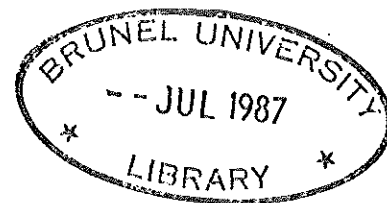


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MEMOIRS OF A BRICKLAYER.

The Life of Charles Lewis Hansford.

Recorded by R.J.Hansford.

1980.

PREFACE.

Unlike actors, politicians or eminent
military men, bricklayers have not made it
their practice to leave memoirs. Our account
of one working like seeks to fill the gap.

R.J.Hansford

January 1982.

* THE BRICKLAYERS.

Dufflecoat muffled in the piercing wind
bustling for bonus
we are the secret legion
the guardians of a hearty culture
a starker politics.

Scurrying to office or hot shop
you pass uneasily
we do not share in your illusions.

Serving a brute apprenticeship
we have what we hold
a raw brick,
the camaraderie of cold.

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* This poem by R.J.Hansford was adjudged 'merit' in the Nottingham Poetry Society Open Poetry Competition, 1979.

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Chapter 1. The Forester's Arms.

Springing from rural tradespeople, it was strange that I should become an industrial worker; life, experience and outlook might all have been different. I was impelled towards the building trade by the circumstances of my mother's second marriage, which removed me to the working class quarter of Southampton. Looking back on fifty years of construction work, the conditions of employment and the physical nature of the work itself, only two results were possible; either it killed you, or, tempered in mind and body, you would survive. I survived.

At the turn of the century my grandparents were keeping the Forester's Arms at Brockenhurst in the New Forest. My mother, who married a policeman, lived for a time near Fordingbridge where he was stationed. Both my parents returned to live at the pub during Grandmother's final illness. I was born there on November 13th 1902.

As well as the pub Grandfather had several strings to his bow. He owned a wheelwright's shop where he worked with my uncle Frank Collins, also they ran a coal round together. When the opportunity arose Grandfather did outside carpentry jobs, such as the time he worked on Rhinefield House^{*}. Two Italians, who were laying the mosaic floors, boarded with us. Each morning Grandfather would set off with them to walk the three miles to the job. Mother used to fetch Grandfather in the evening with a donkey cart.

* Large mansion built near village in late Victorian times.

Our beer came from the Isle of Wight brewery Mew-Langton; once a fortnight the dray would arrive at six o' clock in the morning, after a journey from the depot at Lymington. Whilst the two men unloaded, mother cooked breakfast for them. I can picture her now, stooping over the kitchen range; oddly, the fire was above the oven.

A busy village, Brockenhurst had a railway station and regular cattle market. Callers connected with the coal and carpentry businesses made the pub a main centre of activity. I played in the yard amongst the timber stacks. Across the small square in front of the pub stood a smithy, where horses were shod in the street. Here I could watch iron rims being fitted to wheels made in the wheelwright's shop. The blacksmith used a round metal plate set up outside his forge. Dished to take the camber of a wheel, the plate had a centre hole, which acted as a seating for hubs. Several men with long tongs brought out the glowing rim; I remember the pungent smell of burning as they hammered it home. Suddenly there was a violent hiss of steam when the induced contraction of dousing made hoop bite into wooden felloe.

In the middle of the village a smallholding backed directly on to the main road. Barn doors were always flung open, and a horse on a short pole walked in a circle, working a chaff-cutter. Wearing leather gauntlets, a man would be tossing bundles of prickly furze, good winter fodder, into the shute. Next to the Forester's Arms was a butcher's shop, which had its own slaughterhouse. I delighted in climbing onto an outhouse, from where I could just see terrified cattle being pole-axed.

Situated a few doors away, a little factory cum timber yard made wooden toys; the place was eventually destroyed in a fire. Immediately after the disaster, dozens of rocking horses, rescued from the blaze, were stacked one on another down the street. I loved to poke about in the blackened debris, where bags of nails had been fused into shapeless lumps by the inferno. Only the stark chimney remained, and I recall that the demolition gang used the 'old fashioned' method to remove it. Undermining on the side it was intended the stack should fall, they carefully cut into the brickwork, shoring up with timber props. Building a fire to burn through the supports, the workmen brought the structure crashing to the ground; it fell just as they wanted.

During Summer, various stallholders would establish pitches in front of the pub; being easy to bring merchandise by train, this Brockenhurst trading was probably something of a holiday. Each year a fishmonger arrived. He had a curious light, which dangled from the stall canopy. Every so often, the man used to vigorously work a stirrup pump, forcing fuel along the tube from canister to lamp, where it vaporised and burnt. I know he did business late into the evening, for we children could look out of the bedroom windows to see his strange light burning. Another regular, an Italian fruit seller, came each year from Southampton. At night they all bedded down beneath their barrows.

The largest landowners around Brockenhurst were the Morant family, who lived at Brockenhurst Park. Mother used to save our tea leaves for one of their farm labourers. I remember village sports day was held within the estate grounds, and Uncle Frank always seemed to win his race.

Throughout the year, the village lived in dread of the 'Widows & Orphans'; this was an annual outing organised by the railway company for the dependents of ex-employees. Many of the kids came from the poorer districts of London, so being in the country for the first time, they ran wild. Gardens were invaded, flowers torn up, fruit picked, and objects broken, as the horde rampaged. During this invasion, I used to be sent to stay with an aunt, in order that I should not mix with such a rough crowd.

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Chapter 2. Woolston.

My parents parted in 1912. Taking us three children, Mother left the village for Southampton, where we were to live with Mr Stephenson, our future stepfather. A Yorkshire bricklayer, Tom Stephenson had met Mother some years earlier, when he worked on Brockenhurst Gas Works. He now rented a small terrace house in Mortimer Road; this was at Woolston, an industrial suburb separated from the main town by the River Itchen. I had entered a different world.

It struck me as odd to hear the various hawkers shouting in the streets. First came the milkman with his horse and cart; he would ladle from a churn into whatever vessel people brought out. Milk slopped in the cart, because most of the churns lacked a lid. A man pushing a handcart used to call with a huge block of salt; chunks of any size could be sawn off to order. Most exciting of all, I remember the rag-and-bone man. "Rags, bones, and bottles," he bawled, and if you found something for him, you received a little coloured windmill on a stick.

At Brockenhurst, I had attended a tiny private school run by an old lady in her cottage. Primarily a music teacher, she did however teach general subjects. Lessons were often interrupted by the squawkings of her ugly parrot, a featherless bird, except for a topknot, the only spot that its masochistic beak had been unable to reach. Permitted to walk the mown paths of her country garden during playtimes, we rebelled by planting deliberate footprints amongst the flowerbeds. Big shocks awaited me at Ludlow School, Woolston; town kids seemed like cannibals! A white starched collar,

which I used to wear at Brockenhurst, did not last out the first day; it got yanked off by 'roughs'. Poverty, very visible at Woolston, was evident in my classmates. Children would often be sent home after coming to school without shoes or stockings. Head-lice were not uncommon.

Around this time, cinemas began to provide cheap entertainment for mass audiences, in fact I saw the one at Woolston being built; completed, it made our treat of the week. My pocket money amounted to fourpence (1½p), and it cost only threepence (1p) to go in, the left over penny (½p) bought 4 oz. of toffee. There was just one problem. Emerging from the performance, you found yourself covered with bites; picture-houses were aptly named 'flea-pits'! Bugs constituted the bane of our lives, plaguing us even at Mortimer Road. Mother felt helpless, because cleanliness gave scant protection in a terrace, where parasites could come through the walls.

Nearby on Peartree Green, I remember a set of horizontal bars, erected by some private benefactor, and intended for local youth. A few square meals distributed to destitute families might have been a better contribution to public fitness. Sometimes I played with a boy down our street, who suffered from T.B. Nothing was ever done about sending him away for a cure, he simply had to put up with it. His pallid face sticks in my mind. What happened in the end I don't know, I suppose it killed him.

Soon we became established in Woolston, but two family deaths came suddenly upon us. First my father fell gravely ill at Brockenhurst. Although mother returned for a while to nurse him, he died. At the funeral I wore my first pair of long trousers. Next we

lost my sister Blanche, who developed meningitis at the age of fifteen. She had been a barmaid in Southampton.

My stepfather's job involved travelling around the country, therefore occasionally Mother took me and my other sister on short visits to towns where he happened to be working; we would stay then at Tom's various lodgings. I shall always remember Mitcham in 1915, because with the Great War in full swing, I could watch searchlights sweeping the night sky over London. While we were there a Zeppelin was brought down nearby, so we wallowed in tabloid accounts of our airman manoeuvring his frail plane to bomb this vast dirigible from above.

Conveniently situated where the River Itchen joins Southampton Water, Woolston possessed several shipyards. The largest, Thornycroft's, employed as 'rivet-catchers' a number of older lads, who I knew from Ludlow School. Welding being a later technique, ship's plates of that date had to be fastened together by riveting. Rivet-catchers first heated the rivets in a forge to make them malleable. Carrying red-hot rivets to the job in buckets, the lads used tongs to insert them into aligned holes along the hull. Next came the 'holder-uppers', men who held heavy hammers against the rivet head, keeping it in position. Finally the riveter burred the stubb end. These working boys liked to show off their manly hands, which had become covered in burn blisters; those of us still at school felt small. Garden plots at Woolston were surrounded by mild-steel fences. Obsessed by riveting, gangs of us used to remove the bolts joining sections of fence, and replace them with rivets smuggled out of 'Thornies'.

At 69 Mortimer Road we were a stone's-throw from the corner shop, a vital institution. People in straitened circumstances, living from hand to mouth, obtained here, for a few coppers, small amounts of practically anything. The proprietor would be pouring paraffin one minute, slicing corned-beef the next. Bringing your own saucer, you could even purchase dollops of jam or pickle, scooped from a giant jar. I became friendly with the shopkeeper's son, George Webb, a lad of my own age. Sometimes we staged a show in the cellar under the shop, forcing smaller boys who came, to pay a farthing. George used to dress up as a woman and sing in a funny voice, while I posed as a strong man. There was a battered biscuit tin painted black, with '100 lbs.' written on it, and this weight, after appropriate puffing and panting, I contrived to lift. In the cellar one day we planned a camping trip to visit my old haunts at Brockenhurst; I had always hankered to go back there again.

From George's father we borrowed an ex-army bell tent, together with a flatbed coal cart; the shop also provisioned us. With school holidays stretching ahead, we set off cheerfully, loaded down by gear. Avoiding the toll bridge at Northam, the expedition journeyed via Cobden Bridge, higher up the Itchen. However bad luck struck passing through Bevois Valley; one wheel catching in tram lines, fell to pieces. Undaunted, George went home to fetch a replacement, which he brought back on the tram. Somehow we changed it over, but once again under way the wheel started to bind, forcing a return. The following day we decided to go on the train. Amid cheers and jeers from various by-standers, the two of us marched along Mortimer Road lugging our heavy tackle to Woolston Station. Changing from the Portsmouth to the Bournemouth lines at Southampton, George and I finally arrived at Brockenhurst, where

station staff permitted the loan of a sack-truck for dragging our equipment to Balmer Lawn. We intended to swim in two pools formed by the River Boldre, 'Big Basin' and 'Little Basin'. Mischance still dogged the enterprize, all food had been left on the train. Luckily I knew a farmer, who used to come in the Forester's Arms, so he let us do haymaking to earn some money. As soon as the local lads discovered our presence, they gathered in hostile gangs to throw stones at the camp. Eventually we returned home early. I now realised that I was a 'townee', who no longer belonged at Brockenhurst.

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Chapter 3. First Jobs.

Aged fourteen, I left school in 1916. With the Great War well into its second year, the authorities were establishing new munitions factories around the country. One such 'rolling mill' being built at Woolston was the reason for my stepfather spending a rare spell at home. He worked there as foreman of a bricklaying gang, and managed to arrange 'a start' at the site for me.

I felt awed by the complex, a hive of activity covering several acres. Groups of navvies hand-mixed huge batches of concrete, while others 'screeded' the floors. Brickwork shot up on all sides. Placed with a team of bricklayers, I began to learn the duties of a tea-boy. Starting at seven, the men usually stopped for breakfast at nine, each person bringing his own can containing tea or cocoa in a twist of paper. Gathering off-cuts of wood, I boiled water and cooked the various tit-bits supplied. Some men wanted crisp rashers, another clique preferred underdone, a third lot expected sausages . . . and so on. There would be a stern telling-off if any order got mixed up. Coming straight out of school, this responsibility weighed heavy; some of the 'blokes' did, however, give me a penny tip at the end of the week.

When the 'Roller Mill' (as we called it) came on stream, I graduated to a 'line' job. Owing to a shortage of men caused by the war, large numbers of women had been hired. They even operated several hundred small furnaces in the respective brass and nickel foundries, and could be seen pouring molten metals into moulds. To combat toxic fumes, workers used to be encouraged to eat

plates of oatmeal soaked in milk; the oatmeal came free, but you had to pay for the milk! From thin sheets of brass, women in my section punched small round discs, which, further along the process chain, became bullet cases. As perforated sheets of waste brass emerged, I rolled them into big bundles, throwing these into a skip. Overhead cranes collected this material for re-cycling. I also swept the floor around the machines. The works enforced strict timekeeping, closing its gates sharp at seven a.m., and not opening again till nine a.m. Latecomers lost two hours pay.

Factory work soon bored me, especially as Tom was once more 'travelling'. Finding an outside job with Harland & Woolfe, the ship-repairers, I 'waited on' bricklayers building a large workshop in Southampton Docks. Reaching the site involved a trip on the 'Floating Bridge', a flat-bottomed ferry that crossed the Itchen. Each morning on the open deck, carts, lorries, and cattle destined for Southampton abattoirs, jostled with waves of men going to work. Sometimes a bullock escaped, swimming away to land up river, or even on the opposite bank. The chase would provide quite a spectacle.

