Friern Barnet & District Local History Society

INTERVIEW BETWEEN PERCY REBOUL AND STAN MORTIMER OF 304 FRIERN BARNET LANE, N20 ON 17 APRIL 1983

PR: Stan, when were you born?

SM: 24th October 1909.

PR: Were you born in Whetstone?

SM: 22 Holly Terrace.

PR: Does Holly Terrace still stand today?

SM: No. It was running about 150 yards down on the right hand side running towards the vicarage grounds. Parallel to Whetstone High Road.

PR: What sort of houses were they?

SM: Two rooms up and down, as far as I can remember. I left there when I was 5 years old.

PR Have you any idea when those were pulled down?

SM: After the war. I should say around the 1950s

PR: Had you got any brothers and sisters?

SM: Yes, two brothers and one sister.

PR: Any of them living today?

SM: No, they're all deceased.

PR: Right, let me just talk about your school days first. You told me yesterday that you went to St. John's. What do you remember about that? Do you remember who the Head Teacher was, for example?

SM: When I joined in 1914 at age 5 it was Miss *(Smittle??)*, the Head Mistress.

PR: Do you remember how many classes there were?

SM: In the Infants I can't remember offhand.

PR: But you went through the whole school there?

SM: Yes.

PR: When did you leave school?

SM: 1923, early in December 1923 when I was 14. That was the school leaving age.

PR: What sort of schooling did you get. Was it a good school? Did you enjoy it?

SM: Some days. Yes, I found it quite well.

PR: What were the other kids like that went to the school?

SM: Much like myself.

PR: Any stand out in your mind particularly, looking back on it?

SM: No, I don't think there was anybody outstanding.

PR: No-one sticks in your mind at all?

SM: Quite a lot of them. Some have died recently that I used to know quite well.

PR: Some of these old houses interest me. How was the house lit?

SM: Gas, all gas.

PR: What about cooking?

SM: Used to have just the range with the oven at the side of the fire.

PR: The old black lead stove?

SM: That's right.

PR: They say that in those days it was a lot of hard work for women. Was that true of your mum?

SM: It certainly was. She used to have to work hard.

PR: What would be a typical day? What time would she get up?

SM: I suppose round about half past six in the morning, I should imagine. I can't quite remember now.

PR: But she got your Dad off to work, did she?

SM: Oh yes.

PR: What did he do for a living?

SM: He worked on the Metropolitan Electric Tramways. It's the only job I remember him doing from when I was very young.

PR: Was he driving on the local transport?

SM: No, he was on the Permanent Ways Department. Repairs to the permanent way. Even my grandfather worked on that as well.

PR: Would he have been working when they actually laid the cobbles and things and the rails down the High Road here towards the Green Man?

SM: That I can't say because I wasn't around then.

PR: True, that was about 1904 but it's possible that that's the sort of work he would have done.

SM: He did all the repairs to it. In those days they used to have 5 or 6 men with a chisel, all swinging it together. None of this automatic stuff of today.

PR: As far as the drivers and conductors were concerned, of course they were reasonably well paid. I think it was quite a hard life but have you any idea what your old man earned in those days?

SM: As far as I can remember it was only about £2 something a week.

PR: That would have been about an average wage. Was it a fairly hard life to make ends meet like it was for most people?

SM: As far as I know it was.

PR Did you have to do any little jobs yourself?

SM: I done many a little job.

PR: Can you just tell me about some of them? Did you have a regular job at a young age?

SM: You weren't allowed to do a job until you were 13 but we used to go caddying down the golf course before that. I used to go down to a house in Friern Barnet Lane in the evenings, after school, getting the coal up and the wood from the cellars and suchlike.

PR: General jobs. What would you get paid for that?

SM: I think I got about three shillings a week.

PR: Did you have to give that all to your mum or did you keep some?

SM: I gave her some. I used to do a paper round in the mornings too for Danters round the corner here. Miss Danter ran it then. That's the only one the same as it was years ago – a paper shop. Foreign people are running it now. Indians or Pakistani, I'm not sure what they are.

PR: Has the shop itself changed?

SM: It's been altered inside to what it was. They've made it into one big shop where it was only a small shop in the front.

PR: How many papers did you deliver? Was it a big round?

SM: I used to do about 40 deliveries in the mornings.

PR: And what time did you finish that?

SM: All depends what mood I was in and the weather. I had to be home ready in time for school.

PR: Did you ever get caught by the Inspector watching out for paperboys?

SM: I never got caught. I was never stopped at any time. I don't remember anyone getting caught. I did two or three rounds. I used to do one towards Finchley and one up Athenaeum Road and all round there. I always remember one lady in Athenaeum Road, when you went round for your Boxing Day…… you'd ask her for it and she would say "Oh yes, very good. Have you today's paper?" "No, don't do them on a Boxing Day". "Well I'm afraid you can't have a Christmas Box". That was regular. Whoever took that round knew it was coming.

PR: That's an interesting point because today the kids knock way before Christmas, don't they, to collect their money.

SM: It must be on Boxing Day – that was the one day you went round only.

PR: Were people on the whole quite generous?

SM: Most of them used to give you something. If you got a shilling in those days you thought you were doing very well. I suppose if I picked up £2-£3 on a Boxing Day I'd done very well.

PR: You'd had to work hard for it during the year.

SM: And you used to have to collect the money instead of them coming in the shop to pay for it. Miss Danter used to get quite annoyed if you didn't bring that money in.

PR: Did you have to keep a tally, a book?

SM: Just a paper. She used to get quite annoyed if you hadn't got the money.

PR: What did they pay you for a paper round in those days?
SM: Two and six a week.

PR: That was about average was it?

SM: I don't know that anybody else got much anywhere else.

