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Basildon Heritage

My Name is Ernie.

**(Interviewer) Where were you born?** I was actually born in London, in East Ham in 1922 and came to Grays in the same year and have lived here ever since so I was born and bred in Grays.

I was a permanent civil servant in the Marine Division of the Ministry of Transport and I was transferred from my job in Tilbury Docks in 1956 to go to Pitsea to become the Assistant Stores Manager of the Sea Transport Stores Depot. I stayed there until the depot closed finally in 1964. The Sea Transport Division, which was the parent division for the stores, was responsible for the provision of ships to carry troops. For three hundred years they have been responsible for the provision of ships to carry troops to wherever they were needed in the British Empire. There were quite a number of Sea Transport Stores Depots carrying the reserve stores in-between wars so that they were ready in times of war.

I think it was in the end of World War I, as troops were returning from The Western Front, Flanders, they had a problem to Woolwich Arsenal which was their main stores so the army had to look around the overflow stores to find such things as bedding and blankets (of which they had vast quantities sometime in verminous condition) as we have all heard about the rats, lice and everything that went on in trench warfare and this is how the site at Pitsea became a fully government occupied site. The authorities looked in the War Department looked all over the country as they wanted somewhere near London with good communications (communications in those days included water). Barge transport was used a lot so they picked the site in Pitsea and so far as I can make out, it was purely for the storage of verminous bedding and later on the cleaning of the bedding to put it back into service.

Skeleton staff, something like six men and two boys looking after vast mountains of old blankets. Later on they took on some women to wash the blankets. One time in Pitsea, before the eventual closure, I went into an old shed where I found, what the old foreman called, a hand operated washing machine dating from those days. It was of a wooden construction, like a big barrel with handles at each end. I understand that you put that you put water and the blankets into the barrel to soak and then there was a big bath underneath. Then you turned and turned which was a rudimentary way in which the blankets were washed. They were hung out to dry on the clothes lines, of which there were posts and lines galore on an area near the office and it was still called the drying ground when I finally left in 1964. This was the start of Pitsea as a government stores later on because of the amount of space available and the amount of shed accommodation available which had been built for the explosives factory in the 1880's, they put to use a lot of the sheds.

**(Interviewer) Did you have any accidents? Any accidents from the past explosives?**  
No I'll come back to this later because I know nothing about the explosives except what's been passed down to for folklore.

The Sea Transport People, who were part of the Ministry of Transport running troop ships, decided to expand to Pitsea to put more things in there than just blankets so between the World Wars it built up into a very important depot. Everything that a troop ship needed, it was

there from a flag on top of the mast to the knives, forks and spoons that the thousands of troops would use day by day. Their hammocks, their bedding, washing machines, fire extinguishers, pianos, wicker chairs, glasses, knives, butchers equipment.... everything and this carried on until World War II came along and it got even more important in World War II. After World War II, as we all know, we had 30 odd years of peace and therefore you don't need a troop ship fleet. So Pitsea, in common with other troop ship depots, was allowed to run down as the saying is and in the eight years I was there, this was a gradual process. If you don't need the troop ships you don't need the knives, forks, spoons, flag, fire extinguishers or even cranes and derricks.

During the process of the run down, there was a momentary build up in 1956 when the Suez Operation required the commissioning of new troop ships very quickly so we at Pitsea were required, I think it was, to store the means to equip five merchant ships in Tilbury and London Docks to go to Suez carrying troops. This was a very busy period and that carried on well into 1957 when the Suez Canal business was all over, the ships returned and were then de-stored so everything came back to Pitsea and other Sea Transport Depots. By this time, we were also responsible for supplying three small troop ships that ran from Parkstone Quay in Harwich right up until 1961. These were carrying government passengers as well as troops backwards and forwards to the BAOR in Germany, so this was another reason to keep the stores going. As air transport took over sea transport the three ships on the Harwich-Hook of Holland route were withdrawn, therefore another run down occurred and the total number of supplies stopped at Pitsea. By 1961 it was obvious that we'd have no more ships to run from Harwich and very few troop ships running from Tilbury Docks so it was decided to run down Pitsea altogether and transfer what was left as urgent reserve material to the larger depot at Chipping Sudbury near Bristol.