Gaining the Southampton shore, a mass of workers surged down the ramp, fanning out to various workplaces 'in town'. Many were dockers hoping for a few hours employment in the port. Every day I passed the hiring shed situated just inside the first dock entrance on Canute Road. Often I glimpsed throngs of stevedores pressing against a raised platform, while above their clamour came the shouts of 'gangers'... "YOU... YOU... YOU"... Dock work being casual, whether you worked depended not simply on shipping movements, but on how well 'in' with the foreman you had contrived to be.

Speaking of the docks, I remember too, the forlorn knot of poor children, who every evening gathered outside the dock gates, when the men knocked-off. "Any bread, Sir?" they asked, "any bread, Sir?" A workman might find some left-over sandwich to give them. They were pleased to get it!

The workshop under construction was a tall building necessitating the use of a pulley-block to raise bricks for the higher courses. Hauling all day on the rope, my young arms felt fit to pop out of their sockets, however it gratified me to go home with a dirty face. All the men in Mortimer Road worked as 'dockies' or shipyard hands, so to return clean-faced from a day's labour made one seem something less than a real man.

Wanting me to learn a trade, Mother took a dim view of all this; finally she prevailed, arranging that I should become an apprentice at Kemp's Boatyard in Woolston. Coming under a shipwright, my training commenced. Supported by a cradle on the firm's slipway stood a sailing barge being converted to steam. We needed to drill through hull and bulkheads in order to insert a stern-tube for the propeller shaft. The shipwright told me to make a ladder. Never having fabricated such a thing before, I none-the-less started with enthusiasm. Taking a long fir pole, which I had 'cut down' in the sawmill, rung holes were drilled out using an auger. Wedging in the spokeshave-fashioned rungs completed the task. Unfortunately my inexperience was painfully apparent, the ladder manifested a pronounced twist; anyone using it to board a vessel ran the risk of finding himself spun round and thrown to the deck. My work failed to impress the master-craftsman; in fact we did not get on at all. After two weeks, I left.

Despite this debacle, I was directed to another boatbuilder, Summers & Payne in Southampton; this time I got as far as signing indentures. Again a daily voyager on the 'Bridge', I would turn right at the end of Floating Bridge Road, making my way across Chapel, the seamen's quarter. Every housewife in the district seemed to be on her doorstep shaking out round rope mats woven by some relative at sea. Four years before (i.e. 1912) Southampton had been a town in mourning following the loss of the Titanic. Streets through which I passed, such as Albert Road and Marine Parade, suffered badly, with each terrace losing men. Backing on to the river, the yard of Summers & Payne could be found at the end of a cut, that branched from Belvidere Road at a point opposite Northam Gas Works.

The firm, I remember, were converting several ex-Isle of Wight steamers, recently returned from support duties in Mesopotamia. I started in the sawmill. Induction began with shock treatment as the sawyer held up splayed hands; both shewed fingers missing. "Watch out!" he warned, "all sawyers lose fingers, it's their trademark." This caution sent a shiver down my spine. I worked with the man for a number of weeks, mostly sawing down planking; as he fed timbers into the circular saw, I drew them through. Other woodworking machinery I learnt to operate included the 'spindle' and the 'planer'. From pieces of spare board kicking around the shop, I knocked up my first toolbox. Saving a certain sum weekly, I began to get together a set of personal tools. That year produced a sweltering summer, so during the dinner breaks, we younger lads swam in the Itchen; striking across the river, we used to touch bottom on the other side right in front of White's Shipyard, then swim back to the jetty at Summers & Payne.

I had only been nine months at the yard, when all the joiners struck over pay; the foremen stayed in as did the apprentices, who remained bound. Consequently, the apprentices were sent to the other end of the docks, where they helped to fit out a concrete-hulled vessel, the Cretemast. (As during World War II, the use of concrete for boatbuilding proved a good method of conserving scarce metal - later I would encounter this ship again.) Owing to the general lack of supervision, we boys played around a great deal, doing very little work. Things came to a head, when a gang of us got caught coming back late from dinner-break; we'd gone outside the dock gates to buy buns. Each apprentice was detailed to appear, with his parents, before one of the owners. Loathing the prospect of seven whole years at the same establishment, I used this as an opportunity to leave. Later the firm collapsed, all the nippers who stayed on being forced to seek other yards in order to serve out their times.

Soon after quitting Summers & Payne, I heard about a job at Calshot Point, where buildings were required by the coastguard station. Having to be at the site for an eight a.m. start, I rose early. Disembarking from the 'Bridge', a cycle ride past the docks enabled me to catch the Hythe Ferry from near the Royal Pier in Southampton. At Hythe, a solid-tyred lorry picked up the 'town' party, taking them the final stretch to Calshot. Dawn would be well advanced as we sped along the shingle spit to the camp.

In those days you always found a lot of boys 'on the building'; this contractor at Calshot employed five of us youngsters. Keen, with bags of energy, we lads, when properly controlled, constituted a valuable source of cheap labour. Because

the station was awkward to reach, work began at eight a.m. instead of the usual starting time in the industry, seven a.m. To be away 'early' (i.e. five-thirty p.m.), the blokes took only half an hour for dinner. Thus, topping up five days of nine hours with four hours on Saturday mornings, we worked a basic week of forty-nine hours: many sites did fifty. My own wage came to just under twenty-five 'bob' (1.25p) a week, about sixpence (2½p) an hour. Bigger and stronger than the other boys, I ended up 'waiting on' an old bricklayer building a large brick copper in an outhouse.

I hated working on Saturday morning, you never seemed to have any time for yourself the rest of the day; it used to be pay-day however, so I had to go. Knocking-off at noon, I made a hell-for-leather dash to get the twelve-thirty ferry back to town. By riding down the long Hythe Pier, I could do it, but it puffed me, being a tough uphill ride over gravel roads. As the Southampton men spent so much time packing up their gear, and boarding the lorry, they normally caught the later boat, which left at one o'clock. It pleased me to be one ferry ahead.

On Saturday afternoons, I might take a trip to town with a couple of mates from Woolston. Big crowds gathered in St. Mary's Street and East Street, where shops remained open late, perhaps ten or eleven p.m. Excitement mounted as the evening wore on; everyone knew that proprietors would soon be forced to unload over-ripe perishables at cut prices before the weekend. Meat auctions took place in small butcher's shops along Canal Walk. I remember an establishment in East Street, that catered for sailors. Each deck hand provided his own bedding during a voyage; this shop supplied a rough mattress stuffed with straw; for a

small deposit it could be purchased on credit, the final account owing until termination of a round-trip. These rolls were known as 'donkey's breakfasts'. We sometimes ventured into 'The Ditches', a warren of curious booths and stalls, where people milled in narrow alleys. Here, all sorts of queer goods and services might be found from colonial trinkets to instant tattooing.

Wage levels generally had been boosted by the war, which created labour shortage in most industries; this proved particularly true of building, as the heavy physical work did not lend itself to being taken over by women. My twenty-five shillings (1.25p) may appear meagre now, even considering the difference in the value of money, however, it was good pay for that time: too good to last! One Monday morning, scrambling over the lorry tailboard, two Southampton lads and I received a summons to go at once to the site office. We discovered two other youths already there. Emerging out of the hut, the foreman delivered his bombshell - "I've just had instructions from Head Office," he revealed, "no boy must earn over a pound per week... the new rate will start today."

Whether this really was a Head Office order, or simply the invention of some 'firm's man' at the site, I don't know. It seemed a mean thing. We weren't getting that much! The ruling meant an immediate wage cut of twenty-five per cent. Injustice rankled as we walked in an indignant conclave, back to the brick stacks. Rebellion seethed. We resolved to protest, the role of spokesman falling to me because of my size. I stalked up the road ready for confrontation... to tell him straight!

"We've all agreed." I announced, barging into the hut.

"Agreed to what?" asked the foreman.

"We're going to 'jack' unless the old rate comes back!"

Knowing that the contract was nearing completion, the site foreman remained calm. "It's up to you," he remarked... One by one we went to the office for our money and cards. As my turn came the firm sprang a surprise offer - "We could keep YOU on at the old price, but the others might as well push-off!"

Bigger than my companions, I doubtless represented a bargain, even at the previous money: I quit with the lads. My two 'town' mates strode out briskly, beginning their long trek back through summer lanes to Hythe Ferry. Across the Sound, showing a sharp cornfield patchwork of downland, the Isle of Wight stood clear of mist. Warmed by a climbing sun, I walked with them, pushing my bike.

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Chapter 4 - Town Gas.

Invention of gas-light is generally attributed to William Murdock, who, generating gas from coal, employed it to light his house at Redruth in 1792. By 1802 his technique was sufficiently developed to illuminate the famous 'Soho Engineering Works', Birmingham. Explosive population growth in manufacturing towns created the need for public utilities: water, sewerage and gas. The first commercial gas concern supplying independent customers had been started in London in 1812; the early 1840's saw municipal authorities empowered to provide gas, then mainly used for street-lamps. Devices like the water-geyser (1865), gas-ring (1867) and gas-fire (1880), boosted household demand; pre-pay coin meters made this fuel popular amongst the poor; gas also found favour as a source of power in factories. Between 1882 and 1912 the number of gas undertakings doubled, while output trebled; every large town would have its giant installation, Becton in London for example. If there happened to be a railway to bring in coal, even small rural settlements might offer scope to some local enterprise, public or private, e.g. Brockenhurst.

Coal-gas (called town gas) is produced by carbonisation of coal in a closed receptacle known as a 'retort'. Older plants had 'horizontal retorts', 24 feet long, 2 feet wide, 18 inches high; these tubes, loaded with the aid of scoops and long-handled shovels, held about 15 cwt. (750 kilos). Located in the 'retort house', a compartment at the apex of a huge arch, they stood directly above the 'cellar', where a furnace burned. Heat from the furnace was applied to the retort through a system of flues, the air supply to the retort itself being restricted by closing its stout cast-iron door. The gas emitted could, after purification, be

stored in gas-holders until conveyed to clients via underground mains. After ten to twelve hours the horizontal retorts needed to have their contents raked out and refilled for another cycle. Valuable by-products included coke, tar and clinker, the latter much in demand as an aggregate in clinker building blocks. Later methods of gas production involved inclined retorts (slopers), and 'vertical retorts', both using gravity to facilitate loading and discharge; also mechanical means were employed to fill and empty retorts. Works varied greatly in size, a large establishment consisting perhaps of a 'nest of twelve' retorts in the same arch; small plants might only possess a 'nest of two'.

Gas-works construction and maintenance entailed colossal amounts of brickwork: outer walls, arches, chimneys, furnace linings, flues, cross walls holding retorts, associated outbuildings. Once in operation the unit required frequent 'fresh settings', i.e. removal and replacement of retorts with any heat damage to support structures made good. A number of firms specialised in this field, such as Winsors, an enterprise started by descendants of Frederick Albert Winzler, the early pioneer of gas-light, who came to England from Moravia in 1802. Other companies were Sugdens, West, and Gibbons. An itinerant fraternity of skilled tradesmen and labourers did the work.

Born into the coal-based industrial tradition of Yorkshire, son of a foreman stoker at Keighley Gas Works, my step-father Tom Stephenson had 'fire-work' in the blood; he must also have been infected by the travel bug. Spending almost the whole of his life on the move, he typified the casual-work nomad; whilst a young man, he even spent time in Canada working for logging contractors. I remember how, as a child at Mortimer Road, we used to be enthralled

by stories of narrow escapes from grizzly bears amongst the isolated timber stacks of frontier lumber camps. Occasionally, when work became scarce, Tom would take a 'home' job, I recall him employed over one winter as a stoker at Northam Gas Works, Southampton. With spring came first stirrings of building activity, and the urge to migrate. While involved in the construction of Woolston Roller Mills, Tom had, like myself, taken the opportunity of switching to munition making as building operations tailed off. For a couple of months he worked in the annealing foundry, a 'reserved' occupation which exempted him from conscription. To Mother's consternation however, ennui soon set in; he left to resume his travels. Fortunately he escaped being called up.

During the first eighteen months since leaving school, a restlessness possessed me. How to face those daunting disciplines of statutory apprenticeship stretching monotonously into the years ahead? Impossible! The prospect must be dodged at all costs. My ambition centred on moving around, seeing things, savouring adventure ... I wanted to travel. Nearly sixteen, strong for my age, I considered myself ready to do men's work. Eventually Tom agreed to take me with him on some travelling contracts, so despite maternal objections, I went to join him at Eastbourne, Sussex. Tom's lodgings were in Seaview Road, the job was at the gas-works.

Acting fire-work foreman for Gibbons, Tom controlled a gang doing fresh settings. Soon after I arrived this phase drew to an end, my step-father receiving instructions to go on to Wandsworth. A London 'brickie', Bill Emmett, came to take over; placing me under the new man's wing, Tom departed. Stage two at Eastbourne began at once, a major structural alteration, raising the 'retort-house' roof. We worked alongside steel-erectors, 'iron-fighters' as

we called them; like fire-workers, these men travelled from town to town in pursuit of work. Our task necessitated a complex operation. First the iron-fighters inserted jacks beneath the iron roof-trusses, lifting them about fifteen inches, bricklayers then squeezed in a few courses as they got room. When our new brickwork hardened, the roof could be lowered to rest upon it; using this same technique, we raised the opposite wall to match; in all, ten feet of extra headroom was added to the retort-house.