PR: Did you do any other little jobs or meet any other local people?

SM: Before I was 13 I used to go round with a local baker, Lee's of Oakleigh Road delivering bread with them on a Saturday morning.
PR: So that was another job you had going. Where did you deliver to, Stan? All round this area?

SM: Well, through here, up toward Finchley, right up to Tally Ho! Corner. Finished up in Stanhope Road.

PR: Did he compete with Cook's, the baker on the corner?

SM: That's right, yes.

PR: What was bread then?

SM: I don't know about then but towards 1938/9 a large loaf was the old 8d. *(PAT'S NOTE: I'm pretty sure that during the war a loaf was fourpence ha'penny and it stayed that price for a good while after the war)*

PR: I wouldn't have changed much during the 30s would it. It was fairly stable.

SM: They used to deliver every day to you.

PR: Did you get to know many of the Whetstone people when you were doing all these jobs. I get the impression that in those days nearly everyone knew nearly everyone else.

SM: Yes, in the local community I suppose you generally knew everybody round your own area where you lived.

PR: What were the people like generally? It's said, I don't know with what truth, that they would help each other out.

SM: They did. Very much. Yes. In our terraced houses when I lived just along here you could always rely on, if anybody was in trouble or wanted anything, there was always somebody there to help each other.

PR: That's all gone now, hasn't it Stan?

SM: As far as I know, yes. I don't see much community like there used to be. Most people more or less live in their own little …….

PR: Do you think that's a shame or….?
SM: I do. Very much a shame, yes.

PR: No-one starves these days, do they?

SM: I've never seen anybody starve in Whetstone in my time but they used to struggle on. You might find one or two families were exceptionally poor in them days.

PR: What do you reckon were the worst aspects in those early days, though, when you were young?

SM: I never thought of it in them days. You just took your living as you go along and everything and you just went plodding along in your own way.

PR: But do you look back at those times, Stan, with some affection. What do you think about them. Do you think the sooner they went….

SM: No, we used to have some jolly good times, I thought, as youngsters and everything else.

PR: There wasn't a lot to do, was there?

SM: No. You had to make your own amusements then

PR: What sort of things did you do, then?

SM: What as boys?

PR: Yes. I mean play in the fields and that kind of thing.

SM: Well in the small bits of field we used to play football or whatever it was and top of the *(?pike*) there, many a time on holidays you would see quite a gang of 20 or 30 all sitting down playing marbles and everything else like that. Of course there was nothing, no traffic hardly, much in the roads in them days. We got caught playing football with the policeman on point duty at the corner of Oakleigh Road and Totteridge Lane and three of our gang was arrested one day. That was quite an amusing thing with the local police that day.

PR: Why would they get arrested for playing football?

SM: What! Playing a football round the policeman in the centre of the…… he told us to pick the thing up in no uncertain manner and carry on. Of course what did they do – got past him outside the police station and they was all playing again. So he done no more and come along and took us – we all wanted to go but he only took three of them. They got fined five shillings each at Highgate Court.

PR: What were they charge with? Causing a disturbance or something?

SM: I don't actually know what the wording was. I know one was my brother and one was Charlie Endsby. I forget who the other one was. I know three of them went to court.

PR: Five bob was a lot of money then. Did he get a whacking, your brother?

SM: I don't know. I don't think so.

PR: Do you know who the policeman was?

SM: I forget his name now.

PR: What did they think about the local bobbies in those days?

SM: Alright. We got many a whack with those rolled capes if we was along the front there fooling around and you daren't tell your father about it. They knew the local policemen as much as your mates and you got another one when you got home, perhaps.

PR: Now let's get down to the main reason I wanted to talk to you today, although I might well get back to if you've got any memories of old Whetstone a bit later if we've got any tape left, but let's get you just leaving school and

obviously faced with the thought you'd got to get a job. What happened? How did you get this job at Lawsons?

SM: Well my brother worked there. He started there in 1921. That was when they first took over. It was Lawson's son then. He took over and he actually started work before he was 14. He left school in the August and before the new season he started work.

PR: So what happened? Did he ask the old man whether there was a job going? What happened exactly?

SM: To tell you the truth I don't know. I don't know what he did. I was told to go and see them there and I got the job. I first when into the office then. At first I was the office boy.

PR: Who saw you when you first got there? Were you given any kind of interview with anyone or did you just turn up.

SM: No, I was told to go and see the old chap. That is Mr. Thomas Lawson.

PR: Did he found the firm? This is the old grandfather?

SM: This is the grandfather, yes. He actually lived in Halstead in Essex and he used to come up three times a week but his son, John Lawson, he used to live in lodgings up in Barnet.

PR: So they weren't a local firm, in fact?

SM: No, not when they first came.

PR: So you got this job in the office. Now what were they paying you a week?

SM: 7/6d. a week I got. I didn't like the job.

PR: You weren't cut out for office work, is that it?

SM: That's what I thought, yes.

PR: So what time did you start in the morning?

SM: 8 o'clock.

PR: Let's talk you through a typical day. Here you were, a lad of 14. You turn up at 8 o'clock. What would happen from there on?

SM: Cor!

PR: Well you may have made a cup of tea

SM: You was allowed to make a cup of tea, yes, but not first thing in the morning though. I used to have to do tickets, answer the phone for orders and that. In them days they was only doing bundles of chopped wood. There was hardly anything when they first started there. They used to bundle this wood up like the oilmongers used to sell the rolled sticks. They used to cut the wood up and chop it and bundle it and send it out to the local oilmongers and that.

PR: That was his main business, was it?

SM That and starting off with logs and firewood mostly. That was all when he first started and they had just an ordinary old oil petrol engine that used to drive the saw when I went there in 1923.

