town during the working day is both good and bad. It's bad because the colleague knows you shop during work's time, and good because you know he does too. If you bump into someone more senior, it's doubly good, apparently.

I've learned one of the most powerful phrases known to man when complaining about poor food or service. 'I'm not here in my official capacity as an EHO ...' It never fails to quash all resistance.

I've learned that freezers break down far more regularly than you'd imagine.

Armed with this valuable knowledge, I've completed five three-hour written papers; an inspection of a building site for health and safety at work; a practical meat, poultry and fish recognition exam; and, a practical examination of other foods, mainly fruit and vegetables from around the world.

These pale into insignificance compared to the final hurdle – the interview panel.

This is a panel of three learned professionals, who have 30 minutes to grill you on a variety of topics to test your overall knowledge and your ability to remain calm while being made to look stupid.

I travel to Salford College of Technology for my interview at 11am. I've been briefed and coached, mentored and tested under simulated conditions to prepare me. My head buzzes with helpful advice, such as, 'if you don't know the answer, say so and they can ask you something you might know'. It sounds good, but if I spend thirty minutes saying, ask me another, I might not impress.

I'm ushered into a small, undistinguished room. At a table in the middle, sit three men, all close to or just past retirement age. Thankfully, I removed my earring earlier, sensing it wouldn't be appreciated by the panel. I'm told to sit and the man in the middle, the oldest of the three with a grey comb over and expensive glasses, introduces himself.

"I'm Doctor Clever, Medical Officer of Health for Manchester City Council. Please relax and don't worry, we're not here to catch you out or make you feel foolish. We want to find out what you know. So, tell me what you know about Scarlet Fever."

Has anyone told this man he's interviewing EHOs not medical students. "Sorry, we don't deal with Scarlet Fever. GPs cover that."

He seems disappointed. "What about German Measles? Pontiac Fever? Diphtheria? Okay," he says, rubbing his chin. "What infectious diseases do you know about?"

“Salmonella?”

He nods and off I go, talking about vomiting and diarrhoea. I don't tell him about the mother who filled a jam jar with runny poo, believing the small sample pot was for those with constipation. I also don't tell him about the prank another student played, putting peanut butter on the spoon in the specimen pot. Several members of staff developed vomiting after that escapade.

Satisfied with my knowledge of infectious disease, he passes me over to the youngest panellist, who introduces himself as Mr. Housingexpert. He's a housing manager, responsible for allocating council houses and strategy. He opens with an easy question to put me at ease.

“Can you summarise your local authority's strategy for selecting accommodation for those in need of housing?”

Even the Medical Officer of Health looks baffled with this one. But, I have inside knowledge and plunge into the tale of how my family was rehoused after we were rehoused from a slum clearance area.

“We turned down the three houses offered because they were on a bad estate,” I say.

“Bad estates?” he queries, his brow furrowing.

“Yes, the council puts all the bad tenants on one estate so they don't wreck all the council estates. Because we came from a particular area, they assumed we would be bad tenants.”

“I'm sorry, but in my experience, local authorities are equitable in their allocation of housing as part of a multicultural, egalitarian approach to integration.”

“You obviously haven't visited the Birds estate,” I say, pleased when the other two panellists start nodding.

Having upset the housing manager, I'm left with the third panellist. He's wearing a sharp suit and tie, and has an air of the expert about him, thanks to a nose that seems to smell fear.

“I'm Roland Cleverclogs,” he says in a refined accent. “I'm a noise consultant.”

He pushes a piece of A5 paper across the table. It contains a graph with a fluctuating line rising from left to right. Underneath are two columns of acronyms, three in each. I recognise the three on the left, but the three on the right are mumbo jumbo.

“What can you tell me about that noise source?” he asks, pointing at the graph.

I take my time, as instructed by Fred, my mentor. All manner of thought skim through my brain, mainly concerned with the alternative careers I should consider. Sensing that Mr. Expert isn't going to wait any longer, I look up and with as much confidence as I can muster, I say, “Fluctuating.”

“Very good,” he says, genuinely impressed. “Now, which of the six parameters beneath would you use to measure this fluctuating noise source?”

Without missing a beat, I say, "The three on the left."

From the look on his face, I can see he's no longer impressed. "Perhaps you'd like to explain why those three?" he asks.

I'd prefer not to. "Simple," I reply, maintaining my display of confidence, "I've no idea what the other three are."

For a moment, there's a tense, awkward silence. Then the doctor starts laughing. "You can't say fairer than that," he says. The housing manager also starts laughing, setting the doctor off once more. He's leaning back on his chair so far, he falls off, still laughing as he hits the floor.

Eventually, my interview resumes and I manage to explain what the three parameters in the left hand column mean before time saves me from any further humiliation. Back at the office the next morning, Fred asks me how things went.

"Do they ever have EHOs on these panels?" I ask.

"Never," he says. "That would be far too logical."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why make you even more nervous? So, how do you think you did?"

"I've failed, without a shadow of a doubt."

"Everyone says that. Come on, talk me through it."

By the time I've finished, all the younger students seriously doubt their choice of career, but Fred's wetting himself. When he finally stops laughing, I ask him what he means by 'hoisted by his own petard'. He tells me to look it up and rings the noise team.

"Can you remember the parameters?" he asks.

"Not the three on the right, no."

"Never mind," he says to the noise team, "we'll get the books out and see if he recognises any."

It turns out that the noise man was a consultant who specialised in aircraft noise, which we deal with on a daily basis in the Metropolitan Borough of Bury. He may have been a high flyer, but it seems I grounded him, having discovered what hoisting and petard mean.

I also passed my finals with flying colours and I'm ready to be let loose on an unsuspecting public.

In August 1981, I received a letter telling me I'd passed and was now an Environmental Health Officer.

The fun was about to start ...