Bill Emmett seemed to 'take a shine' to me; I did stretches of brickwork, but found myself in trouble if it wasn't 'plumb'. This first taste of fire-work showed me what I had let myself in for. Already dust and dirt were old friends, I knew them from the docks and Calshot Point, however, gas-works meant dust and dirt concentrated! Working in confined spaces, you swallow as much powder in one day as you might during a whole week on an open air site.

Towards the end of that initial period at Eastbourne, I remember a fire occurring in the coal-stacks at the gas-works, caused by spontaneous combustion: it burned for days. Finishing my evening meal at the digs, I used to stroll, aching a little from my day's toil, back to the job. Huge heaps glowed sullen, several-coloured in the gloom. Firemen came day after day to douse it, finally succeeding only by cutting deep into the smouldering beds to find the fire's secret seat.

Most men in the gang drank heavily, needing regular 'subs' (wage advances) from the foreman, by the time they received their money they would even then be in debt. Bill Emmett never allowed me

to sub. On completion of the Eastbourne contract, he invited me to accompany him to Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, another project which specified increasing the height of a retort-house roof. I jumped at the chance.

Making our way to Norfolk, we broke the journey to stay overnight in London, where the foreman had a 'fancy woman'. That evening the couple took me with them to a very rowdy East End pub; I remember arguing with Bill, who refused to let me take my turn buying the drinks. Back at his girlfriend's place, I slept downstairs on a sofa. Bill Emmett was a bit of a lad.

Great Yarmouth Gas Works stood near the fish-market close to the harbour; fishing fleets operating in the North Sea were based here, so exploring the sea-front, I found plenty to look at. One Sunday morning I came across a ship that I previously worked on, the concrete-hulled 'Cretemast'. Now in service as a trawler, the vessel reminded me of my brief apprenticeship with Summers & Payne back in Southampton. Peak of the fishing season brought an invasion of Scottish girls, who obtained work gutting the herring catch as it was landed on the wharf.

Having been able to save a little money, I recall purchasing my first 'made to measure' suit, paying, I think, about two pounds. I went around with a young iron-fighter, a lad of my own age, whom I knew from the Eastbourne job; he too had come to Great Yarmouth for the gas-works alterations. On our own, away from home, doing building work, we grew up early. Taking my companion into a dockside tavern, I sought to demonstrate my status as a knowledgeable man of

the world. In Southampton I used to hear shipyard workers talking about various drinks. There was a 'light-plater', a mixture of light-ale with bitter, also a 'boiler-maker', which consisted of brown-ale and mild. With a flourish I ordered just these two specialities, but the ploy failed miserably to impress ... no Norfolk barman had ever heard of them."

Altogether I spent eight months at Great Yarmouth without going home. Out of the blue, Bill Emmett announced that he would be leaving the job; the young iron-fighter and I carried his bags to the station. Boarding the train he gave us six pounds with instructions to hand this money to the iron-fighter foreman back at the gas-works. This sudden departure, plus the money, pointed to sleight-of-hand; we guessed that he had been up to something, obviously the money constituted part of the take that he now thought to return in order to make things better for himself. Often foremen ran a 'dead man', i.e. claimed wages for some ghost employee, pocketing this themselves. It turned out that Bill sold bricks 'on the side' to local builders; a big inquest followed with a director coming down from London Head Office. I never saw Bill again : he was good to me.

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Chapter 5 - Brute Apprenticeship.

Soon after the hasty departure of Bill Emmett, following the brick scandal, my step-father sent for me to join him at Wandsworth; after almost a year of travelling work, I had begun to shape as a useful fire-work brickie. Aged seventeen I arrived in London; Wandsworth would prove to be, literally, a baptism of fire. A series of fresh settings was under way at the gas-works. Using block and tackle we manoeuvred the new retort sections into place upon their support walls; these walls then needed to be built up to the arch roof, single thickness in the middle of a section, double where two lengths butted together. Entering an arch was never a pleasant experience at the best of times, you came out smeared from head to foot with the grime of carbonisation. This first London job introduced me to other hazards encountered by fire-workers, such as heat; the retort-houses on each side of us continued in production while we worked. Hot arch walls made it impossible to brace yourself against the sides for balance, you weren't able to bear your hand on them. Normally, we crawled in the top spaces walling up the apex with bricks passed from below. Stifling temperatures near the roof ruled this out so we buttered our bricks with fire-clay, and pushed them into position as well as we could using a stick. Fumes penetrated all work areas, drying mouths and throats to leave an acrid taste of sulphur.

The pub at Wandsworth, situated right outside the plant entrance, formed part of the boundary wall of the gas-works. Finishing at night we dived straight inside. You always found a crowd of stokers in the bar, hardly surprising because all work

connected with a gas-works was hard grind. They fed the furnaces, drew and loaded retorts, wheelbarrowed vast quantities of coal, coke and clinker, from one spot to another. As in the building trade, it represented a physical output that had to be repeated every day. Working in exceptional temperatures, they sweated out a lot of their body fluid.

London, an extensive and densely populated metropolis, required a considerable number of gas installations; during a few months in 1919, I visited many of them with Tom, doing maintenance. We moved from works to works, switching between the various contracting firms as opportunity or circumstance dictated. Although most gas concerns employed repair gangs themselves, they still needed travellers; we usually got the dirtiest jobs, which no-one wanted.

Parts of the capital seemed to possess a life of their own, especially dockland; several big gas-works were located on the river in order to receive coal shipped direct from northern coalfields. It sticks in my mind how early in the morning things started up around areas such as Fulham and Poplar. Walking into work we would find all the pubs open, so Tom used to take me in for a cup of coffee laced with rum.

Above all we hated those works equipped with 'slopers', i.e. retorts set at forty-five degrees for easy loading and discharge. Had humans been born with one leg longer than the other, this work might have presented little problem. As it was you were laying bricks whilst clinging to the slope like a

mountain goat; support walls had to be perpendicular for all that! At the end of your stint you ended up nursing bruised knees, grazed shins and a host of queer aches and pains. London plants I remember include Wandsworth, Harrow (water-gas unit), Becton, Bromley by Bow, Ilford, Fulham, Poplar, Nine Elms, Red Hill, and Ealing. I believe there were others, which I have forgotten, often we spent only a couple of days at a works before moving on.

It was in the capital that I joined the 'O.B.S.', i.e. Operative Bricklayer's Society, then the largest of the several trowel trades unions. Since a split in 1847, the bricklayers had been divided into two separate, in fact hostile organisations, based respectively in London and Manchester. Working mainly in the south, Tom for many years remained a member of the 'London Order'; whilst living at Mortimer Road, I recall going once a month to Southampton with Mother, when she paid Tom's subscription at a pub in St. Mary's Street. Constantly travelling, it proved easier for my step-father to stay registered at one branch than to chop and change as he moved. A lot of travellers would simply let their ^{dues} fees lapse.

You noticed big differences between London, and 'small town' jobs as far as the union was concerned, the former being more militant with better organisation on the sites. The stewards wanted to see your card as soon as you walked on to the plant. Tom and I used to be listed as 'retort-setters'. Arriving to work in a new part of London, custom required you to make contact with the nearest branch, if possible within a week; they could advise of local contracts taking on labour.

We met men who took part in the terrible 'London Lockout' of

1914. Trouble concerning the employment of non-unionists had come to a head in January, when the London Master Builders' Association (LMBA) introduced a document to be signed by each employee. Signature bound the men to work alongside 'nons', and abjured the use of strikes to force these nons into joining societies. The agreement also contained provisions committing the operatives to pay fines if the contract was broken. Failure to sign by January 24th brought instant dismissal.

Presenting their document at the slackest time of the year, the master builders expected quick acquiescence, especially after the recent 'bad times' caused by the trade depression of the early nineteen-hundreds. However, unwilling to give up opposition to nons on the sites, over twenty thousand building workers of all trades soon found themselves 'locked out'. Oddly enough, few non-unionists signed the agreement, which in fact simply pledged them not to take action against themselves. Over the next few months considerable privations were suffered by the men; many became forced to sell household possessions, and widespread evictions for rent arrears occurred. Poor Law Committees often refused relief to families of men 'striking against their masters'. Despite everything the workers defied LMBA for seven months, several times recording big majorities against a 'return'. The struggle only came to an end in September with the outbreak of World War I.

Being a travelling fire-worker bestowed a number of advantages, for instance we got three and sixpence (17½ p) per day lodging allowance, in other words 'our keep'. On top of this, fire-worker's wages were usually a couple of pence (1p) an hour more than housebuilding rates. Employed in gas-works, you could rely on a 'full

week', because, working inside, inclement weather did not interrupt the job. Often there would be overtime as the gas company required its plant back in production at the earliest possible moment; we normally went on till four p.m. each Saturday, for which we received 'time and a quarter'. Not having our homes to go to we didn't mind overtime so much. By contrast, housebuilders rarely paid 'premium time', preferring 'flat rate' over the whole contract. In spite of these perks, not every bricklayer wanted fire-work: it wasn't very congenial.

Arriving to work in a new part of London, the first thing we had to do was find digs; Tom, of course, knew many places from previous trips. Sometimes, if we left it too late, we used to go to the nearest Rowton House. Named after the founder, Montagu 1st Baron Rowton, philanthropist and one time private secretary to Disraeli, these establishments offered cheap accommodation to itinerant working men. Six Rowton Houses built in London provided some five thousand beds. I believe we paid a shilling (5p) per night, which gave us a bed only, no meals being supplied. An iron grille at the foot of the stairs permitted access to dormitories between certain specified times. You were obliged to be up and out at the crack of dawn; it was not the sort of place where you might lie down during the daytime. Really, the institution resembled a prison more than a hotel, we avoided it if we could obtain private lodgings.

Some lodgings proved to be a proper home from home, the landlady acting like a mother to us, we also stayed at rotten dives with dirty rooms and skimpy meals; I suppose one should not blame the avaricious type of landlady, they were poor and simply trying to make a little money. The trouble was that we didn't have a lot either, so they couldn't get much out of us!

As mentioned before, lodging allowance totalled twenty-four and sixpence (1.22½ p) per week; landladies usually charged twenty-two shillings (£1.10p) for full board, so we ended up 'in pocket'. Full board in those days included doing all your washing. At a seaside town during the summer, when proprietrix could get holiday visitors, we might have to pay twenty-five shillings (£1.25p). Families were in any case none too keen to take in fire-workers on account of them returning home in such a filthy state; we would be black-faced with our hair matted by brickdust from the decomposing linings. No washing facilities being provided at the gas-works, our ablutions there consisted of a quick rinse in a bucket on leaving.

Unfortunately, Tom sometimes erred in his choice of salubrious lodging-houses. On occasion we tumbled thankfully into bed to find, within minutes, the bugs beginning to bite. The trouble with a lousy bed used to be that you couldn't tell until actually between the sheets, which perhaps looked clean enough. Turn on the light, rip back the bedclothes, and the lice disappeared ... settle down and they attacked again! Next morning you had a row with the landlady, and checked out, however, this would be after a sleepless night, it was too late.

Constantly on the move between various gas-works and different lodgings, we made the acquaintance of a goodly number of transient companions. I remember lodging at Nine Elms with a young bricklayer from the gas-works; Tom was in a house a few doors down. This brickie and I palled up with our landlady's son, an apprentice printer, we often played cards late into the evening. We got him to produce some visiting cards for us, which, in addition

to our names and addresses, carried the truculent legend 'RETORT SETTERS' : we liked to think ourselves tough! Finally we caught the printer cheating at cards - we played for money - so the trio broke up.

It amused me to hand round these visiting cards in a pub, a gesture that led to another dubious friendship. One young bloke to whom I slipped my credentials seemed especially impressed; apparently he was some sort of general labourer, who had himself done gas-works stints with fire-work gangs. Our mutual 'graft' in the building trade proving sufficient introduction, we teamed up for a pub crawl around Nine Elms. I soon discovered my companion to be an aspiring boxer. Working in London's riverside boroughs, Wandsworth, Vauxhall, Fulham, Poplar etc., you met many like him; they were 'hungry fighters', hard men from poor backgrounds, keen to get on. Boxing in London used to be very much the working class sport, a world of back street gymnasia run by Jewish proprietors. The youthful devotees found their mecca in nearby Blackfriar's Ring, an institution spurring ambition with tantalising dreams of a 'Title Fight'.

As the evening progressed I realised that my new mate sought trouble; blokes of his stamp contrived to be in a brawl whenever they could, it made the high spot of their week. He obviously possessed a considerable reputation, people got up to leave as soon as he entered a bar. This phenomenon pleased him no end. Barmen, however, gave us a cool reception, responding unsmilingly to our order for 'two halves of half 'n half', a mixture of mild and bitter.

Nothing happened until after closing time. Finding that the boxer lived close to my current digs, we walked back through the

streets of Nine Elms together. I heard the clang and rumble of Nine Elms marshalling yards, a din which at first had kept me awake at night, but that lately I was becoming used to. Suddenly we were in a fight. Why it started I never knew. Something said? Someone brushed against? Anyway fists flew. Just after 'turn out' time the streets would be full of touchy tearaways, who fancied themselves in a rough and tumble. A whole melee developed, men appearing from nowhere, some ran out from adjacent houses to join in. I found myself pinned to the wall, arms held by two strangers. "What's it all about?" I queried. "You don't come from round here, do you?" asked one of my restrainers, I told him that I didn't. "If I were you, mate, I'd clear off out of it!" I took his advice.

Off duty in the capital, you always discovered interesting things to look at; alone, and on foot, I walked miles, simply sightseeing. My favourite route led over Wandsworth or Battersea Bridges into central London, where I came to know the Houses of Parliament, Buckingham Palace, the Tower, in fact all the landmarks. One morning I stumbled across Petticoat Lane. Amid the bustle, a stall holder selling watches attracted many onlookers. "Brand new watches for a shilling," he shouted. As I pushed to the front, he held a timepiece close to my ear. "Hear it going, Sir?" he asked, and I could. "These watches are normally used to time greyhound races," he continued. What a bargain! "A free gift with each one sold," announced the trader; I purchased without further ado.