PR: I'd better just establish for the tape that we're talking about the Lawsons Timber Yard which was next to, or adjacent almost, to the old police station in the High Road.

SM: There was 5 cottages between those.

PR: There was the police station, 5 cottages going in the direction of Finchley.

SM: And this was next door to it.

PR: Yes, and indeed still is today. So how many people were working at Lawsons when you first joined? There was your brother and yourself you've mentioned. Can you give me any names, Stan?

SM: There were 4 or 5 of them. They used to be these casual fellows, they would chop and bundle this wood. They were only casuals – they used to come and go. The pay was very poor in them days. They used to do it on more of a piecework basis. They used to get so much every hundred bundles they made.

PR: Where did he get his timber from to do this?

SM: I suppose the old tree wood and logs, they used to do a lot of logs and all that kind of stuff.

PR: He'd have to buy those.

SM: Oh, yes. He'd get them in.

PR: Would they have been bought locally, Stan, or would he have bought them from some merchant or other?

SM: Well that I can't really say how he got them.

PR: How would they have come into the yard?

SM: Horse and cart. When I first went there they had hundreds of ammunition boxes all round the back and side there. They used to sell them to different people but of course there was a lot of wood round those cases and you got a lot of stuff from that.

PR: So used that as firewood? Chopped it up.

SM: Sawn with a saw. It wasn't an electric saw. The old Petter engine which on a cold morning you'd start at 8 o'clock and it might not be going at half past nine. You were still trying to get it to start.

PR: Was much of it cut by hand, though, as well?

SM: No, it was all done with that old Petters oil engine driving the belt. Belt driven to the saw.

PR: I've often wondered how they cut that wood. I remember them in the ironmongers and they were all tied in a very neat bundle. So imagine we've got a tree trunk then. Tell me how it was done.

SM: Well all timber was cut into its length. You'd have your circular saw and you had *(I can't make out the next few words)* and it was all split by hand with the choppers, the axes.

PR: A special kind of axe was it, or a chopping block of some sort?

SM Yes, chopping block. And then they had a bench. On that bench was an iron frame scooped like a horseshoe shape. They'd drop so many sticks into that and from that you had two ends of a rope coming up and it was looped and you put that round and you got another wood and levered it and that brought them all up tight together in a bundle and you tied the string round it and that was it, done. It was put into a crate – 50 in a crate – and that's how the men used to get paid for – so many in a crate.

PR: And that was put into, what, a wooden crate?

SM: In a wooden crate and delivered to the local whoever wanted them.

PR: Who were the big users, Stan?

SM: Where the Eastern Electricity at Finchley is now, that used to be a row of old shops there. Who was that one…? He was an ironmonger there.

PR: You had a big one in Whetstone.

SM: Oh that was Oliver Brothers, that's right, yes. I don't remember ever doing with them but this one special man at Finchley when he asked for his materials on the phone you could hold the phone about 2 yards away and he was still shouting at you about when he was going to get his logs and his chopping bundles.

PR: How were the logs delivered? What sort of log tipper was it for burning.

SM: The tops of trees and all that. The limb part that wasn't suitable for other kind of work.

PR: Some burn better than others but was there any difference in price?

SM: I don't know what the price was then because it was very dirt cheap to what the present standard day of timber was. We used to have a lot of Oak in them days come in. Some trees were better to burn. You'd get a Poplar tree and that was vicious, it would spit all over the place and cause havoc but mostly we used to get a lot of oak.

PR: How were the logs sold. By weight?

SM: No, so much a hundred. It was in hundreds.

PR: How much would a pile of a hundred cost then?

SM: In them days I think I a hundred logs was about 7/6d., which was good oak logs.

PR: What about a bundle of firewood.

SM: A penny or twopence, if I can remember. That was all they were. So you can imagine what little these fellows got that used to make them got.

PR: But presumably that 7/6d. per hundred – was that competing with coal? Did a lot of people burn nothing but logs do you reckon, or did most people buy coal and logs?

SM: Well you used to buy logs to help out the ..um. I know we did in our home. There was always a good big log in the middle of the coal to keep it going. A good Oak log used to last.

PR: Yes. I mean better than coal in some ways.

SM: I don't think anything was better than coal when it was actually burning.

PR: No, but you sort of eked it out. I mean coal was relatively expensive.

SM: I suppose them days you were on 1/11d. to 2/- a hundredweight. The best was about 2/3d. as far as I can remember, in them days.

PR: So, anyway, the early firm depended on these logs. So what happened, did it start to grow?

SM: Then it came along … there was a local man here, name of Teddy Bolton, he came along and he was a fencer in those days and he came along and started fencing with the Lawsons, erecting the fences. He used to have a business along here which is now….New offices have been built now and he had a yard there. Just along here, at the end of the shops where that new block of offices are. He used to have a business there. Taylor & Bolton it was then. The I don't know whether Taylor died or they broke up and he came and worked for Lawsons.

PR: But he had his own little business?

SM: He had a little bit of doing rustic work and all that and he done that then he came to Lawsons and from then it started on fencing.

PR: Did he used to work in his own yard?

SM No, in Lawsons, he used to work there. The first place we had was where Datsun Motors are now. A fellow named Thompson had that. It was more like a big shed it was and we had our first business in there and we used to do some of the work over there preparing the fencing ready to go out.

PR: Was it mainly rustic?

SM: No, fencing. Putting proper fencing up. Putting the posts and mortars in by hand, no machines in those days.

PR: This would be what? Oak posts?

SM: Mostly oak.

PR: What sort of timber for the palings?

SM: You could have soft wood palings and in them days you used to have cleft oak paling which nobody sees today.

PR: It would cost the earth, wouldn't it.

