

## **Memories of Wickford**

**Author:** Betty  
**Date Range:** 1904 - 1986

### **Resume of Eric's oral history taken 15 January 1986**

Eric had been born in 1904, and he is still working from 8 to 4.30.

He had been born in Wickford and lived in a small house with several brothers and sisters: he shared a room with his brother and they put themselves to bed. Sometimes because of the noise mother sent father into keep them quiet and father showed an effort by whacking the bed or something – indicating he had whacked them. They were not read to in bed; Eric said he quickly learned to read and his father bought books from the market and he read Titbits and other magazines. There was also a library at the church school and books were borrowed from there. His mother did not work; she kept house and made all the clothes – sometimes using used material, as material was dear. Father used a hobbing iron to mend their shoes, using Blakies which they clopped against the kerb to make sparks fly. They got told off for doing this. His father was a carpenter. Indeed his family had been in Wickford for many generations and they were all connected with building. Some generations back the undertaking business drew apart from the main building business and the two firms went their own way – both prospering. The firm had saw pits in Wickford High Street (and the Wickford Archaeological Society in 1962 found the complete skeleton of a horse in what was purported to be a saw pit).

Eric went to Wickford Church School (and he gave me a book relating to the managers' meetings which had been found at the old hall or rectory when the firm converted it into flats. The headmaster was very go ahead and told them that what was most important was general knowledge. He encouraged this by giving them three questions each week to answer; there was compulsion about it. Although it was a church school, religion did not predominate. They had reading, writing, arithmetic, history, etc. The headmaster had a telephone system installed (closed circuit) and spoke about chemicals used in the first world war so they could imagine what the troops were experiencing. They used a cinder play area and later a proper ground was established. Eric said he picked up reading easily. But although he did carpentry at school it did not really prepare him for his first job which was at Compton Works.

Compton Works was situated in what was to become Russell Gardens and probably it was the site of the first Darby Works (previously to their having taken over the Stileman site in Wickford). As I recall it, the firm was connected with the repair of vehicles. During the first world war they had to try to repair vehicles for military purposes. The firm had only one vehicle of its own. After this he worked for his father on building; and at one stage, after he had married in the 20's, when times were hard he lived with his wife's parents in Cranfield Park Road and he clipped/prepared dogs. His cousin, Silva, started out by branching away from his own father and building a couple of houses in the area of Alderney Gardens. Silva asked Eric to help him, and he stayed with Silva

until the present. He seems now to be in charge of administration and pays the insurance of the firm, deals with CITB matters and chooses the colours of the bathrooms of the houses on the Wick Estate etc..

Eric was baptised at Wickford Church but he went to Sunday school – there being no compulsion about it – sometimes going to the Congregational Church and sometimes to the Salvation Army. He was married in a registry office.

As a youngster he joined a boy's club and attended it in the Mission Room, London Road. When he walked home along Runwell Road (as the family had moved to a larger house there) he was rather frightened. Apparently from time immemorial there had been a ghost story told about a tree near the cemetery in Runwell Road where the old Congregational Church stood. There was talk of a black dog; he never saw anything. This was in an area to the east of the 'drinkings' - an area where his cousin Jack had told me the local people used to take their animals for drinking. He later on used to meet up with the boys of the area on the area opposite the Castle public house. The local policeman, used to move them on sometimes, but never prosecuted any Wickford person! If he found a stray horse belonging to a gypsy he would tell the gypsy off. Well, Eric used to join on to the pranks of the local lads. One prank was to pull coloured handkerchiefs out of the top pockets of the other lads. He did this once, and tied on to the end of the handkerchief was a watch. He had to buy the boy another watch for half a crown, going to the local ironmongers to do so. Eric used to watch football and he stood near the goal. He got to know the goalkeeper and by this means he was introduced to cycling. He joined the Rochford Cycling Club and was a founder member of Southend Wheelers. He gave up cycling for motorcycling and he now drives a car – sometimes at 130 mph. He regrets not having a motor caravan and he would certainly like to do more travelling but he would not like to give up his job to do so, as he would have enough to do for six months and then have nothing.

Eric's father was also very sporty. He played cricket and football. Wickford Invicta Cricket Club moved their ground to Patmore's water meadow when the railway wanted to build a water meadow. Patmore was the local publican at The Swan.

During the first world war soldiers were compulsorily billeted on Wickford people. During the second, people had the choice. In the first war Zeppelins and 'Gothas' came over the area. One Zeppelin fell in Billericay. By the time of the second world war he had joined Carter and Ward's and he had hoped to join up. He was Grade 4 as the army had found that he had a small area of skin knotted up. During the war the firm did war time repairs as far afield as London and also a lot was carried out in Wickford. After the war the firm took up all the local Council licences for building in the area and they learned that licences to build could be transferred from certain areas. Wickford had the first bomb to drop in the area – in the area of South Beech Road. A baby was killed in its pram. There was a lot of enemy activity. British and German planes fought overhead. Scottish soldiers were billeted in Wickford – and he still heard from a soldier who had been billeted in Wickford during the first war.