On the way back to my lodgings, I noticed that the hands had stopped. Prising open the cover, I observed the works to consist only of a small spring, which, on winding, caused the hands to whirl round for a while, this is what made the ticking sound.

Unwrapping folds of paper, I examined my free gift upon the parapet of London Bridge; it was a tie-pin, at least that's what the card inside said. Under closer inspection, the object turned out to be an ordinary pin with a blob of grease on its head to make it appear like a gemstone tie-pin; the wax soon melted. What did I expect for a shilling? The patter had been worth that.

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For details of the London Lock-out of 1914, see :-

R.W. Postgate. The Builder's History. 1923.
pages 414-420, and 423.

W.S. Hilton. Foes to Tyranny. 1963.
pages 200- 209.

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Chapter 6 - Work and Beer.

There is nothing worse than bricklaying with a worn finger-end, it hurts each time you pick up a brick; using fire-clay wasn't too bad, but sand and lime mortars cracked the skin, stinging painfully in abrasions and cuts. You ended up working with a cocked finger like a polite tea-drinker. For protection we wrapped strips of tape around the tops of our fingers; even today, when rubber gloves are available, few men wear them, because they too much restrict the supple finger movements of bricklaying.

The 1920's building employer saw it as no part of the entrepreneurial function to provide special clothing or footwear for the workforce; the worker was left to kit himself out as best he might, gleaning whatever oddments of apparel he could lay his hands on. Even in the exceptional working environments of gas-works, this remained the general practice : no-one gave us anything. During the months following the Armistice, a rash of military garb appeared on construction sites. Men arrived decked out in old 'demob.' suits, army trousers, tunics, caps, and long trench coats, the latter were at least warm and waterproof. I remember also, a profusion of army boots, and, oddly enough, 'repaired army boots'. Some garments belonged to ex-servicemen, but the bulk of this cut-price flood came via second-hand, or army surplus dealers. The spectacle presented by the operatives 'en masse', sporting their motley collection of varied attire, made them reminiscent of a crowd of gipsies, which of course they were, industrial gipsies.

Interspersed with periods at the different London gas-works, there occurred occasional trips to installations on the outskirts,

or just beyond. One such excursion took us to Borden, Hampshire, a small habitation on the Southern Railway, seven miles from Farnham, and mainly known for its large army camp. The settlement possessed a tiny works where we did fresh settings for two twin 'arse-enders', (i.e. retorts sealed at one end, which are emptied by 'raking out' rather than 'pushing through', each arch contained a 'bed of two'). Arriving on a Friday night after a stretch at Wandsworth Gasworks, Tom and I went in to work on the Saturday morning, meeting a labourer known to Tom from previous jobs. This labourer had had time to explore the area, so when we packed up at twelve, he wanted to take us straight away to a pub he liked. Situated about a mile outside the village, the place was reached via a narrow country lane. We passed a ramshackle farm complete with a pond and some ducks. "I'll have one of those buggers on the way back," announced the navvy.

At the time we laughed, but as it happened, he wasn't joking. Wild and reckless, he fitted the pattern of a good many young blokes you met doing travelling work, he'd dare anything. Added to this, on returning, we'd all had a skinful. In a twinkling, he waded into the pond, scattering frightened birds in all directions. Following much splashing and cursing, he caught one, wringing its neck in three feet of water. Amazingly, despite the uproar and terrible squawking, no-one emerged from the farm-house to challenge us; rough, rowdy and black-faced as we were, the farmer probably decided it prudent not to tangle with us. Next Monday at the gas-works, we found a pot, and made duck stew. It tasted delicious.

Another country locale we visited was Ware, on the River Lea in Hertfordshire, about twenty-five miles by rail from London. Lodging in a pub, we discovered one of the other guests to be Mr

George Harris, M/C of Blackfriars Ring. Founded in a disused chapel, during 1910, by the former light-weight champion Dick Burge, the establishment soon achieved nationwide fame; its Sunday afternoon boxing shows became especially popular amongst East Enders. Living with his wife at Ware, Mr Harris commuted into London for big promotions. Having been in the fight game for many years, he had met all the champions whom we idolised. Boxing mad, we used to be mesmerised by his recollections of cliff-hanger bouts and dressing room drama. For ten shillings (50p), he sold me a beautiful pair of boxing gloves, jet black with white laces; according to the sewn inscription inside the cuffs, they were 'As worn and recommended by Georges Carpentier', a boxer then at the peak of his renown. Afterwards, I carried my gloves from town to town.

Moving on, Tom and I next worked at near-by Broxbourne, a small village five miles from Hertford. Following this came London, Luton (Beds.), Royal Tunbridge Wells (the spa), Luton (2nd trip), then once more London. Our final outskirts job turned out to be Godalming, Surrey, a market town on the River Wey. Close to the gas-works at Godalming stood a papermill, its tall chimneys undergoing renovation and re-pointing. Boisterous young steeple-jacks employed on that contract had overnight climbed a local church tower, tying a flapping hessian sack to the weathercock as a prank. (In the building trade, our pre-packed building materials always seemed to come in units of such a weight, that they were just at the extreme limit of what a human being is able to lift; these hessian cement bags, which we unloaded, stacked and shifted from place to place, each held two hundred-weight.) Subsequently apologising, the day we arrived the steeple-jacks climbed the

church to recover their flag. Tom and I joined a sizeable crowd watching this spectacle from the square; newspaper reporters appeared, everyone cheered as the workmen descended flourishing the offending device.

At Godalming, I remember, my step-father got the opportunity to do a 'foreigner', i.e. a job on the side; a baker approached him about re-lining some shop ovens. Filching a few fire-bricks from the gas-works, Tom engaged in this spot of private enterprise, pressing me into service as co-conspirator, muck-man and mate. Not often did we have the chance to make a couple of extra bob.

Involving large structural changes, the gas-works project at Godalming lasted several weeks. When we left there was the usual farewell do at the pub we'd adopted; these functions enabled us to say good-bye to our circle of drinking companions. Switching to a firm called Winsors, who sub-contracted all fire-work for Babcocks, the big boiler people, our orders required that we report to head-office at Victoria Street, London; here we would receive details of the next contract. One of the blokes we were thick with happened to be a small time horse dealer; really a 'gippo', he also dabbled in hackney work. As Tom and I set out the dealer insisted on taking us himself, for nothing. In retrospect, it seems a foolish idea, the capital lay over thirty miles distant. Towns in which we worked used to be well served, anyway, by the railway bringing gas-works coal. Despite all this, however, we threw our cases and tool-bags into the cab, embarking half sozzled from Godalming.

On the journey we bought fish and chips, chucking these away

because of their nasty flavour. Later Tom found that he had thrown out his false teeth with the bundled paper, he'd been nine sheets to the wind at the time. It proved too far to go back. Suddenly a policeman seized the reins, and before we knew what was happening, we were being led into a police station yard. Constables quickly hustled our friend inside, leaving Tom and me marooned in the stationary cab. We took a few minutes to gather our wits, then, with the towering indignation of 'free born' Englishmen, raced round to the front entrance. "What's the charge?" we demanded aggressively, thumping on the counter, "this is a free country..." Our protest attracted the attention of a sergeant, who issued from an inner room. "If you two don't push-off, I'll run you in as well." At this we made a judicious withdrawal.

We got to the bottom of the incident some time afterwards, when the landlord of the pub at Godalming wrote to us. Apparently, singing and shouting as he drove, the dealer had cheeked the bobby; they charged him with 'Making an insulting remark to a policeman'. In addition, the constabulary discovered the man to be operating without the necessary hackney licence, so he was booked for that also. The pub organised a whip-round to pay the fine, but we declined to send a donation: that gippo had had enough free drinks from us whilst we were there.

When we finally did arrive at Victoria Street, our assignment removed us from London altogether, in fact we came back to the West Country, namely Swanage. We lodged in a little pub called the Globe, becoming mat^uy with some dry-wallers who drank there. Swanage was one of those hot jobs. As at Wandsworth, heat

penetrated to our working areas from neighbouring arches, where furnaces remained in production; as luck would have it, the summer turned unusually warm as well. Temperatures at the gas-works became murderous. After just half an hour's bricklaying, clothes wringing with perspiration clung to our bodies. My step-father hit on the idea of working at night, at least the air temperature might be lower.

Next morning, therefore, Tom and I started the day with a lie-in, rising at ten o'clock. Dressing unhurriedly, we set out to explore the town and harbour; the trouble was that we were simply not used to leisure during weekdays. At first we wandered about sight-seeing, but, Swanage being a small place, we began to recognise streets already investigated. Tom initiated the rot. "We might as well have a darn drink," he announced, "they're open." Downing a quick pint we launched out immediately on another tour. This time we ranged further afield, climbing up into the surrounding Purbeck Hills. The locality possessed many quarries, family concerns, whose shafts pierced the slopes like prehistoric caves. Taking a close interest in extraction techniques, we saw stone winched to the surface using a trolley-on-rails system ... We soon gravitated back to the Globe.

By the time our night-shift commenced, we had become pie-eyed, keeping walls straight to the plumb-bob proved no easy matter. Tom sprawled in a drunken stupor upon the retort-house floor. Eventually the plant manager caught us. "Right you buggers," he scolded, "that's the first and last time you work a night-shift."

At the end of the Swanage contract, my step-father and I moved to the other end of the country, where we did a circuit of gas-works jobs on

on the East Coast. Among those I remember are Dover, Littlehampton, Margate, Broadstairs, Westgate-on-Sea and Harwich. At Harwich, from where the ferry crossed to Zeebrugge, we patronised an inn called the Vine. In the centre of the bar, a gnarled vine strained towards the light from a peculiar glass dome built into the roof; the plant was supposed to be of great age.

Today, my knowledge of a good many English towns is limited to what I recall about the gas-works and the pub. Cultural and historical aspects of places we passed through for the most part completely escaped me. Bizarre though this might seem, it stands as a pretty accurate reflection of the life we led. By day we slogged our guts out at the gas-works, in the evening we drank. Our existence centred on work and beer, and then more work and more beer. Graduating from 'Ludlow Road Boys' to the Government Rolling Mill at the age of fourteen, my Alma Mater had prepared me, perhaps, for little else ?

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Chapter 7 - Downturn.

The beginning of 1921 found me back in Southampton. My step-father was preparing to leave for a gas-works job in the Channel Islands, he planned to take Mother along as a sort of holiday. I decided to stay behind at home, looking for work locally. After some three years of travelling, during which I had picked up a trade, I now felt ready to strike out on my own.

In many ways that first period of travelling constituted the happiest and most exciting time of my life. Young and unencumbered by family responsibility, I enjoyed the constant round of strange towns and fresh jobs. The gas-works circuit served for me as the working class equivalent of the 'grand tour'. Thrown together and parted by the vagaries of contract maintenance, 'transients' were a special breed; sharing a tough life, we kept our doughty camaraderie. Working environments, dusty, hot, faced without proper gear, none the less bestowed a certain glamour. Fit and reckless, the work exhilarated me. It is only as you grow older that the going becomes harder.

Once more at Mortimer Road, familiar sights and sounds evoked a sense of strangeness; previously living in that Woolston terrace as a boy, I had returned from travelling, a grown man. My sister Mabel still lived at home. She worked at a small back street workshop in Southampton, where she sewed piecework buttons on to men's suits contracted out by Burtons.

It proved harder to obtain employment than I expected. Immediately following the Great War, everything had seemed at first to go well. The boost given to the economy by the war carried over into the peace, being reinforced during 1919 and 1920 by a speculative boom. Surges of industrial

militancy augmented trade union membership generally, also leading to a spate of amalgamations. Building saw the formation of the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers (AUBTW) in January 1921. Combining the London and Manchester orders of the Operative Bricklayer's Society, rivals since their split in the nineteenth century, and the old Operative Stone Masons, this new body was a considerable advance. It went some way towards fulfilling the aspirations of the 'industrial unionists', who had desired to create an organisation embracing the whole construction industry. Wages increased, but the most spectacular gain of the period concerned working hours, a 'standard week' of 44 hours being granted; some regions at this date still did 55 hours per week, all the year round. Although improvements in pay can be quickly eroded by inflation, reductions in working time usually represent a permanent advantage. These successes stemmed from a bargaining situation basically favouring labour; the boom generated a strong demand for every type of operative. In addition, the impact of the Russian Revolution, raising briefly the spectre of emulation in Britain, induced managements to proceed with a certain prudent caution. Circumstances, however, were set to change.

Winter months of 1920 brought the first indications of an imminent industrial depression; the post war upswing proved to be a mere temporary stabilisation; unemployment levels began to creep upwards. True to form, the construction industry, highly sensitive to those declines in capital investment characteristic of recessions, felt the pinch. Industrialists ceased to instal new plant, therefore no new buildings were required to house it.

Returning from three years 'on the tramp', I found myself a real 'greenhorn' as regards obtaining a job in Southampton. Money getting tight, I decided to sell the beloved black boxing gloves purchased from George Harris at Ware. Taking them to a pawn shop below the Bargate,

I expected to realise at least a pound: the shop only offered two and sixpence.