SM: Oh you wouldn't get them today. They used to be cleaved by hand. Every one was cleaved by hand. In fact where the garage round the corner is now there used to be a fellow there name of Whittington, he used to cleave the oak.

PR: How did they do that?

SM: Well it all depended on the length of the paling you wanted, you see. He used to come and get the prime clear oak and he used to split them.

PR: All straight grain presumably?

SM: Well of course they've got to be cleaved, you see.

PR: How did they do that?

SM: Cleaving irons and axes.

PR: I wonder what they sold for.

SM: I can't remember now

PR: 5ft. would it be?

SM: Well they used to be in bundles of say about 25 in a bundle.

PR: So did you have more machinery? I mean these oak posts, they're a hell of a thing to cut aren't they?

SM: Well, when we first started we used to do everything by hand. Drill by a big brace and bit. Used to drill two holes, one each end, 2 inches apart then you used to chop it up with your chisels.

PR: This is morticing the thing?

SM: That's morticing.

PR: Did he buy in the posts?

SM: He used to buy them in whatever size you wanted, four by four, five by four inches or six by fours.

PR: What timber was used for the arris rails?

SM Oak and also deal. All depends what sort of …..

PR: And then you could buy a variety of palings.

SM: Oh yes. You might have what they call Open Space, you might have an inch, two palings and space. That's how they used to do it round.

PR: What customers came round for that?

SM: Private houses.

PR: Was there a lot of building going on at that time?

SM: In the 1930s you had all these estates building up then. There was never no shortage of fencing in them days.

PR: Plenty of work, was there? You were kept busy on that?

SM: Oh yes. And the class of work had to be good too. You wouldn't get away with what they could today.

PR: There was no cast concrete.

SM: No. No concrete

PR: But who actually installed the fencing?

SM: You went out yourself and you erected it.

PR: Tell me about that, Stan, because that's an art that I don't know about. Take a new property, was it all marked out for you, the boundary lines?

SM: That was the builder. He'd tell you where his points were where your fencing's got to be erected.

PR: How did you dig the hole? Did you have a special grafting tool?

SM: Used to have a grafting tool with a long handle on it. About 5ft. handle you see so you got down and most of the posts in them days had what you call a big butt on them which was a big lump on the end of it which made the posts firm and that. You'd never put a post in them days without having a butt on it like they do – its just a clean straight down butt today on a post.

PR: Was the pit lined with anything?

SM: What pit?

PR: Sorry, the hole for the posts.

SM: Lined?

PR: What I meant was anything put at the bottom?

SM: No. It was put under the ground

PR: Was the timber treated in any way?

SM: Creosote, we mostly used to put creosote round the butt before we put it in. Sometimes they'd have them concreted in. (*Next few words inaudible)* … with the clay and everything.

PR: They'd last for years, those things, didn't they?

SM: Yes, years and years. It was only at what they call the wind and water line at ground level, that's where most posts went. What I've been told is that you could get posts that have been in there 50 and 60 years and the butt was still good inside the ground. It's what they called the wind and water line – that was what always went.

PR: O.K. Just take me through the job again. You dig all your holes out first, did you? Or line your posts up first.

SM: You get your sighting rods up at each end We never used lines, it was always sighted in by eye, then you lay your arris rails out to the length of 9 to 10, whatever you want; mark you holes and dig the holes and start erecting, putting your posts in, you've got to add to your arris rails shapes to fit the mortice, you put them in (*inaudible)*……..and line in into between the two sighting rods and levels and carry on up the fence like that and then you would put your gravel boards in the bottom and the next thing you'd do was start putting your boards on and you'd top them all along the top to make a finished job of it.

PR: When you say "top them off", Stan, what does that mean exactly.

SM: They stand higher than what your two post levels are and you put a line or something along that and you cut that off so you've got a perfect straight line along the top.

PR: That's all done by hand, obviously.

SM: Yes.

PR. Someone once said to me that on a really good fence you cap them off

SM. Oh yes. You had what they call the counter rail and capping on the top. That's when you had a capping on you had to put another rail which we used to call the counter rail to carry it on. That used to be along the top.

PR. That stops the weathering of the top

(I can't make out the next couple of sentences)

SM: Of course then you used to have your round top post standing above or just level, whichever you …..

PR: How long do you reckon a fence like that would last?

SM: Years and years. A good oak fence was put in in them days, they were.

PR: The cost of that would be….?

SM: Colossal now.

PR: Any idea what a good fence would have cost in those days?

SM: On some of the estates, like up at Southgate – we used to do a lot of Southgate estates – the new buildings you used to get a 4ft.6 to 5ft. high fence and you could have that supplied and fixed for 5/- a yard.

PR: That can't be oak.

SM: No, that was deal but the posts could be. They started a lot of this deal business for cheapness and that.

PR: Was there any alternative to the paling. Did they have wire fencing?

SM: Later on, yes

PR: That came in what?

SM: I always remember I was the first one from Lawsons that fixed one of these chainlink fences at Lawsons and believe me I wondered what it was when the gave it to us and that was at the bottom of a factory at the Welsh Harp. We put it along there and a local man here from Whetstone with me and that. We wondered what the devil it was when we were first given this stuff to put in. We'd never seen it before.

PR: You weren't too keen on it?

SM: What? Chainlink fencing? No. We used to call it Meccano stuff. All these bolts and iron posts and wires. It was a lot of iron in them days.

PR: They didn't last very long, did they?

SM: They used to be all galvanised first and then they got on to this plastic covered stuff. The galvanised never seemed to last long in the weather.

PR: No, it was obviously a cheap form ….