After he had joined his cousin, Silva, Silva started to build further houses in the area of Alderney Gardens they sold. Silva got to know Billy and Ron, with whom he played golf, and he bought land from Bridge House Farm– which was Billy's. From this Deirdre Avenue was created and Almond Avenue. Billy also owned the Grange/Granary Farm and land was bought and Louvaine and Victoria Avenue built.

The firm did work at Witham and other places. They built the Belchamps Estate and the Beauchamps estate during the 60s. At one time they had 400 working for them. Now they employ sub contractors as men want to work a short day 9 to 4 or so; they do not any longer employ apprentices because apprentices leave once they have been trained and they do not themselves employ any skilled men to work with the apprentices. They are also building The Wick– being the major firm concerned there. Eric attributes the success of the firm to the fact that opportunities were seized – and the first opportunity was building a pair of houses and going on from there, and then using the opportunities which came out of socialising on the golf course, etc.

Eric's mother had been born at Marsh Farm, South Woodham Ferrers. She had left to go to London to work in service; she later worked for his family as housekeeper at Guinea Pig Hall Runwell Road, and met up with Eric's father. The sort of food they had as children was mostly a joint on Sundays – silverside as better cuts could not be afforded. They had stews and (here he named it) something like white lace, which was cooked in the oven and stuffed hearts. There was a communal oven in Nevendon Road– but he did not know who had built it. On market days cattle used to come to Wickford on foot and he used to get paid a penny to drive the cattle up to the station. He used this and the usual halfpenny for sweets (18 aniseed balls for a halfpenny). The local butcher, bought cattle and kept them on a field in Southend Road and then brought them to a smaller field to fatten before slaughtering. The small field was near the area where the by-pass joins Runwell Road. Before slaughtering they used to tie a rope round the animals neck.... The market was near the Castle pub and later it went into Market Road. It was very agricultural in those days, although Wickford did have a foundry business on London Road corner. It was known as Foundry Corner later renamed Hall's Corner. The Compton Works was engineering and there was a small shed-like building near The Castle which was connected with the Maldon Iron Works. Darby's came from Pleshey and started their business in Wickford and produced a traction engine which was used extensively in Egypt. The business was started by Thomas and his two sons were in the business. At one time Eric worked for Darby's and in particular he remembered working for Albert. Albert, according to his mood, might say they were going to work all night and gave him a ring of keys so he could go round the workmen's benches getting out the tools they would need for their engineering work. So it seemed that Wickford had a market for the surrounding area of about 5 miles or so and also was quickly into engineering in a small way, although mainly agricultural. He did not have a real holiday as a child, but sometimes went to stay with Golden Holden (his cousin) at Tolleshunt/Goldhanger. There, the children were given time off from school for

blackberry picking. However, normally when at school he and his friends used to run to Battlesbridge for a swim in the lunch time and run back to school.

In those days everyone knew everybody in Wickford. He can remember the doctor going by on horseback and bending down to call out to his father 'How are you doing Halbert' - as his father's name started with an H. That was when they lived near the Peculiar Chapel in Nevendon Road. You got to know the shopkeepers. Now there is hardly anyone left who belongs to Wickford (it was agreed that the interviewer's family qualified as Wickfordians as great grandparents lived near Foundry Corner). The circus used to come to Wickford – and used Franklin's small fattening field. The Castle Field was opposite the Castle pub – and included the area used by Sadd's and today Jewson's and that is why the area is 'rough' still.

He had two children, a son and a daughter. The son got made redundant twice but picked himself up again. He and his wife run a transport cafe, near the junction of Church Road, Ramsden and London Road and they are now doing well. His daughter lives 90 miles away. After he had lived with his wife's parents he moved to the Alderney Gardens area, and then he built his own house where he now lives. Phyl, his wife, never liked it in Swan Lane. What put her off was having a woman call and being taken for a shop, as he had built a large picture window in the lounge. He then showed me over his self-built house; it consisted of a large bedroom with two cupboards built in the thickness of the wall; another bedroom with an airing cupboard in the thickness of the wall (the bit not used by the room next door); a large lounge in front looking out into Swan Lane, a dining room which he did up at Christmas, a kitchen with microwave oven on which he prepares two dinners at a go and which he eats at lunch time as he comes home from the firm at midday, the 'usual offices' - with mermaid glass in the bathroom; and a large sunlounge leading into his garage housing the 130 mph car. His garden comprised a glass house and a shed camouflaged as a sunhouse and the lawn took up the main central area. He is still picking tomatoes which he grew himself and he is starting off seeds for the coming season.

His wages when he first started work was 2d farthing an hour.

He is a member of the TNT and goes out visiting places; indeed at school they were taught about nature.