Considering the circumstances which had ended my previous spell at Calshot Point, i.e. the wage cut and the tea boys' walkout, it seemed ironic for my first job around Southampton to be there again. However, this time it was at the R.A.F. base, and with a completely different firm, namely Playfair & Tool, builders of Lyminster. The air-base would expand throughout the 1920's, with the 'High Speed Flight' being formed in 1926. Calshot went on to become famous as the venue for a series of aerial contests known as the Schneider Trophy Races. This competition acted as focus for the 'Big Power' rivalries of the period with Britain, Italy and the U.S.A. taking part, while France and Germany watched from the touchlines. At one stage, British participation came under threat owing to the government's desire to withdraw as an economy measure. I remember the rescue of our entry by Lady Houston, eccentric widow of a millionaire shipping magnate, who put up £100,000 of her own money. Britain finally gained possession of the trophy in 1931, when Flight-Lieutenant Boothman clocked up a new lap record of 340.08 m.p.h. in his Supermarine S6B; this seaplane, designed by R.J. Mitchell, and manufactured at Woolston, later served as prototype for the Spitfire.

Playfair & Tool, who took me on at Calshot in 1921, were contracted to erect married quarters accommodation on the camp. Several of their own men came over from Lyminster. Having learnt my trade almost exclusively on firework, house-building proved unfamiliar to me. Thinking it politic not to let on, I endeavoured to pick it up as I went along by watching the Lyminster blokes. Some of them twigged, although not giving the game away.

Like the majority of the blokes, I didn't bother to go home every night; often we stayed to do overtime. We had the use of a spare air force hut. Taking eight concrete blocks on which we laid short scaffold planks, we made up our own rough and ready beds with mattresses scrounged from the service store. After the weekend I would return with a big bag of food; one of the bricklayers brought a primus stove, which enabled us to cook bacon and sausages in the hut. The NAAFI sold tea and rolls.

Moving nearer to home, I next found a few days work with a builder doing a job at Archer's Road, Southampton. An upper middle class area of town, rows of substantial residences stood here in their own grounds, owned by doctors, solicitors, etc. We built a garage. This strata of society had just begun to ape the aristocracy in their penchant for motoring. Completion of the garage led directly to another project at the house, cleaning and whitewashing the cellar. I remember the family employed two domestic servants, one of whom used to sneak down with a tea tray. The client frowned on any interruption of work, so whilst building the garage, we were forced to keep at it; by contrast, out of sight in the cellar we did extremely well for tea and cakes.

During the early twenties, all the great passenger liners called at Southampton for their refits. Coal fired, these huge ships would create a sudden demand for bricklayers who knew firework. Contracts, mainly undertaken by Harland & Woolfe, were rushed 'turn-round' jobs; starting on a Friday night you might work right through the weekend, getting laid-off on Monday. A man could earn a normal week's money in a mere couple of days. Despite this there weren't too many takers: liner work was foul! 'Harlands' for the most part recruited labour via the 'branch', who spread word amongst members; as a quid pro quo, refit firework remained a closed shop. No stranger to coal dust or poky corners, I always used to be game.

To me, liner firework proved routine; if you'd lined out a furnace at the gas-works, you could do the same in a ship's engine-room. When under way, coal needed to be continually transferred from the immense bunkers to the engine-room, where stokers fed the several fires. Young lads known as 'trimmers', used to be constantly racing along the connecting corridors pushing large wheelbarrows. I remember noticing that these barrows had looped handles to prevent the nippers grazing their knuckles as they ran the coal.

At that time lagging was considered to be bricklayer's work, and we were required to tackle a whole network of steam pipes leading from the boilers. The asbestos employed as an insulation material, came in a tacky form which we could carry in buckets. It set very quickly, so our technique involved dealing with perhaps a ten foot stretch at a time. First we covered the pipe in a thin $\frac{1}{2}$ " layer. Reaching the end of the length, you found 'the start' already beginning to harden; we then smeared along another doughy thickness, smoothing it round as we went. By this process the specified circumference was eventually achieved. If you worked too slowly, the asbestos dried out, and you couldn't do a thing with it.

Before commencing to apply the renewal coats, we had to remove the old, flaky, decomposing asbestos. Hacking and scraping with claw-hammer and cold-chisel, we crawled through the narrow vents and passageways enveloped in a white mist of fine asbestos dust. No-one wore a mask: in those days people didn't worry about such precautions.

Sometimes you might get a more congenial task, a bit of brickwork in the kitchens, or an area of floor tiling for example; these less filthy jobs were our perks. I worked on a number of ex-German vessels, seized as reparations after the Great War. There was the Cunard liner 'Berengaria', previously the Hamburg-America Line 'Imperator', and the White Star Line 'Magestic', once the 'Bismark'.

Another job which springs to mind from that period was at the Royal Netley Hospital; erected in the previous century, the establishment required further outbuildings. I put up a laundry store. The reason I recall it is because, house-building still seeming strange to me, I got thrown in at the deep end; the builder left me on my own there. With no-one to ask, I sorted out any snags that developed for myself; at least I learnt a few things.

Employed by the same firm, I then worked on some cottages at Hamble. This site turned out to be memorable too. During the whole of 1921, the slump gathered pace. In December 1920 there had already been 691,000 'registered' workless, nationally comprising 5.8% of the total insured. The figure reached 1,355,000 (11.3%) by March 1921, climbing to 2,171,288 (17.8%) in June. Even the return of summer weather failed to give construction its usual seasonal boost. Breaking up the wartime coalition in 1918, Lloyd George coined the catch-phrase 'A land fit for heroes'; the curt humour of the job asserted that this slogan had meant you needed to be a hero to live in it!

Such a sizeable 'reserve army' soon began to alter the balance of power between masters and men, undermining in all industries the improvements achieved since the Armistice. First signs appeared as early as November 1920 with a strike of shipyard joiners against a proposed cut in wages. Rapidly the new situation became generalised, a reality exemplified by the collapse of the 'Triple Alliance' in April 1921. Building followed the pattern.

On the industry's national 'Wages and Conditions Council', the union side found themselves forced to accept a series of reductions. Within the space of just two years, the 'Standard Rate' was to fall from

2/4d to 1/8d per hour, a decline of 30% : it would take twenty-six years, i.e. until 1946, to regain the level of 1920. Never had rates moved so dramatically against the operatives as they now changed in favour of the builders. Even the 44 hour week slipped away under the terms of the 'Frazer Award', which led in many areas to 46½ hours 'summertime working'.

When the first of these cuts was due to come in, 2d an hour from May 16th 1921, I happened to be on the Hamble Cottages job. Opening pay packets that week, the blokes were flabbergasted to discover their money unchanged. Perhaps the company hadn't heard about it? Next week the same occurred again. "We're on to a good thing here," we congratulated ourselves, "the foreman doesn't know!" Unfortunately it proved a mere stay of execution - on the third week the cut came in full.

"We thought you didn't know about it," we teased the foreman. "I knew about it all right," he replied, "but I didn't have the neck to do it!" Obviously the office had caught up with him.

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For details of post war slump, see :-

1. G.D.H. Cole - Short History of the British Working Class Movement 1789-1947, pages 398-405.
2. W.S. Hilton - Foes to Tyranny, pages 226-232.

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Chapter 8 - Refinery Building.

Despite the general gloom induced by the downturn, there were of course a few sectors still expanding, one being oil. Shortly after the Great War, the Atlantic, Gulf & West Indies (A.G.W.I.) Petroleum Co., an off-shoot of John D. Rockefeller's giant Standard Oil Co., obtained Board of Trade permission to establish an oil refinery on Southampton Water, near the village of Fawley. Located close to the busy port of Southampton, the installation would be well placed to supply bunkering fuel to the big liners, which at that time began switching to oil from coal. In addition, the waterway enjoyed the advantage of double high tides, useful for bringing in heavily laden tankers. Construction commenced on August 10th 1920.

By the middle of the following year with building operations in full swing, fire-work contracts had gone to Gibbons, and my stepfather was detailed to go there in charge of the bricklayers. Fed-up with the Hamble cottages job, this gave me the opportunity to get back with Tom doing the type of work I knew. As already mentioned, fire-work usually paid a couple of bob more than housebuilding, also you lost less time through bad weather.

The refinery site resembled a Klondike boom town. It was the largest job I had ever worked on, dwarfing even the scale of the government rolling mill at Woolston, where I'd been employed as a tea boy on leaving school. Armies of navvies were engaged in moving vast quantities of earth required to make embankments, cuttings, sea walls, tank bases, roadways, and for levelling the ground, mostly low lying saltings. A network of narrow gauge railway tracks linked the different areas of the site. Constantly travelling to and fro along these rails came numerous 'side-tipping' skips drawn by horses. Horses also hauled the large carts carrying construction materials; only occasionally did you

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see a motor lorry.

I recall that the labourers were spurred on by a bonus payment. For their normal money each gang was expected to load fifteen 'one ton' skips per day. Any truck filled in excess of this brought an extra shilling to each man in the group; drivers earned the same premium on completing two and a half additional 'runs'. Between August 20th 1920 and June 30th 1922, 139,500 cubic yards of earth had been shifted: all pick and shovel work. Virtually a law unto themselves, navy gangers hired and fired on the spot. Because of the size of the site, however, a sacked man could contrive to get taken on again by walking to the other end of the refinery, where he approached a different foreman.

At all points of the compass, steelwork skeletons of production plant began to appear together with the shells of new buildings. Primitive road communications around Fawley made it necessary for the bulk of construction materials and equipment to come by water via a local creek. A steam crane lifted piles, pipes, steel plates, machinery, ballast, cement, bricks, and a thousand-and-one disparate items, from barge to railway wagon; a branch of the narrow gauge system connected the creek with the main site. Down on the mud flats a Dutch contractor worked full pelt erecting the jetty, which would soon receive the first trans-ocean tankers shipping 'crude'.

When I joined Tom at the refinery, bricklayers were lining out the coke retorts, these units provided heat to facilitate many of the early refining processes. Later we worked on Number 1 Power House; the complex produced its own electricity. In various locations stood several 100 ft' steel chimneys, all of them had to be lined with fire-bricks to a height of fifty feet. By some error, one of the chimneys got put up in the wrong place; using sleepers, rails and winches, the engineers managed to re-site the structure without toppling it: a dangerous operation.

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Part of our crowd in 'The AGWI' consisted of Yorkshiremen- real 'Yorkshire' too, coming himself from Keighley, this pleased my stepfather no end. These Northerners had been sent down by Gibbons. With its steelwork blast-furnaces, textile mill boilerhouses and pottery kilns, the North of England could claim to be the heartland of the fire-work tradition. Oddly, these 'Yorkies' never deigned to carry a hod. Apparently the customary method 'up North', they wore a felt hat with a rolled stocking in it. Loading a small board with eight or ten bricks, they balanced this on their heads, mounting the ladder two handed. By contrast, the board was not employed to move muck, fire-clay being transported in a bucket perched directly upon the hat itself. Scaling shaky ladders to run along the bouncy walkways of planking, the labourers kept their poise, in even a lively wind. We Southerners, not having seen such a display before, found it better than a circus act.

Apart from gas-works there used to be very little fire-work done in the Southern counties. Although practically every town might boast its gas installation, these would normally be built and maintained by travellers. Consequently, the local brickies at Fawley required a certain amount of instruction as they started off. They were, however, keen enough. During the early stages of construction, before things got into top gear, men daily trekked considerable distances in the hope of landing a contracting job. Once on the payroll, they considered themselves in clover. Not since the establishment of a near-by Royal Flying Corps aerodrome for the Great War, had the locals savoured the 'paradise' of a big site with its overtime and bonus.

I worked with one New Forest brickie, a gypsy called Samuel Gobby. An ex-regular soldier, he had, as he often proudly reminded us, learnt boxing. He'd several times represented his unit. The man was unable to read or write. At the time he courted a girl, who lived in the gypsy

encampment at Ringwood; he regularly roped me in to write his love letters or read the ones received. I remember we got him to come round the branch with us; he joined-up with myself as proposer, and another refinery brickie, Len Jones, seconding the initiation.

Regrettably, like most big jobs, the early 'AGWI' produced its crop of industrial accidents. A driver we knew lost his life on being over-run by loaded skips in transit from the creek. In addition, some poor devil had an arm torn off by the machinery of the crane on the quay.

Unless owning a bike, you were pretty well stranded when working at the refinery; Fawley lacked a bus service, also the branch line from Totton did not open until 1925. Just as I myself had done whilst at Calshot Air Base, the main body of contractor's men lived in huts on the site labour camp. Tight deadlines caused overtime to become the norm, therefore it would have been difficult in any case to return to Southampton after a late finish. A local woman, Mrs Stone, rented a small corner in one of the huts; here she ran her little kiosk selling tea, rolls and cooked snacks at all hours.

It happened to be the very isolation of the refinery job which led my stepfather and me into an unfortunate adventure. One Saturday we went on bricklaying till four o'clock in the afternoon. Temporarily, the site stood deserted. All the lorries having gone at twelve, there wasn't an earthly chance of a lift back to the ferry. Ironically, although our getting home meant a wearisome foot-slog through the lanes to Hythe, from where we worked on the mud flats, Woolston lay clearly visible across the narrow waterway. Furthermore, by looking north along the eastern shore of Southampton Water, we saw, poking out into the sea, the pier used by the steam ferry. It seemed, as the crow flies, a mere

stone's throw,perhaps half an hour's walk.Admittedly such a passage necessitated traversing private land,but the thought of the tedious inland route made us foolhardy.Why should they mind ?

The 600 acre refinery site had only recently been bought by the A.G.W.I. Petroleum Co. from the Drummond family of Cadland Estate. This family acquired the property in 1772, a purchase effected by the Hon. Robert Drummond,partner in the Drummond Bank at Charing Cross,London. Attracting the private account of Hanoverian monarch George III in 1802,the bank prospered.During the nineteenth century,a steady accretion of wealth was reflected in the expansion of the estate,adjacent tracts of land being obtained from neighbouring gentry.By the 1920's,Cadland represented a considerable entity.Owning sizeable interests in Hythe,it stretched down the coast to Calshot,then ran at right angles along the Solent shore opposite the Isle of Wight.With fifteen miles of water frontage,the estate,which encompassed virtually the whole of Fawley Parish,contained numerous farms and over 200 labourer's cottages.Taking out just a small bite near the village of Fawley,the refinery complex remained invested by Drummond land.Across these grounds,Tom and I were now brazenly bent upon venturing.