SM: It wasn't cheap stuff. good galvanised it was supposed to be but, see, when you got a chain that was made up in the ordinary plain wire and when you'd had it dipped in (?Bunners) of course you got little spots that never really got the galvanised in then the rust started. There's very little galvanised used, it's nearly all plastic heavy gauge. It's galvanised underneath but the plastic is covered.

PR: You mentioned earlier on, Stan, this rustic fencing. Tell me about that. Was that one of the early things, rustic fencing?

SM: We used to do loads of it, yes.

PR: What year was that – in the 20s and 30s?

SM: Yes.

PR: They still do it, don't they?

SM: No, not now. They've got nobody to do it.

PR: Is there any particular type of timber that's good for rustic fencing?

SM: Well, mostly then for uprights we used to use the larch poles. We used to have different types of fence. We used to have what they called the trellis fencing, then we had all this higgledy-piggledy stuff. Lawsons have got some photos of it now of all what we used to make there.

PR: Rustic is mainly ornamental, isn't it?

SM: Oh, it's all ornamental, yes.

PR: So would that go into the big gardens locally?

SM: Yes. Used to have big screens right along the garden people in the big houses and that. Arches in different places.

PR: Did you have to supply and install that?

SM: We used to supply and make it there, actually make it.

PR: Did you make it before it went or…?

SM: No, used to make it up in sections ready marked and then used to go and erect it. There was only about three of us used to make it over there. That was old Teddy (?Poulton) the fencing, myself and my brother. Nobody else used to make it over there, only us three

PR: Is it a special branch of the art, rustic fencing?

SM: We used to think so in them days. Nobody else could do it.

PR: What was special about it? What was difficult?

SM: They was it was made. To us making it, it didn't seem special but everybody else thought it was special.

PR: You're working in different thicknesses, aren't you?

SM: Most it used to be tops of oak trees, all the twisted parts and that. It used to come in on a horse and cart there. A fellow name of Bells from East Finchley used to supply it to us. …….used to get the local lads that worked there to peel it off with draw knives. Took all the bark and everything off then it was all

made up from that. You've got to see a photo of actually what was done. It's hard to describe. It was what we used to make with it.

PR: But it was really good was it?

SM: We used to consider yes. Everybody else thought so. I think a little while ago Lawsons used to have a big host of pictures of all the work we used to do there.

PR: It would be interested to see that.

SM: You can ask young Mr. Lawson if he could show you some of the early pictures.

PR: We just broke off there to look at an old picture of Lawson & Sons and there's some of the rustic work Stan was pointing out to me there. You were saying that arched one was for a four-way path.

SM: Yes. What we used to call The Dome.

PR: But what were the uprights? Were those larch? You were saying the uprights were always larch but the tops were different.

SM: Some had to be cut out of a …. shaped and shaped on a ring. We used to make those rings up on a board, cut them and join them all up to make the rings first.

PR: Were they nailed together, Stan?

SM: Oh no.

PR: Galvanised nails?

SM: No. They was very thin nails. You couldn't have thick nails in those kind of…..generally used to be about a 2" thin nail that used to join. They used to be cut on a slope then fitted to these rings. Then those rings was placed together, what we call the filling in, that's the oak pieces and all shaped.

PR: Round about here – Whetstone, Finchley – there were some big houses who could well afford things like this. Can you remember working in the big houses locally?

SM: No, we didn't seem to do many round here. It used to be going out towards Barnet. We used to go to St. Albans and all round doing this rustic work.

PR: How did you get up there?

SM: By motors.

PR: By the lorries?

SM: Yes.

PR: Is that the sort we've seen in one of the pictures with the solid …..

SM: That's right. That was one of the first ones we had.

PR: A crew of how many? Three and a driver?

SM: The driver would take you out and leave you there. Used to come back under your own steam on a bus or whatever it was.

PR: What about Totteridge? There were some big places.

SM: Um..

PR: How did Lawson get the order – he was on the phone by this time I see, in the thirties, but people used to write in or….? Any distinguished clients, any well-known clients that you remember?

SM: No, can't offhand say any special ones. We done a terrific lot of work for Bullimores who was down Friern Barnet Lane in the early nineteen thirties. Down in Church Way. They bought what used to be the old farm land all round there *(inaudible bit)*…. All used to be all farm land and all this land was sold up for housing and that and he bought this big lump of land behind Friern Barnet Lane houses and we done a terrific lot of work there for them.

PR: Is that where Bethune Park is today?

SM: No no, its Myddelton Park – you know Myddelton Park? Well there were some big houses there. One was Bullimore the big Cosser Radio man, he was one and also Ponting, what was he, a stockbroker and everything. Those two had them big houses and he bought this land behind there and we done a terrific lot of work and all fencing there – big ornamental oak fencing and really smart stuff.

PR: Any other big contracts you remember doing?

SM: We used to have all the building firms and everything, we used to. Yes.

PR: Wades and people like that?

SM: Wadey? We done a load of work for him.

PR: You always laugh when you say Wadey.

SM Well we know so much. My eldest brother worked on there. They was a right gang of lads. That's where old Tommy the Tinker worked and my brother and the Catlin, Harry Catlin the brickie from Oakleigh Road. It was a proper old gang there were there. Jack Prime was a carpenter on there. Yes.

PR: What's your memories of those days, Stan. I mean were they good craftsmen in those days.

SM: They were very good craftsmen. You didn't have them cowboys in them days, I tell you that they wouldn't. They were craftsmen. They had their training and that to do it. And those fellows, any of them on Wadey could go to any job and do a job, they could.

PR: Did they get on well together?

SM: Yes, they was always good….

PR: They also had a lot of fun together, you know…

SM: They'd go on a building site with a bloomin' old wooden shed there and …….rough and tumble having their mugs of tea and different things… but now everything's got to be put down for them, so long for tea.