In 1964 we had the sad task of getting rid of one hundred people that had worked at Pitsea for most of their working lives. Some of them had been there for 40 to 50 years. I was relatively young in 1964 but some of the workers were over 70 and still working contrary to the normal practice of the civil service to retire at 60 to 65. Some of them had never known another job. There were those that could be found other jobs and I did my best for them and we eventually closed down in July of 1964. The only stores that were left were the Coast Guards Stores which I carried on for the next 20 years in the new depot in south-east London.

The newer type of stores had been introduced with the rise of the Road Division in the Ministry of Transport. Road construction, motorway construction and instruments were stored there as well as protective clothing and crash helmets, things like that for construction workers which were all taken from Pitsea in 1964 to the new depot where they were for many years afterwards. That effectively was the end of Sea Transport Stores in Pitsea as a government run establishment but in that time quite a few notable events had happened and as I say two World Wars and the Suez Operation.

There was a legend that during the days when it had been an explosives factory, commercially run of course, originally set up after these brothers saved people that the Swedish dynamite inventor Nobel belonged too. There was an apprentice that had blown himself to smithereens whilst carrying an unspecified quantity of nitro-glycerine across the road from the gatehouse to the workshops on the other side of the road. This was told to me by an old foreman there when I first joined and little did I think that years later, the lady living in the large bungalow opposite the main gate, a Mrs B who was the wife of the then stores manager, claimed to have seen a face appear at her window at least once a year. It's supposed to be the ghost of the apprentice. I can't vouch for this story but she swore by it at the time and the foreman said to me "it's not surprising, he has been seen from time to time." That's the only bit of folklore I have to give you on this but there was the underground tunnels.... There's supposed to be underground tunnels but I never found any evidence for that, no underground tunnels.

Lots of small railway lines in the dense bushes over on the western side of the island as you might call it, which obviously dated from the explosive factory days. There were a large number of sheds with windows which were made with red glass. I don't know whether these are still there as they didn't come under my control but I used to walk around them. These were also specially designed sheds for the storage of explosives and in those days if direct daylight got the explosives, combustion would take place, hence the red glass. They may have been removed or vandalised by now but they were there in 1964. Interesting sheds with doors with the hinges made of special material, phosphor-bronze, no steel could be because a spark could ignite and phosphor-bronze couldn't strike sparks.

**(Interviewer) Did they get used?** We used very few of those sheds. We used only the sheds each side of the main road that led all the way down to the jetty.

**(Interviewer) Did there used to be sheds all the way down there?** Oh yes all the way down to the jetty there used to be sheds. I think you have now preserved some large brick-built sheds?

**(Interviewer) Yes that's where we are.** Those were the bedding sheds as I recall it. All the troop ship bedding was kept there, the good stuff, mattresses, pillow slips, things like that. Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of them and about twenty people looking after them all the time. Turning them over, washing them, putting them back, that was on the right hand side of the road going towards the jetty. On the left hand side of the road was another major brick-built sheds which we kept largely fire-fighting apparatus used on ships; hoses, extinguishers and extinguisher charges. I don't know whether that group of buildings are still there?

**(Interviewer) Yes they are still there, they are the ones when you first come into the park.**

I'll tell you the only way I can place it is, I've only visited Wat Tyler Park once and that was two or three years ago when I was reading about the danger of unexploded mines and bombs. I went down to have a look at it and the only bit that I could really recognise is the present display rooms, you might call it, with maps at the side and toilets...

