

Memories of Wickford

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Reminiscences of Eric, of Swan Lane, Wickford

This account has been transcribed from notes made in 1986 by the Heritage team of the time. The Heritage speaker comments have been omitted in the cause of clarity. November 2010

I come from a very old Wickford family, going back prior to 1800, actually they have been in the building industry in Wickford before 1800. My cousin Silva has an old account book that goes back before the early 1800's when things were paid for in pence virtually. The major building work was done on farms and they would build the barn on the farm and in part payment take so many trees from the farm. They hauled them home by their own team of horses, called timber-wims to the saw pits, cut up the timber to make the next barn. So the building was of houses and agricultural buildings. Yes, lots of agricultural buildings.

The undertaking business drew apart. They used to do it all, that was a builders job. In the old days it was always the builder because he was reckoned to be a carpenter. There were more wooden buildings than anything. Masons were only connected with church work, and mansions. Well, there was no stone around this area, was there? So it was all wood. No bricks were made, not quite then. When I was a boy there was the old Wickford field and before that there was a brickworks at Barnhall, I think. That was much after. A more modern works, a different fuel. A brick kiln, whereas Wickford was a stack. Wickford made stock and red bricks where they made little stacks and burnt them through heat within the stack, whereas in a kiln they are in a brick enclosure and the fire is all around them.

My father was a journeyman carpenter. He worked for Silva's father up until the 14-18 war. Then, of course, there was no work to do around here. He worked for a firm called Siley Weirs on the docks, converting big liners into troopships. He continued doing that for so long he ended up converting them back into liners. He used to walk from Wickford to Pitsea station, and that's quite six miles, a normal thing then, when I started work. You might be fortunate to own a bicycle, which few people did.

Although I was connected to the building trade I started work in engineering. 14 years I did with what was Compton Works, D J Smith and Sons from Compton Street, Boswell Road, London opposite the old Darby Digger works, this end of Russell Gardens but there was no road there and no gardens. That was the old original Darby Digger works. Darby's moved from Pleshey to Wickford, I think, to those works which were built for them. They were the first firm. Then the building was taken over by a firm making electrical locomotives. They had a little railway running right up the middle of the field at the back to test the locomotives. Then Darbys came to Styleman's. I would be six or seven.

Old Thomas Darby, the father of Sidney and Albert, lived at the end of Wickford Street opposite where my grandfather lived in Rose Cottage. Rose Cottage was sort of gable-end onto the street. You went up a little flight of stairs into a kind of blacksmiths shop attached. Then came Motts the pawnshop. Then there was Rose Cottage. Misses Solly and Kate had a small property that she eventually sold to the gas board. Was that Rose Cottage? They eventually built the new gas offices there. Then the Black Cat Café next to it.

My first job was in engineering. In the bad old days I was up at seven o'clock and I finished at half past five. In am now 82 and I am doing 8 till 4.30 but that's only part time and I really enjoy it. When I first started I was overhauling the lorries that came back from the 14-18 war. They used to come into Wickford by the train load. We had one single cylinder De Dion motor car that was our sole haulage power. So we used to drive to Wickford station (park at property of the works manager) employ (sic) go through the whole of the lorries to see where we could cannibalise a piece off one to put on another and made one lorry go. So with one lorry we would tow all the others up to the works, and when we got there we would strip them down to the last nut and bolt. We had a government contract. We would strip them down and rebuild them. We had to make the majority of the parts because you could not buy them. We did turning and milling. We had all the equipment to make our own pistons, piston rings, exhaust pipes, all sorts of things.

Schooldays did not prepare me for this. We had carpentry lessons. The only thing they did to prepare you for the future. Luckily we had a very, very good schoolmaster. He was a very clever man who installed telephones throughout the school and told us all how they worked. They were not linked into the telephone system, I don't think anyone had phones then. He demonstrated poison gas to us. He made some and let us sniff it so we knew what the troops had during the war. He was rather forward in his way of teaching. He made the first wireless set I ever saw. It was a massive thing, and it worked. This was in the days of Marconi's first experiments at Chelmsford. This big wireless set could also receive, not speech but dots and dashes.

I started school in 1909, the same year that sewers were put in at Wickford. Then they started going up Southend Road.