Emerging from the main works entrance at the top of 'Time Office Road',we walked some way up Marsh Lane,coming abreast of Fawley Lodge, one of several gateways into the estate.Although a dog barked,we slipped past unchallenged,setting off down the principal carriage-road to the 'big house'.We strolled beneath magnificent flowering-chestnut trees, part of the 500 acre park originally laid out by 'Capability' Brown, himself a client of the Drummond Bank.A minor township clustered around the hall rendering Cadland an almost self-sufficient unit.Here could be found kitchen gardens,bakery,brewery,laundry,and hot-houses supplying soft fruit and cut flowers most of the year.Situated close-by,the 'home farm' boasted stables,dairy and abattoir.Associated with the farm

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were saw-mill, timber stacks and building yard.

Seeing a fountain playing in an ornamental pond, we turned aside from the drive, weaving our way through a small copse. After avoiding the summer-house, we skirted walled gardens only to hear the sound of sawing emanating from the wood store. This deflected us to over-hung paths, which criss-crossed the rhododendron thickets : the shrub grew here in multi-coloured profusion. Thus we completed a concealed detour dodging the scattered outbuildings of Cadland Home Farm. Moving down the incline we noticed the rhododendron groves to be composed of less gorgeous specimens, mainly 'escapes' whose blooms had reverted to paler shades. Finally, issuing from the undergrowth, we discovered a charming tidal creek, complete with jetty, boat-house, sheds and quay cottages. Reserved for the estate sailing barge the 'Cadland', this private dock was used to bring in coal, cattle-cake and other goods from Southampton.

About a mile north of Fawley village we traversed an open vista giving a clear view of Cadland House itself. Centrepiece of the property, it stood on a gentle eminence commanding splendid marine panoramas of Spithead and the Needles. The white-brick mansion had been constructed in 1775 to a design by the famous architect, Henry Holland, also a customer at 'Charing Cross'. Subsequent rebuilding in 1836, under the direction of an equally talented builder, Sir Jeffry Wyattville, cost a later owner all of forty thousand pounds.

Beyond the creek, a twisty carriageway led us towards Hythe tracing the edge of the saltings. We strode out jauntily invigorated by sylvan surroundings and sea air. Tiny streams ran in culverts beneath the shoreline road, each watercourse carving its miry, meandering gash across the reed-beds. Passing over one of these bridges in the sedge we disturbed a gaudy golden-pheasant. Semi-tame, the cock dawdled in the ride dragging

an ostentatious tail; in the face of our approach, it strutted disdainfully into withy clumps. Plume aflame with sheens of green, red and yellow, the bird was the brightest creature we'd ever seen: it took our breath away.

Around the next corner the idyll came to an abrupt end. Luck ran out as we were pulled up by a keeper; doubtless we had been observed in the open ground below the big house. The man carried an ugly two-barrelled shot-gun, also being armed with that dogged fanaticism often conspicuous in the semi-feudal retainer defending a squire's property rights. His master's considerable capital gain on the recent sale of the refinery site, which we thought fit to mention, in no way diminished in the servant's mind, the outrage of our intrusion within the bounds! Although by this time quite close to the Hythe end of the estate, the gamekeeper insisted upon escorting us back to our starting point at Fawley Lodge.

For some time we sat on the manor bank warmed by a late afternoon sun. We summoned up new resolution. Knowing, now, something of the geography of enemy territory, our second plan involved a route directly across the saltings between the tide lines. Having, for a certain period in the distant past, existed as a monastic holding, Cadland controlled the mud flats down to low water mark. Shore privileges deriving from this ecclesiastic tenure were currently assumed by secular owners, we remained, therefore, trespassers. However, by keeping to the seaward side of the coastal carriageway, our movements would be screened by sallow carr.

Staying out of sight we initially made good time, passing a string of stews. Soon the going became more difficult as we found ourselves jumping dykes, clambering over slippery embankments and working along the slopes of sea walls. We stabbled in drains, fighting to

extricate boots from the powerful suction of a cloying ooze. It was Tom who first missed his footing to fall headlong into alluvial mire : progress slowed to a wallow.

Eventually we did break through to the Hythe end of the estate. Sticking to our clothes, the sparkly silica dust from high-temperature furnace bricks, had become overlain by the mud-pat splatterings of an assault course crossing. Reaching the perimeter, one last obstacle remained, the ten foot high wrought-iron railings of the boundary fence. I happened to be in the very process of giving Tom a lift to mount the barrier, when up came another estate worker, who chanced to be passing. The man wanted to inquire as to whether we realised we were trespassing. At this juncture, somewhat out of sympathy with the deferential mores of English rural society, I assured him in no uncertain terms that we knew!

A late evening ferry transported us back to Southampton. Our short cut had caused a delay of many hours. The noxious reek of esturine slime permeated garments and irritated our nostrils, but at least we'd seen how the other half lived.

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Chapter 9 - Price Work.

First vessel to dock at the new terminal on Southampton Water was the 'AGWILAKE', discharging 2,390,650 gallons of crude oil into storage tanks. At this point building operations began to tail-off, therefore only a dwindling band of contractor's men continued to turn up after work for a drink at the 'Falcon' - the pub in Fawley village deriving its name from the heraldic bird of a local landowning family.

Having developed a serious interest in competition cycling, I tended to do less drinking myself, preferring instead to train alone around the country lanes. On one of these road-work sessions I happened to meet my future wife. I had entered for the One Mile Cycle Handicap at the County Ground, Southampton, on August Bank Holiday Monday 1922. For the race I'd just purchased a brand new bike, delivered by rail to Totton Station; in those days many small cycle manufacturers existed, who regularly advertised in the papers. Collecting my machine on Saturday afternoon, very little time remained to become accustomed to it. Consequently, I trained hard on Sunday, being forced to venture out beneath an uncertain sky. Caught in a sudden storm, I sheltered in the Forest Home inn at Hardley, where, daughter of the landlord, my wife-to-be served in the bar. I remember she lent me a raincoat. Next day I won first prize in the Mile for which I was awarded a large silver tray; I also came second in another race at the same meeting.

Tom and I were amongst the last of the transients to leave, staying on to finish odds-and-ends all over the refinery. We built the brickwork base for a platform in the Barrelling Plant; from this unit drums went by aerial ropeway to the jetty. The wooden shack township that had been the labour camp shrank as one by one the contracting outfits pulled out on completion of their particular phases.

Towards the end, Tom and I found ourselves compelled to quit our hut, one of the few remaining at the camp; AGWI required the ground for a different purpose. Luckily we obtained lodgings in the village, but soon needed to move again when the people putting us up received notice. On getting out, the family squatted on Badminton Common, living, noisy kids and all, in a white marquee: I recall this later blew down. Meanwhile, my stepfather and I arranged to take a room at the Forest Home. Being some distance from Fawley, we 'biked' it. I used to ride my spanking new racer, enthusing about the 'lure of the open road' etc. Tom, who hated cycling, had borrowed a shaky lady's-machine. Hard put to keep up, he would mutter a heart-felt rejoinder; - "Bugger the open road!"

It became obvious that the refinery job rapidly neared its end; Tom awaited orders to resume travelling. 'Walking out' with a young lady, I declined to accompany my stepfather on a further tour. To continue my courting meant that local work must be secured from somewhere ... and quick! Fortunately, out of the blue, I was approached at the site by a Mr Judd, who worked 'permanent' for AGWI; he wanted a price for the brickwork on his house to be built at Dibden Purlieu.

What should I charge? A novel problem. I decided to ask Tom. Despite having, during his lifetime, laid thousands of bricks, my mentor's experience of commercial estimating had been limited to quoting for the occasional 'foreigner'. He advised one pound per thousand, including 'pointing in', a ridiculously low figure eagerly accepted by the Judds: good job I possessed the energy !

At the plot on Forest Front, I got to work; Mr Judd's retired father acted as labourer, keeping me fed with muck and bricks. My two previous spells of housebuilding at Calshot Camp and Hamble, came in useful as I tackled this first solo venture. Technically the job was a roaring success, but from the pecuniary standpoint, a disaster: I didn't

make much money out of it.

Brickwork completed, Mr Judd asked me to tender for the plastering, hoping no doubt that my charges in a cognate 'wet trade' would prove equally 'reasonable'. Again I had no idea what to quote. 'New Forest Rate' for bricklayers stood at one and sixpence per hour, but, never having done plasterwork before, I could only guess as to how long the job might take. I agreed to tackle the entire bungalow for seven pounds: nothing ventured, nothing gained.

From a secondhand bookshop in Southampton, I purchased a tattered little book, costing sixpence, on the 'Art of Plastering'. The manual appeared rather dated, advising for instance the addition of ox-blood to certain mixes in order to improve their consistencies. None-the-less the volume did give a few useful hints, such as how to get round the chimney-breast by working to 'plumbed' corner battens.

Once more the client's father acted as my labourer, preparing the plaster, which he 'bucketed' to the mortar-board in the room; we commenced with the ceiling. Normally a plasterer himself nailed the thin flat lathes to the ceiling joists prior to starting, however these had been fixed for me by Mr Judd's brother, a 'chippy' undertaking the carpentry side of the contract. To the plaster we added handfuls of horse-hair, previously beaten thoroughly with sticks to break up the matted lumps; this material served to bind and reinforce the first coat. Application of this initial layer involved 'pricking up', i.e. forcing the soft plaster against the lathes so that it squeezed between the strips to flop over forming 'keys'; I used a steel float. My lack of know-how made for hard going - as fast as I completed a section it fell down. After a lot of trial and error, we got the mix right, and included the correct amount of hair; finally I mastered the technique of getting it to stay up.

Much stimulated by the triumph of the 'pricked up' ceiling, we spent the rest of the day doing walls. Deciding upon a 'lean' 6-1 mix, I ran a screed along the skirting, also another just below the ceiling. Then, employing a length of timber for a 'straight edge', the space between could be filled in, and worked with a wooden float. I gave extra strength to angled corners by adding a dash of cement. One tool I had come to find indispensable was the plasterer's 'hawk', a square board with a handle underneath, which, carrying a good dollop of plaster, obviates the need to return constantly to the mortar-board. I became increasingly engrossed in my task; all afternoon the 'hawk' hovered around me as I plastered, its flat base and short stem resembling the outstretched wings and rudder tail of the poised bird of prey.

Losing light we packed-in. First lamps were beginning to appear in the cottages bordering Hill Top Heath, as I bumped back over the rutted Forest track to Hardley. I felt well pleased. With one ceiling 'pricked up', and a respectable start made on the walls, all seemed set for a big push next day.

On the following morning I arrived at the job raring to go. The knack of plastering is knowing when to apply the various coats. I realized that to add a 'finishing' to a 'backing' layer on a wall, it was advisable to catch the first thickness whilst still wet, better adhesion would thus result. Testing the ceiling revealed it to be tacky, which I imagined a favourable circumstance. Unknown to me, ceilings required an altogether different technique. Any initial ceiling coat should remain untouched until hardened 'white dry', because its hooked 'keys' have to bear the whole weight of a ceiling as it hangs from the lathes.

The second ceiling coat went on easily, being completed in double

quick time; the practice of the previous day had improved my dexterity. Filling in the last space I noticed a small bubble beginning to form at the centre. I tried to smooth it back, but relentlessly it grew, and more bulges broke out in other places. Suddenly the complete ceiling collapsed smothering me in a deluge of wet plaster: I could have cried.

Despite all calamities and setbacks, I eventually overcame the plastering problems at Forest Front, although the job took a lot longer than anticipated, making the enterprise a dead loss from the financial angle. Alone at the site I was doing a few finishing touches. Swilling some 'sharp' sand in a bucket, I poured off the scummy, yellowed water, then, 'dry-mixing' in a box, I used this material to knock-up a rich 2-1 mortar, also putting in a sprinkling of 'Surphite'. Carefully I squared the several corners, working with a small 'corner trowel', which had right-angled flanges. Someone watched me ...

Looking up I found myself being scrutinized by a shabbily dressed middle-aged man, wearing cycle clips. Observed, he came in from the road to introduce himself as Mr William Waterman - 'general builder and village undertaker'. I knew his yard to be situated a short distance away; the Judds bought their materials from him.

"I've been looking at your work," he announced, "I hope you don't mind?"

"That's all right," I assured him.

"Nice piece of brickwork ... 'even joints'..." I thanked the man.

"How long have you been in the game?" the builder inquired.

"Since leaving school, firework mostly," I replied, "I've travelled

a lot."

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"I might be able to put some work your way," continued the visitor, "what do you charge on brickwork?"

"Two pounds a thousand." I answered without hesitation. (I was learning fast!) The builder told me to call at his yard as soon as I got away from Forest Front.

Thus, although assessed by the yardstick of profitability my first venture since leaving the refinery stood as a dismal failure, it none-the-less served as entrée and initiation to the world of local building: my talents had been noticed. Contract number one for Bill Waterman, a house at Hill Top, Beaulieu, involved bricklaying, roof tiling and plastering. A labourer provided by Bill assisted me. Aged twenty, master of my trade, hired by a builder and having a helper to feed me, a little self-congratulation seemed in order; however, my endeavours were still dogged by ill-luck.