**(Interviewer) That's the Information Centre.** Yes the Information Centre, now that in my time was a storage shed for tools, tools used in the depot not tools in storage for the ships. We called it 'The Depot Maintenance Shed' and there was a fire station there with a small fire pump which had a pump and so forth. The main offices were on the other side of the road and these have disappeared entirely. That is where the depot mainly started not at the main gate but at that particular point, the Information Centre. There was a large three ton crane on the green immediately to the river side of that and as you proceeded down the road, sheds made of brick on the left with firefighting apparatus and what we called ships fittings and other miscellaneous fittings, gallery equipment, dough making machines (bread mixers and things like that), and bacon slicers in them. On the right hand side, a large brick built shed with bedding and soft stores.

As you proceeded down the road you came across a group of open fronted sheds which were made of brick and they were called open fronted because they were built rather like garages with canvas blinds down the front. Inside there was more firefighting apparatus and at the bottom end of the road where the jetty was, there were more sheds in which gangways were stored, ships gangways and ships metalwork, ironwork such as anchors, pulling blocks of all sizes, hundreds and hundreds of pulling blocks, steel wire ropes, shackles and what was called lifting and loading gear, various slings, hooks, grabs for loading troop ships with explosives and largely that's what it was for you see. You had to have special slings for loading special cargoes like explosives into ships. All of this was stocked at Pitsea.

There were a lot of other sheds off the main road, which were only partly used in my time because as I've said, the heyday of the stores was already over in 1956, but I have no doubt in that in the two World Wars they were full to the brim with urgently required stuff to go to the nearby ports. This was the strategic point of Pitsea; it had to serve the South-East and East Coast ports. Further up there would have been another depot serving the North ports. Further out, Southampton had a depot for the Western Ports.

**(Interviewer) Were there any actual Naval people working there?** No never, not that I know of, we had our own uniformed branch. Sea Transport always has had and always will have an increased manner in wartime. The uniformed branch of Sea Transport officers who wear a Naval type uniform and they are the technical and professional advisers to the stores. There aren't many Sea Transport officers at the moment because there are no wars to justify it now. In time of war Sea Transport officers get posted to all ports where troops are being sent out. Like in the Falklands that would have happened? Exactly, and they would transport as well as having a Sea Transport officer going to the port at the other end to set up a Sea Transport Organisation like the Falklands. These chaps were all ex-Navy or ex-Merchant Navy officers of technical qualifications. They advised the stores people on the condition of various stores that are in their possession at the time with regular inspections and maintenance and so forth. New types of equipment were introduced to the stores by the technical officer and that is the only real contact with Navy type officers.

Part of the site had always been part of the War Department right up until about 1961/2 I think and they had regular soldiers manning it with regular officers in charge and a Major to oversee it all. We didn't have anything strictly to do with them except from time to time when we were both called upon to supply the same ship. They went in the 1960s and the Sea Transport stores took over their accommodation for a brief period.

**(Interviewer) What was the condition of The Creek like then?** Aahh The Creek.... Well it was pretty sort of muddied up in my time but at the time of Suez, I well remember, The Creek was sufficiently open and dredged for us to be able to move a hundred tons of material at a time in barges. Mainly during the close of the aftermath of Suez when the ships came back to portside at Southampton and Victoria Docks in London, unloaded all their trooping material to go back to civilian life onto the warehouses in London and it was a vast operation to bring it back to the stores. In those days it was judged too expensive to send by lorries all the way from London to Pitsea. It was much more economical to load it straight onto barges from the ships and hire a tug to bring it down. The tug was able to do just that with two barges at a time up to The Creek, tie onto our jetty, which had a three ton crane on the end of it and we took the stuff into the stores that way. This was in 1957 when we last used the barge transport. It was quite effective.

**(Interviewer) And then?** After that it gradually silted up, they let it deteriorate. Yes, yes it did deteriorate.

**(Interviewer) What can you remember about the previous owner? What can you remember about him?** Not a lot (he said laughing). **(Interviewer) What about what is was just before you?** I know very little only what I've been told by word of mouth that it was part of the Nobel set up. I've often wondered whether it was part of the Ely Kynock set up but I haven't got any clues on that. **(To Interviewer)** Have you heard of Ely Kynock? They're the biggest name in sporting cartridges at the moment. When you buy a shotgun you buy Ely Kynock cartridges. There is, at Stanford-le-Hope and Coryton (on the Corringham Marshes), evidence of an old town called Kynock Town, have you heard about this (to interviewer)? I have always thought that this must have extended round Fobbing Creek into part of Pitsea, but I've no evidence of this. The Pitsea set up bears all the hallmarks of the Kynock's set up just over The Creek so I've no doubt that it could be the same sort of thing really couldn't it? I've no doubt that before World War I they probably got mobilised into army service anyway.