PR: Did Lawsons supply the scaffolding poles at all?

SM: No. That was outside. That was a different line altogether.

PR: Today, as you go past there, of course it's full of sheds and greenhouses. When did those sort of things come in. In your days?

SM: Oh yes. We started making them on the business then but it's all contract now. They buy all those in now.

PR: But tell me about the early days, Stan. I mean as far as you're concerned when did he go into the garden shed, summerhouse, type of thing?

SM: Quite early.

PR: Did he? What happened there. Tell me about it. Did you make your own?

SM: We used to make them all up there in the workshops.

PR: How many people working there then?

SM: In them days, about 20 or 30 then I suppose.

PR: As many as that. All local lads were they?

SM: Mostly local, yes.

PR What year are we talking about now, typically?

SM: In the 1930s – early thirties.

PR: About the sheds, was it the foreman or someone designed those or did they make them to the customer's specification?

SM: Well in between the governor (*inaudible)* used to design them out and work from that.

PR: Did he used to have specimens installed on the forecourt of the… like they have today?

SM: Yes. They was all their own designs up to the time I left there. We made our own designs and done everything there and used to decorate some of them with different types of rustic all over them. In them days, going back in the early thirties, we even used to have thatched straw houses made. We used to have a chappie in from, I think he lived in Russell Lane, a chappie name of Wild down there. I think his name was Wild. He used to come and do the

thatching for us. Of course we used to have it thatched on the job. You couldn't take it out on vehicles it would be too weighty. You used to put the building up on the site and he used to come along and thatch it.

PR: Were they mainly local people buying products like that?

SM: No, we used to go all over the place. Right up past St. Albans with some of those summer houses and that in these big places.

PR: How did he get that business? Did he have catalogues?

SM: We used to have print catalogues, yes.

PR: Did he have any agreement with some of the nurseries and local people there?

SM: No, not in the nurseries. You didn't see many nurseries doing them sort of things in those days. Most this has died since you've had these metal green houses and that's when this big advancement came in greenhouses.

PR: Yes. You made greenhouses as well, did you?

SM: Very few. We didn't do many. That was a specialist ….you used to have these greenhouse…. well them pine people at Austins and all them kind of people used to be right up in the job in those days. It was a trade more or less on its own.

PR: Can you remember though, Stan, what would be a typical price for a little garden shed in those days?

SM: Just a few pence. We'd make a summer house, what we used to call a corner summer house – fit in the corner of a garden, shaped and everything, lined inside and out with matchboarding, decorated with rustic on the windows and things and I think it was £16 to £20. The same thing today would cost you £400/500.

PR: Was that in cedarwood or anything fancy like that?

SM: Deal mostly in them days. Good deal.

PR: What other products that you made can you tell me about?

SM: What other products? Mostly wood, just fencing and um sheds and everything. That was our main lines. Then, timber, we used to mould our own mouldings and everything when the machines come in later on. The spindles and the plane and all electric planes and all that stuff.

PR: So he was quite a big employer in the area at this time?

SM: He had quite a number of fellow on, yes. You had quite a number, as many as 10 sets of fencers going out erecting all day long. (*inaudible)*....stuff in the course of a week. 10 gangs going out there.

PR: Would you reckon he had a successful business running there. I mean it sounds like it. Would he have made money out of fencing.

SM: *Laughs*. No governor ever tells you he makes money, does he. Then the depression come along in the 1933 and they was really tight, builders. We used to do a terrific lot of fencing and then the builders started going bankrupt and things got very grim for everybody.

PR: What were the worst years as far as you were concerned?

SM: Well I was fortunate. I was never out of work so I was very fortunate.

PR: What were you getting paid about this time?

SM: Up to the war I don't suppose a tradesman, beginning of the 1939 war a full tradesman didn't get much more than one and sevenpence, one and eightpence an hour. That's on the buildings and all that. It wasn't a lot a week. But we used to, on our fences, do a lot of piece work. We would, we had to work hard for it but to get that extra money to what some did.

PR: You could knock up what…three or four quid on a good week.

SM: We used to take over four quid if we wanted to.

PR: Wasn't bad then.

SM: Not in them days, no to what some of them did. You had to work hard for that, to keep having to get that. If you didn't do anything on rainy wet days or weeks you was in poor street then for a while.

PR: You were saying about the depression, how long did that last, as far as you were concerned?

SM: I should think it went from about 1933, the worst I think it was and then it went on till I should say about 1935 and then it started picking up. When everything was beginning to get in its stride then the war come along.

PR: Of course you had building on Gallants Farm Estate all round Russell Lane way.

SM: We didn't do nothing about that. They was all Ideal Homes done most of that and I think they had their own department. They used to put up a different type of fencing to what we did. They'd got their own style of stuff.

PR: The pained look on your face!

SM: Well it was. It was a different type of thing to what we usually put up. You know, their own type and that. New Ideal Homes did. They always did their own work. But we did a terrific lot…. I suppose we did more fencing over the Tommy Lipton estate that any other fencing firm. We used to have gangs up there all the time working up there.

PR: Well is there any particular incident you'd like to tell me about? How many years were you there for?

SM: 1923 to when I retired in 1974 I think it was.

PR: So you did a lot of years.

SM: I got into the army. I got a bit of that. I was the last one on the firm that went.

PR: What do you think about it, Stan, looking back on it all? Have you enjoyed it all?

SM: I had some jolly good laughs at different times.

PR: Good mates were they on the whole?

SM: Yes, very good. We was always up to larks between each other. You had to watch out that somebody wasn't doing a trick on you somewhere. And for a while we ran a very good football team.

PR; Tell me about that

SM: I've got a photo somewhere.

PR: What year was that?