Participating in a cycling competition at the Varsity Ground, Southampton, I had just won a barometer by gaining second place in my race; unfortunately in the next event I fell off breaking a collarbone. Strapped up in plaster for eight days my right arm felt rather stiff after removal of the cast, but, 'time was money' therefore I went back to the site immediately. We'd reached the plastering stage. Changing from total rest to the violent movements of stretching above my head to 'prick up' another ceiling didn't help to facilitate recuperation. (Plastering in those days wasn't simply a matter of nailing plasterboard.) Finally the arm became so painful that it compelled me to lose even more time. Price work could be chancy.

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Chapter 10. - Country Builders.

The lot of a country bricklayer sixty years ago was no cushy sinecure; we really worked, no-one having any time for a 'passenger'. Our work-a-day world somewhat resembled that of a wagon-train pioneer in the 'Wild West'. You started a job by breaking in through the bank to create an entrance. Next came felling undergrowth, and grubbing up the stubborn stumps, which gripped with their tap-roots like nasty teeth. Site clearance completed, building could commence - if you had water that is! Often in an isolated location there were no services so we would need to sink a well shaft, this amenity becoming a selling point for the dwelling. Usually the client also required us to dig and line-out a cesspit, measuring perhaps 8'x12'x8' deep.

Groundwork meant pick and shovel excavation of trenches, followed by hand-mixing and placement of concrete foundations; mechanical concrete-mixers did not become common until after World War II. Before bricklaying finally got under way you slaked three tons of 'stone lime' used to make the 'sand and lime' mixes for mortars, plasters and renderings. Unlike the town bricklayer, who might be able to specialize, the rural operative tended to be involved in every process of construction including labouring: you picked up a bit of knowledge about all the trades.

During the nineteen-twenties I found myself doing the bulk of Bill Waterman's brickwork, mainly on a pricework basis. Compared with now, the administrative and design side of house-building constituted a minimal proportion of the operation. Those armies of architects, designers, surveyors, planners, inspectors, consultants, etc, who currently swarm over the tiniest development, were then conspicuously absent. Bill's practice was to sketch a rough diagram on an old cigarette packet showing the position of doors and windows, sometimes also the direction the structure should face. To us blokes the rest seemed common sense, we just built it.

It wasn't ever necessary to offer the purchaser a '25 year guarantee', the reputation of the local builder, and the skills of the men who worked for him being sufficient recommendations in themselves. Craft pride still remained a very real thing, in fact we seemed more engrossed in the technicalities of the job than in what we got out of it. Of course, at that period the same gang would be involved with a particular house from start to finish, perhaps three or four months, therefore we could take a close interest. Given the contemporary structure of building industry employment, today's 'in and out' mentality is quite understandable - the 'subbie' must complete his bit in the shortest possible time in order to dash away to the next contract.

Although engaged in a tough, often gruelling occupation, there was always the lighter side. A man might cycle home in the evening with his dinner-bag feeling like a ton weight, a phenomenon he automatically ascribed to plain physical fatigue. Once indoors you discovered that some joker at the job had swapped your empty lunch-box for half a breeze block.

We made a lot of the various landmarks in the erection of a dwelling, e.g. 'damp-course level', 'window high' etc. Reaching the highest point on a building, known as 'Topping-out', constituted a special event requiring to be marked by a little celebration. The men tied a piece of rag to a stick which they stuck in the chimney pot. This flag acted as a signal to the client, who, on noticing it, was expected to participate in the matter of providing a round of drinks. Most clients knew about, and eagerly took part in our festivities. Intertwined with the gaiety, however, came an element of sadness; for the bricklayers especially, 'Topping-out' meant the beginning of the end of their jobs.

I remember a place we put up for Mr Hearst the Hythe magistrate. Returning from his honeymoon, he expected to move straight into the new property, which Bill Waterman had been commissioned to construct. As usual with Bill, his promises were six months ahead, and the jobs six months behind.

The job wasn't even started. Bill contacted me in a terrible panic, urging that I should begin immediately.

I often teamed up with another bricklayer, Jack Welton, who lived at Hardley, and also did a lot of brickwork for 'Waterman's'. Jack and I used to get on well together. Once on the site we found ourselves working under the eye of the client; Mr Hearst owned a house adjacent to the job, where he lived with his new wife, monitoring progress brick by brick. Doubtless hoping to spur us on to a quick completion, the magistrate kept Jack and me generously supplied with gallons of tea. Several times a day Mrs Hearst appeared carrying a huge billy-can. There would be so much that, despite our inveterate thirst for tea, until the other trades arrived it became necessary to surreptitiously pour some away.

Summer weather allowed good headway to be made by working late into the evenings; soon the carpenters turned up to fix the roof timbers. I recall one particularly sweltering day, when a 'chippy' shed his waistcoat, hanging it over the gable-end. The ever watchful magistrate imagined this to represent the flag going up for 'Topping-out', therefore, to everyone's surprise, he came rushing across balancing a clattering tray of drinks. Actually we hadn't reached the highest point at all, the chimney stacks weren't yet under way. We felt rather embarrassed about it because the man had been so decent.

It transpired that I was the last to leave, as Mr Hearst asked the builder to do a terrace and fishpond in the garden, these extra contracts falling to myself. The magistrate seemed to take a shine to me; during my final spell there, we regularly chatted, covering all sorts of topics. When I departed he gave me two books, Darwin's 'Origin of Species' and Boswell's 'Life of Johnson' : I still have them.

Next came a dwelling for a Mr Rann, the Hythe carrier; I believe this was the only time we quarrelled with Bill Waterman over 'prices'. House-building is an integrated sequence of operations depending upon co-operation between various trades. Commencing with groundwork, bricklayers would usually muck in to help labourers, who in turn waited on us once we started to build walls. When walls reached roof height, carpenters could begin to erect the roof timbers prepared by them on site. Meanwhile bricklayers switched to fire-places, chimney-stacks, and the 'partition walls' dividing a house into rooms.

Other brickwork included pillars and 'sleeper-walls' to support, respectively, the 'wall-plates' and floor-joists. There were two 'wall-plates' per room, running on opposite sides to take the weight of floor-joists; floor-boards rested on the floor-joists. Acting as bearers, the 'sleeper-walls' used to be honeycombed, i.e. constructed with numerous gaps in the brickwork to facilitate the circulation of air beneath the flooring; this arrested wood rot. Then bricklayers did window-sills, doorsteps and drains. By this time carpenters had finished on the roof, so we bricklayers went up to do tiling, which might be slates, asbestos sheets or clay tiles.

After bricklayers covered in the roof and bricked up gable-ends, carpenters got busy laying wooden floors and nailing lathes to ceiling-joists. The last phase involving bricklayers consisted of plastering walls and ceilings, plus any outside rendering. Moving on, bricklayers left carpenters to hang doors, secure skirting-boards, etc; house painters added their contribution right at the end.

When Bill Waterman arrived at Rann's site, Jack and I were in the process of 'taping out', setting out the building with the aid of a huge 'builder's set square', bricklayer's lines and an armful of pegs; we hadn't yet discussed terms. I told Bill that Jack and I wanted £55 between us for the bricklayer's side of the contract. The builder hesitated,

considering it 'a bit steep'. After a heated debate he reluctantly agreed, but insisted that we must complete the bricklayer's work in six weeks, otherwise reverting to a lower figure. Knowing the contract involved a simple 'pitched' roof having no 'hips' or 'valleys', we concurred. At that period a bricklayer on day work expected to be paid just short of four pounds per week. Two men during six weeks might receive something like forty-eight pounds, therefore, if we beat the deadline, each of us could rake in at least three pounds ten shillings above normal. To avoid the penalty, however, it meant going at the job hammer and tongs with scant regard for hours worked.

Concerning the client things got off to a bad start. The only wood on the site was a long telegraph pole. Every day we cut a small log in order to brew up. Employing bolster and lump hammer, the lovely straight-grained pine proved easy to split. With lively crackle and petulant popping of sparks, the resinous sticks heated our kettle in no time. Taking an old sack, we endeavoured to conceal the freshly sawn end; alas, the entire bulk of the shrinking trunk rapidly disappeared. This caused a bitter row as the haulier intended to make a couple of gate posts from it.

Although Jack and I put in an all out effort, snags, hold-ups and weather conspired to produce an over-run; we missed the target date by a few days. In the event Bill coughed up anyway - we were worth it to him.

Time-hallowed custom demanded that when a particular trade departed from a site, the client should give each man a drink. On the bricklayers' last day we did a final stretch of plastering; the ritual payment seemed a considerable time in coming. Mr Rann's 'nipper' often played around the building, so we thought it opportune to send a hint via him.

"Tell your dad we're just leaving," we primed the boy, "and does he want to see us?"

"Thanks very much," came the reply, "no, he doesn't want to see you."

Taking a dollop of pink colouring, we made an inset in the white plaster over the chimney-breast - a wine bottle with several glasses. As we quitted the site we transmitted a parting message via the young runner, "Tell your dad we've left him a drink!"

I remember a bloke called Bill Parnell, we used to think he was lazy. Working for a Brockenhurst builder, Bill Parnell first came to Hardley with a gang who did an extension to the Forest Home for the brewers. While the job lasted he lodged at the pub, which is how I came to know him. The young man soon struck up a friendship with Elsie, another of the landlord's three daughters, when the contract ended, he sacked himself from the Brockenhurst firm in order to remain in the district. Jack Welton and I sometimes took on a labourer, consequently, because the lad wanted local work, we decided to give him a trial.

A Mr Longman, the Hythe coalman, had arranged for Bill Waterman to build a pair of houses at 16/18 Pylewell Road. Jack Welton and I were sub-contracted to do, as usual, bricklaying, roof-tiling and plastering; Bill Parnell would be our hod-carrier. We always told the joke about the new labourer who went to hang his coat in the site hut, only to discover that the hut itself was his upturned hod: the witticism came pretty near the mark. Normal practice demanded that a labourer should be virtually worked to death.

First we expected him to erect scaffolding as the job progressed. Then he brought up the bricks, stacking them in convenient piles along the planking, he also kept two bricklayers supplied with muck. Finally it

fell to our luckless helper to light a fire and make tea. He never seemed able to cope, all day we shouted down to him, "More bricks ... more muck." The higher the structure grew, the more arduous became the task of the poor devil waiting upon us, whose frenzied efforts increasingly failed to satisfy.

It happened to be on the Pylewell Road job that our suspicions were first aroused re Bill Waterman's viability. As the contract developed it appeared more and more difficult for the builder to provide materials we required. Mr Waterman rushed here and there around the village, garnering 'odds and sods' from the different sites he had at various stages of construction. All sorts of unlike bricks got pressed into use to complete the chimneys, their clashing tones standing out from the rest of the brickwork like a sore thumb. Commercial travellers ceased to call (in those days they did the rounds on foot). All these manifestations signified a phenomenon only too common in the trade - the builders' merchants had tightened up on the firm. We wondered if we should ever see our money.

One afternoon we were doing some inside brickwork when someone called for Jack, his wife was having a baby. Within a few minutes he returned to the site, picked up a trowel, and started to lay bricks again. He said nothing. We stood agog.

"Has she had it then, Jack?"

"Yes."

"Well, what was it?"

"Twins."

"Hoo-ray ... Good old Jack ... etc. But you've only been gone a couple of minutes, if my wife had had twins I would have taken the whole darn week off."

"If your wife had had twins," he retorted, "you wouldn't be able to afford a darn week off."

On any job there used to be a lot of horse-play. Reaching 'roof-high' at Pylewell Road, we wrestled on the ceiling. I pushed Bill Parnell over, and as he fell backwards his foot got caught between two joists. The ankle was badly sprained, fortunately not broken. Jack and I were forced to pay Bill Parnell a week's wages while he convalesced; we thought this a dead loss as it creamed off our profit on the contract. (Bill Waterman did eventually settle with us for Pylewell Road; I suppose he must have robbed Peter to pay Paul.)

Sadly, Bill Parnell lost Elsie in the end. He never bothered to change his dust grimed working clothes for the evening. Although she repeatedly nagged him, he wouldn't make the effort. Poor devil! I realise now that his lassitude stemmed from pure physical exhaustion; running up and down a ladder all day with heavy weights can be rather debilitating. He often said that it felt as if his thigh bones were poking through the skin. When Elsie threw him over, he checked out of the pub and returned to Brockenhurst; we worked him too hard.

Bill Waterman's problems eventually led to disaster, he took his own life with a twelve-bore in the carpenter's shop at the yard; at that time the village artisan found the stigma of bankruptcy hard to bear. His affairs had always been in a muddle. Whenever he cycled round the parish people waved him down to chase about jobs he'd promised to do. Cornered, he fobbed them off with his stock phrase - "I was just coming to see you." I don't believe he kept proper books, trusting many clients

who failed to pay him. A sorry end.

After the death of Bill Waterman his nephews Fred and Frank Smith assumed control of the firm, and, as both were carpenters, also carried on the undertaking side. I continued to 'sub.' most of their brickwork.

Many of the contracts required the digging of a well, and when I think of the risks we took sinking the shafts, my blood runs cold. Sometimes you struck water at eighteen feet, but if missed at this depth a forty foot hole might be needed. Not bothering with helmets we frequently came close to being 'brained' by dislodged stones. Of the various soils, gravel used to constitute the safest to work in; by contrast, clay and 'running-sand' presented real dangers. I remember one occasion we dug into blue clay at a site near Hythe village, the shaft sides displayed numerous fossil shells embedded in them. Hitting a spring late in the day, I began to brick up the shaft, beginning at the bottom. Before packing in that evening I managed to complete several courses. Next morning a shock awaited. Peering down the shaft we saw a great lump of streaked clay filling the base of the well: there wasn't a brick in sight! The cave-in had pushed over the first courses, choking the hole to a considerable height. Any person bricklaying at the base when the collapse occurred would have been a 'goner'; we rarely practised enough precautions as regards shoring-up; young and foolhardy, one tended to ignore hazards.