Kynock Town, I think, would have worked full blast for munitions for the Army for the Boer War, but I've got no evidence that any of this happened in Pitsea I'm afraid.

**(Interviewer) What can you remember about Pitsea? What sort of things? What was Pitsea like as a village?** Not a lot really. To me it was only just one street really, The Broadway with a cinema and a hardware shop which is still there I believe. There were a couple of good pubs, The Railway of course, which was the big one and there's The Gun up on the hill and there was a little one on the left hand side, The Bull. **(Interviewer) It's now called The Prohibition but don't know what it was called then....** It's changed, I preferred The Gun myself.

The water in the area always interested me because the Pitsea Hall Fleet, which is purely freshwater drained off the marshes, was alive with wildlife even in my time especially eels. At the right time of year, you could catch eels by dropping a bucket over the side and getting baby eels back. I don't know whether these still survived there?

**(Interviewer) I don't know possibly as they've preserved a lot of the world wildlife. Did you get many people come over there then? Lots of sort of naturalists, did they used to come over?** No, we used to keep them out, not naturalists, nobody was interested then you see. This was still what you would call a defence establishment and security was strict. Now I had a large force of night watchmen and firemen on day and night. Their main function was chasing people off at weekends, so the place, like a lot of War Department establishments, was a natural sanctuary for wildlife because the public were excluded. You find this all around the country. I could go there with a pair of binoculars and study a heron whenever I wanted to at close range, watching his exact technique of picking eels out of Pitsea Hall Fleet, the way in which the heron throws them into the air, waits for the eel to come down head first and open his beak and straightens his neck all in one go so the eel goes down head first, then the scales don't get stuck the wrong way in his throat.

I offer this as another bit of Essex folklore that was given to me by the old yard foreman, now perhaps we might mention a few names here. Now the yard foreman was a gentleman called George. He and his wife both worked at the Stores Depot all their lives and he was a great authority on everything that went on there; the wildlife, the rabbits which he used to catch every day because there were thousands and thousands of them there until mixamitosis came along and I think he used to keep our canteen supplied with fresh meat by catching rabbits.

We also had another man, must be long since dead, who was a typical Essex longshore man, wild fowler, he owned a punt gun and a punt. This is again, a purely East Anglian (Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex) way of shooting ducks. You have a gun which is about eight feet long which is the giant's shotgun, too big to be fired from the shoulder. You have this mounted on a sort of very low canoe like a kayak or a punt and the object is that you lay face downwards in this punt with paddles on your hand and the butt end of this gun against your shoulder and you carefully insinuate yourself into the flocks of ducks in the reed beds without making any disturbance on the water. The gun used to be loaded with X pounds of shot and gunpowder in little bags. That's all I know about punt guns, they are great collector's items now. You pull the trigger or the lanyard in some cases on these pump guns, deafening report and about fifty ducks used to fall down at one go. This is what you aimed for of course it is not the thing to talk about in today's conservation society but it was all the rage 50/60 years ago. Killing one or two birds with a shot or fifty in one shot. That's right it was real professional duck killing you see and he was a punt gunner and I've only ever seen one punt gun and that was my own grandfather's down in Grays and it stood in the corner of the shed and you didn't pick up the gun, you picked up the punt with the gun attached to it you see and put it in the water.

I used to use the railway station of course quite a bit (Pitsea station) and there used to be lots of people using the railway and there wasn't any good roads from Pitsea Broadway down to

the Creek of course. Station Lane and Marsh Road was largely unmade up the last three quarters of a mile of it with cows on the side of the road. Sometimes in fog you would bump into a cow that had wandered across your way.