SM: About 1935 up to just before the war. Of course everybody was then being called up or mobilised and we had to give up. We used to have a pitch over Brook Farm. I happened to be the lucky one to be the secretary and did most of the work.

PR: Who did you used to play?

SM: All different ones in the Finchley League.

PR: So there was quite a bit of social life as well?

SM: Oh, yes. We used to do all that. I used to leave work early – it was a privilege I got on a Saturday – and go down about an hour before and go down and see if the pitch was ready. Billy Muggins, I was. Collect the subscriptions – about 6d. – to keep us going. I know the first people we played was Specialoids along Finchley Park. The first match we ever played and young Don (*or could be Tom or John)* Lawson, that's this one's father, he started off. He said "I tell you what, first match I'll give you half a crown for every goal you score". So we won 7-1 that week and he said "that's enough for me".

PR: He supported it, did he?

SM: No, he didn't really but a chappie we used to have as a department manager, Denis Kirby, he used to help us a terrific lot with it. He used to come everywhere with us. We used to travel round. We used to go in different cups. Junior cups and everything.

PR: What I ought to do really, Stan, is to get any names you can remember of people who worked, say in the 20s and 30s. I mean the governor's name was what? Which Lawson would he be?

SM; Thomas Lawson was the elderly one with the beard.

PR; Yes, he was the grandfather, the founder, but you were saying he didn't live in the area.

SM: He did eventually. He came up to live in Barnet after a while, at Ravenscroft Park.

PR: Now what about his son?

SM: He got married then and he moved up to a house called Lindsay in Arkley. He built his own house up there.

PR: Which Lawson was this one?

SM This one's father. He died in 1940. He built his own house up there. He had a big lump of land – I think it was given to him as a wedding present – he built his own house up on there then.

PR: So it's the third generation of Lawsons now. What's his name?

SM: He's John.

PR: Who was under him then? Who was the sort of no.1 because presumably the Lawsons weren't there all the time.

SM: No. Well during the war there was only this one's mother. She was running the firm. Just her, my brother and the other fellow George Presland. They was the three and all they was doing was very little, just ticking over, they were because nobody could get anything you see. But when in 1939 we first started off we got a contract with the Ministry to make these wooden platforms for these rockets sites and we had a big order for that.

PR: Yes, so you were on a war footing in a way, then?

SM: Well they took some of our machinery away because they done a lot of it, you know, and took them to different places. They confiscated them, well not confiscated, they bought it from you to take to other places. A lot of them was taken at different times.

PR: I didn't know that. But in the 20s and 30s was there a gaffer or a foreman there at all?

SM: Oh yes, you had your foremen.

PR: Who was the main one you remember there?

SM: The one who worked out to be manager was a fellow named Denis Kirby. Mr. Denis Kirby.

PR: Was he a local?

SM: He was local. Come from Barnet

PR: Any other names you remember?

SM: Different ones?

PR: Yes.

SM: Loads of names but of all different people.

PR: Ones that stand out in your mind. I mean as being either useful or …….

SM: Oh there was dozens of fellows there

PR: Well I imagine they would have the old pay books and things still there. Do they tend to keep the records there?

SM: No, I don't know anything, not nowadays. So many people worked there. In the latter years I don't know how many faces I did see come and go. Of course after the war anybody could get a job anywhere. They used to come and go, come and go.

PR: Well that would be a matter of record but finally, Stan, can we just turn out mind to Old Whetstone in case you've got anything there. You mentioned to me your grandfather, I think you said, was Whetstone born and bred.

SM: I don't know whether he was born and bred in Whetstone. All I know is he lived in Swan Lane, well he lived in Holly Terrace first, and from there he moved into a cottage on the other side of Swan Lane. Four little old cottages on the left hand side.

PR: Did you know any of the old timers then when you were young? Any names you remember particularly.

SM: Well next door a little old lady. Her name was Cooper. Next door to them was……. oh, dear.

PR: This was in Holly Terrace, was it?

SM: No. Holly Terrace, there was a number there. A policeman lived in there and different people and that. I know quite well Gregory was one of the policemen in there. I don't know but I think he had something to do with police when they had a bit of a strike business. I think he was something to do with that I think. As far as I can remember because it's long years ago.

PR: We were talking the other day about the old Gilmour sisters that you knew, and you knew the old man, didn't you?

SM: No, the brother. I knew the brother, Alfie, yes. He had a house along the High Road there. He was a tip top joiner, he was. .He was a craftsman, a real craftsman. Beautiful work he could do but he'd got one fault.

PR: Drink, yes.

SM: It's funny, you know, I've done a lot of interviews now. Not many people have talked about the problem of drink which there was a lot of, wasn't there?

SM: Yes, terrible. We had one fellow on our firm (I won't mention his name). He used to cause us some headaches. He'd go out dinner times at work and you'd wonder whether he was ever coming back or not. He'd say "I'll see you after dinner". He had the bag of tools with him and course he used to get pickled. Come back. "Where've you left the tools?" Had to go round these different pubs to find out where he left his tools. Drink was a real issue with some of them.

PR: There was a lot more of it then. Why do you reckon that was, Stan?

SM: I don't know.

PR: It was fairly cheap, wasn't it.

SM: Not arf. About 4d. a pint. The better quality was 5d. It wasn't dear up to 1939. You could get half a pint of beer, a packet of Woodbines, a box of matches and get change out of sixpence. A ha'penny change out of sixpence. It was strong beer. The you had that Taylor Walker's Extra for an extra penny and you knew you'd had a couple of pints.

PR: Where there any old characters, Whetstone characters that you remember?

SM: Oh, yes. I forget their names now. You generally used to see the old push ambulance with the police to pick up the drunks on a run in the station with the three wheeled trolley. Put them in and strap them down and take them into the…. to cool off and that.