**(Interviewer) Can you remember the owners of Pitsea Hall?** No, is there a Hall? Well the first place when you came past the station, on the right, you would pass cottages on the right (these cottages used to be in Station Approach) over the bridge (this is not applicable to this route to Pitsea Hall Fleet), the level crossing was manned in those days. There is a little road down to the left which had the impossible name of Dundonald Drive, I often wondered how it got its name because it only had two houses in my day. (Interviewer) It still has it's the rubbish dump.

This is the thing that killed it off because there was a fair amount of ill feeling at one time, on my part. When I took over as manager, because although I went there in 1956, I didn't take over as manager until the end of 1961 when the previous one retired. In that time, I watched our road that led all the way from the main gate down to the jetty being knocked to pieces by huge vehicles going through, sometimes lowloaders with bulldozers on. I used to protest to the manager of a concern called the Land Reclamation Company that these bulldozers were knocking my road to bits. I couldn't do anything about it because there was an agreement between the government and the Land Reclamation, who were sponsored by the government, that they could have the use of our road for a nominal rent of say £5 a year so there was not much I could do about it. I could not keep them out they were the only people allowed through our defence establishment gates. I was told then there was about a 25 year contract for this firm to bring rubbish from London and waste paper as most of it come up by barges, up the Creek and the rest came by lorries, to raise the level of the surrounding marshlands with a view to preventing further flooding.

Often we got small floods that didn't get in the newspapers of course. We often got the area each side of the road down by the jetty flooded but nothing like the 1953 floods.

**(Interviewer) What happened in the 1953 floods?** Before my time of course, but Pitsea, like Canvey Island of course, was one of the areas that really suffered but it didn't hit the papers as Pitsea wasn't built up like Canvey Island. The area got flooded just as badly but the only people that suffered were the workers down by the marshes. Our workers, when I wasn't there, on that site they were well flooded yes for a long, long time before it rained. In fact I think it was two or three feet in the offices and some of the other places, even in the undergrowth because I, and not only me, my predecessor loved Pitsea and he lived on the site where I didn't, he lived in that big bungalow. He loved Pitsea and he used to make a point of keeping the paths open by walking.

Even in my time there were dense thickets of brambles, hawthorns, blackberries and the place was alive with foxes. The foxes were there because there were plenty of rabbits and other wildlife to eat. When you managed to get through some of the pathways you would find earthworks of various sorts which I was told by people like old George, the foreman, were relics of the days when it was a gunpowder factory and the sheds were deliberately spaced out a long way from each other and each one had a rampart of earth round it as a primitive blast wall. You see if one shed got blown to smithereens the rest wouldn't and there are quite a few little places in the heart of the island that have obviously been part of even older munitions set-up but there's no history of that.

**(Interviewer) Which is right by the Barge Inn?** Yes, whether it is still there I do not know but there was a wharf there.

**(Interviewer) Yes Vange Wharf.** It was Churchill Johnson's Wharf at one stage, before that I think it was Farquason's, all timber people. That was always called Timberman's Creek, in

the past and all the way from Millwall and now it comes by lorry. I say Millwall that was one of the docks where timber ships used to come in. All the London docks did a regular timber trade, certain ones specialised in it you see. I mean as a boy I could see ship after ship, Russian, Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, German as well as British coming up the River Thames passed Grays all leaning over, you could always tell which way it had come because the ship listed to Port or Starboard. You could tell whether it come from The Baltic or somewhere else because the weather on the way across the North Sea used to soak the timber because of washing over spray and the timber used to swell up and get heavy. By the time she got to London she had a big list on and they used to look really dangerous with hundreds of tons of timber on the upper deck. All leaning over and chaps working away with wedges and hammers to keep it shored up that you think it would just about get to London Docks.

**(Interviewer) Did you ever see any of them sort of sinking?** I always saw some with timber falling off, you know long planks and things but as I say most of it used to come from The Baltic and Norway and Sweden.