PR: Do you remember the fire engine?

SM: My father was one of the local firemen down there.

PR: Was he, at Whetstone. I must talk to you about that because this is one of the grey areas you know.

SM: One of the part timers, he was. You used to have your bell in the house.

PR: Right, and that's how they used to communicate? Thee bell just rang when there was an alert? When there was a fire?

SM: Used to have the alarms in the streets. Used to have an alarm at County Boundary, one outside the Whetstone Fire Station, which is the old Toc H now and one at Woodside Lane and every night, they used to take it turns these local firemen, used to go along and test those bells every night. Give it three short pulls just to test in each house it was working. It rings in each other's houses. We always used to know at 7 o'clock that bell would ring in our cottage.

PR: So what did your dad do when there was a real fire?

SM: Go out quick and get the escape out there.

PR: Was his uniform by his pillow?

SM: Trousers and that but the jackets and helmets used to stand in the um….the helmets used to be in a rack on the station. All the brass shiny helmets.

PR: Now when you talk about the station, that was…..

SM: That's all it was, an escape with a ladder and everything.

PR: It was a little tin tabernacle, the TocH is ….

SM: That's where the escape stood, in there.

PR: Now you see this is where there's a lot of controversy. Some people said they used to have an engine

SM: They had no engines in them days.

PR: So they had what you call an escape.

SM: It was. It was on wheels and a big escape like they used on some of these….

PR: It was a ladder really.

SM: It was an escape with the wheels and everything. It was a proper, good escape that extended up with the whatsname.

PR: What about hoses and things like that?

SM: They was all inside the box. That was pushed by hand.

PR: They all had these brass helmets?

SM: Oh they had the brass helmets which, when you look today, is a silly thing when there's electricity.

PR: That's why they had to get them (*inaudible)*

SM: They used to lay out their…. all bright and shiny and they had their small office at the back of the escape there where they used to sit and I think they used to go from about 7 to about 10 at night, all in turn and the chief in them days was old Tom Randall, he used to be the chief officer in charge of Whetstone. There was 4 or 5 of them there.

PR: He's now gone. Stan, give me some names. So there was Tom Randall, the fire chief, there was your dad whose name was Arthur Mortimer.

SM: There was another one, I think his name was Harry Webb and a Jack Howard. They used to live there and later on there was a chap named Woodhouse. Those were the 5 I knew in them days.

PR: What year are we talking about?

SM: I forget. I was only a youngster and when that bell rang at night people used to curse indoors. It would keep on until one of the firemen got to the fire alarm there and switched it off. It was on a big baffle board on the top of the

staircase and many a night we've got out and put a sock in that to stop it once it started.

PR: Are there any big fire incidents that you remember particularly, or your dad talking about?

SM: I remember one now by the Odeon Barnet. A big house there, it laid back there and they was flared up all night long. It was massive and the only means of water was a pond in the middle by the road and I remember seeing my father standing in the middle of the pond getting the hoses fitted into the pond to suck the water up. The engine from Hendon Lane used to come from there. They used to go out with their local escapes but the big fire engine used to come from there.

PR: To do the actual pumping?

SM: And the fire, they had the escapes and everything on it

PR: They couldn't pump water, could they?

SM: Not with these, there was nothing on here, no, not on this.

PR: So what about a little local fire, I mean a chimney alight or something? What did they do on things like that?

SM: They'd call the engine then.

PR: But they had to lug it up there, I mean it's all done by pushing.

SM: Oh yes. Five horses. I've earned many a five shillings from that when nobody's there I helped my father push that and my brother did once or twice. They used to give you five shillings if you helped to push that escape. You had to wait until the end of the month till it came.

PR: What did he get for pump time…?

SM: I couldn't tell you. I've no idea.

PR: I think it was about £3 a quarter or something.

SM: I know it wasn't much. Them days it seemed a lot to them.

PR: Someone said it just about kept the family in boots.That's a good memory. When did that pack up, that escape?

SM: I don't know. I think its when they used to telephone the normal service when they stopped these alarms in the street. You'd get people even to start that lark, pull it once or twice there, those alarms. Of course it used to be by the kerb, one at County Boundary, one outside the station and one at Woodside Lane then another one, the next fire escape, was up in Finchley in Friern Park, they had another one there like they'd got here and one in East Finchley but the main engine used to come from Hendon Lane.

PR: I do remember those, Stan, myself and I'm talking about, what, '36, '37 time. It must have been almost up to the war. There used to be these red posts that stand on the pavement where you break the glass.

SM. That is the alarm. That's the ones they used to pull.

PR: I remember there was one at Myddelton Park so there must have been a lot round there.

SM: Well that was nothing. That was Friern Barnet. That's a different borough altogether. This was the Finchley Borough we're talking about. Of course that side of the road used to be Friern Barnet. Sweets nursery over there was Friern Barnet. Those people had different dust people, everything different to us.

PR: And then the boundary comes down the middle of Friern Barnet Lane, more or less, does it?

SM: It stops at the corner there. Floyds was in Finchley. Floyds Dairies which is where the police station is. The from on from the Sweets Nurseries, all that was Friern Barnet which was Sweets Nurseries and all down there was Friern Barnet and the actual boundary of the road was where Friern Court flats are now. Right across the road that was Friern Barnet. Once you walked there you was in Friern Barnet then.

PR: Yes. I see. Well any other stories about Whetstone? I'm very glad we talked about that fire brigade because a real ……

SM: No. I can't. Sometimes it suddenly comes to you, a certain incident….

PR: I think then we'll stop at that point and thank you very much for telling me some of your old memories.

Transcribed by Patricia Cleland
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