The bulk of the firm's work centred on the Hythe area, although we did build a couple of bungalows at Rolleston, and a house at Blackfield. Now and then we went further afield such as the time we did a job for a 'toff' near Buckler's Hard on the Beaulieu River. Our contract specified the construction of a concrete retaining wall to arrest slippage, which threatened to undermine the dwelling. It turned out to be quite a business. Each time we excavated a trench the sticky mass of clay slid down to

re-occupy the space. Eventually we mastered the problem, having time, therefore, to look around. The client was a model railway fanatic, whose enthusiasm had led him to lay out a miniature network in the grounds, complete with cuttings, bridges and tunnels. Along the system travelled scaled-down, working versions of famous engines. This used to be an aspect of the building trade I enjoyed - moving about and seeing things; in a factory you're stuck with the same unchanging surroundings day after day.

Another dynasty of local builders was the Bowmans, who also maintained an interest in several shops, and owned a number of rented properties. Like 'Mr Rushton' in Robert Tressell's 'Ragged Trousered Philanthropists', (a work I had not at that time read), Mr Bowman, in fact the majority of country builders I knew, espoused a stern Nonconformism. Fred Bowman often preached outside the Forest Home, waylaying customers with dire warnings concerning the evils of drink. Fearing the impact of these crusades upon pub trade, an irate Mr Snelgrove regularly emerged to warn off the builder with unrestrained vehemence.

Not all the contracts resulting from my association with the Bowmans were above board, some proved downright devious. On one occasion Fred Bowman sold his yard at Hardley to a bigger builder from Southampton, namely Braziers. The transfer agreement included a clause that Mr Bowman should himself cease all building operations in the neighbourhood: needless to say, he didn't. Sub-contracting to third parties such as myself, who could act as front men, he continued to engage in housebuilding as vigorously as before. His cheek was boundless. A job he organised fronted the very yard he had just sold - I chatted to Braziers' yard men as I laid bricks! A goodly number of these clandestine constructions came my way at this period. Once I foolishly allowed Mr Bowman to sell me a ladder, later discovering the rotten rungs: I ought to have known better !

Doing price work one always encountered difficulty in obtaining payment. I used to find this a real bugbear, because I in my turn usually had to pay another brickie, perhaps Jack Welton, or a labourer like Bill Parnell. When you chased a builder they never seemed to possess 'cash in hand', strenuously pressed they might rush off to see clients who owed them for jobs, hoping to call in some money that way. More often than not the builder returned empty handed, which was your bad luck. Most of the country firms ran their affairs in such a manner.

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Chapter 11. - 'The Rate'.

Employment in the building trade was always precarious. In a country area one's livelihood depended upon a shifting pattern of fickle relationships with the several local builders. These firms didn't pay any more than they had to, when I first arrived in Hardley, Bowman's labourers were still on 10d an hour. What people now call 'redundancy', constituted part of life; a few weeks work might come your way, then the job ended; if lucky, you found something else starting up. This chancy mean of a year's casual employments (and unemployments) dictated your fluctuating annual income.

I worked for my different masters under a variety of ad hoc employment set-ups. Sometimes it would be day work, at another period price work. Whilst on price work I could be sub-contracted individually or in tandem with a second bricklayer. Occasionally the builder supplied a labourer, alternatively I often hired a helper myself. I can also remember an early experience of partnership.

One regular customer at the Forest Home was an ex-naval carpenter, Reg Edwards. He happened to possess a little money being the son of a Fawley baker. Having just come to the end of a short stint in the AGWI refinery, lining out pipe stiles, I needed work. Reg suggested that we should team up to build houses; he promised to provide carpentry skill and finance, while I contributed bricklayer's know-how. I'd already done a number of jobs for Bill Waterman, so the proposition seemed a good idea; to start with I agreed to take one-and-sixpence per hour, plus a 'share of the profits'.

Our first contract involved the erection of a dwelling for Mr Williams, owner of Williams' Shipping, a company operating sailing barges

from Ashlett Creek. Simultaneously we were occupied in building two bungalows at West Common, places having corrugated-iron walls and roofs, each equipped with brick fireplace and chimney. We also made a start on a house for Reg Edwards himself.

Despite excellent progress on the sites, my association with Reg was not destined to last; blame for this must rest mainly on my own shoulders. One morning my partner turned up at the 'William's Shipping Site' to find roof tiling in full swing. Perched on the roof I happened to be working up the 'hip' fixing ridge tiles. When engaged on such an operation it is useful to have someone positioned below to sight the alignment, therefore I had detailed our labourer, Enoch Pike, to perform just that task.

On arrival Reg Edwards thoughtlessly shouted up some pointed remarks concerning the necessity of keeping a man 'standing about doing nothing' especially as the firm had to pay him etc. Really these comments were harmless enough, however, in those days I used to be a rather fiery character; at the slightest provocation I would throw down my tools and march off the job: since then I've mellowed. Anyway, I felt incensed because the labourer, a simple country bloke, had been working well, also my own competence seemed under attack. The upshot was that I quit there and then, leaving my erstwhile partner to make the best of it. What my 'share of the profits' amounted to I never knew.

As mentioned above, the country bricklayer relied to a great extent upon the largesse of a small group of local entrepreneurs. On the other hand, if you possessed the energy, and a good bike, the mix could be altered somewhat. This long distance cycling became of course compulsory during those periods in which work in your immediate vicinity tailed-off. Travelling to far away jobs presented no real problem to me, as a keen cyclist I used to do a hundred miles in a day for my road

training, and think nothing of it. First light found me making preparations for my marathon, early morning journeys to work. The only other person moving about in the pub would be another lodger, 'Uncle Jim', brother of the landlady; employed as a brick-maker at Langley Brickworks, he, too, habitually set off at the crack of dawn.

From Hardley, the furthest I ever cycled was to Flowerdown Army Camp, two miles the other side of Winchester, a distance of some twenty-four miles. Several buildings required re-tiling, and I remember having to make 'puglet holes', i.e. knock out bricks at regular intervals up the wall in order that the cross-supports for the wooden scaffolding could rest in the gaps. I often used to cycle fifteen miles or so to the western outskirts of Southampton, working on the various extensions to Southampton Power Station at Western Esplanade. Also along Western Esplanade I did the fire-work for a sawdust destructor at the timber merchant Montagu-Meyer. Most of these jobs came my way via the union.

Although cycling bestowed increased scope and flexibility, it turned out on occasion to be a double-edged weapon; you might jump out of the frying-pan into the fire. From time to time I pointed my machine inland, traversing the furzy wastes of Beaulieu or Yew Tree Heaths; the New Forest attracted many a prosperous city dweller seeking sylvan retreats in quiet villages; local developers eagerly catered for this market.

January 1924 saw me working for a Lyndhurst firm, ten miles from Hardley. Owning a well established business, this builder, a J.P., spent the bulk of his time on civic affairs, leaving a son to run the jobs. I can remember both father and son being upset by the election of Ramsay Macdonald and the first Labour Government.

One Monday morning I happened to be engaged in laying a terrace at a biggish house on the Brockenhurst Road. Whenever architects, builders,

or landscape planners become involved in designing paved areas, such people seem invariably to specify 3' x 2' slabs: they don't have to lay them! A paving stone of this size, 2" thick, weighs something like $1\frac{1}{2}$ cwt. Each stone will probably need placing and lifting at least half a dozen times to ensure that it is flush at all edges with adjacent paving. Bending double to prise these dead-weights off the deck is apt to cause your vertebrae to pop out. Covering a patio with the largest possible paving units is of course cheaper than using smaller sizes, so, as usual, I had to content with 3' x 2' slabs on the Lyndhurst contract. This particular Monday, making his occasional visit, the builder was to spring a surprise on me.

"I'd like you to take three days off," he announced, "we haven't got a lot on at the moment. Come back on Friday and we'll see what's what."

These instructions put me in an awkward position. I was going to lose three day's pay, and yet couldn't look for another job because I hadn't been discharged. Chances were that on Friday the builder would have more work lined up. In fact, too mean to find me a fill-in job, he simply planned to save himself some money at my expense; I must accept a short week, but still be available when the boss felt ready to start me again. Most of the builders acted like that, expecting you to run after them.

To say the least of it, I was piqued. Wages were none too high in any case, and to miss more than half a week's money represented quite a blow. On top of this I resented the builder stringing me along, therefore, immediately work finished on Monday evening, I contacted my friend Jack Welton, and took on a bricklaying contract for Bill Waterman. When Friday came round I dutifully returned to Lyndhurst, however, it was to demand my

one day's money and cards. The builder reacted angrily.

"You ought to have darn well let me know," he protested, "I've made promises to a client !"

I got married on May 31st 1924, moving into a four-wheeled roadman's caravan, purchased for £75, which father-in-law allowed me to park in an old gravel working at the rear of the Forest Home. My wife, Dorothy, continued to serve in the bar. We possessed an oil stove for cooking, oddments of furniture from the pub, and a tilley-lamp. One little novelty was our sink, originally taken from an ocean liner; after use it folded neatly back into the wall simultaneously flushing away the water to the outside of the van.

Before the wedding I did a week's work for the Beaulieu builder, Mr Webb, whose yard used to be situated at Hatchet Gate. The firm received most of the building contracts from Beaulieu Estate, also getting maintenance jobs on big houses in the area. During the few days I worked for Webb we were re-roofing a large private residence down by the river. Welsh slate specified for the new roof came in various thicknesses, so we picked out the heavier pieces to go at the bottom. Each slate needed individual preparation; we scratch-scribed across the plate with the sharp end of a slating-hammer, employing a length of wood as our gauge; two holes punched on the line made the unit ready for nailing to the battens. It was beautiful stuff to work with showing changing shades of colour at different angles to the light.

As it happened, owing to the rush, I wasn't able to collect my wages, or tell the builder that I intended to take a couple of days holiday. I didn't think it important because no one paid you for time off, even to be married. Some days later, cycling across Hill Top Heath, I reported back at the yard.

"Where the hell have you been ?" snapped the builder, not pleased to see me.

"I just got married," I replied.

"O.K. then. You'd better put in your timesheet for last week," he instructed.

Bricklayer's wages were set by negotiations between the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers (A.U.B.T.W.), and the Master Builders' Federation. Although all the builders belonged to their own organisation, they took a dim view of any employee being in the union. Country employers in particular proved zealous about sticking to the 'minimum rate'; the U.K. was divided into a number of regions, where different variants of 'the rate' operated; 'New Forest Rate', I remember, trailed $\frac{1}{2}$ d an hour behind 'Southampton Rate'.

Often a travelling firm or a contractor would pay over the rate, such 'catch rates' serving to attract tradesmen already employed by local concerns. In those days the chance to earn $\frac{1}{2}$ d more than the rate soon caused men to rush to a new site. Having recently worked for contractors, both in the refinery and at Calshot Base, I unthinkingly put in for 1d an hour above the rate : this strongly upset Mr Webb.

"Don't you know the rate ?" he asked.

"Yes, I know the rate," I replied, "but it doesn't mean firms can't pay over the rate."

Horror struck, the builder rounded on me violently. "Who did ? Who pays OVER the rate ?" I refused to say.

"I'll find out who pays OVER !" he warned, "and when I do, I'll report

them to the Federation." I ended the argument by 'piecing-up' (quitting) there and then: four days after getting married I found myself out of work.

Fortunately another contract soon started up in the refinery, construction of the 'Cat-cracker', i.e. Catalytic Cracking Plant. Basically a huge distillation unit, the complex extracted various products from oil as the temperature reached their different boiling points. Most fire-work in the early refinery had been done by British firms such as Gibbons, however this project went to a U.S. concern, Kellogs. The job gave me a first experience of an American firm with American style management. Our General-foreman, a genial cigar-smoking Yank called Reynolds, ran the site with a hearty panache all his own. I remember one occasion when he caught a man sleeping in the 'bender' - small hut used as cement store, mess room etc. Being asked by the British foreman if the offender should be woken, the American replied in characteristic vein: "No ... as long as the guy sleeps he has a job!"

Something was said in Chapter 7 regarding the downturn of the period after 1920, and how I experienced the first wage-cut whilst employed on a housing estate at Netley; this came just prior to my initial stint of refinery building at Fawley. In fact throughout British industry during the Twenties, there were titanic struggles over the question of wage rates; witness the alternating exhilarations and disappointments of 'Red' and 'Black' Fridays (1920 and 1921), also the General Strike of 1926; conflicts occurred too in construction.

The National Building Strike of 1924 developed from several years of acrimonious battling between masters and men. First one side then the other would gain advantage, the outcome at a particular time usually depending upon the state of trade, therefore the demand for labour. Militancy allied to post-war boom brought the 44 hour week in 1920, also

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the establishment of the National Wages and Conditions Council, which for the first time laid down pay scales on a country-wide grid with a rate of 2/4d per hour for the highest of the seventeen grades agreed. However, only a few months later, when the employment situation once more deteriorated, the union side found themselves forced to submit to a cut of 2d per hour on the 16th May 1921. Within three months came a second reduction of 1d, then the following month a further drop of 1/2d; the process eventually produced a fall of almost 30% by 1st June 1922.

Slump giving the employers the upper hand, January 1923 saw them bringing in a demand that an extra 20% wage cut be made (i.e. on top of amounts previously enforced), coupled with an extension of hours worked from 44 to 47 per week. Stalemate in negotiations prompted the employers associations to deliver an ultimatum :- 'The men must accept 2d off Grade A, with proportionate reductions down the scale for a special period of twelve months'. If the operatives agreed to this the 44 hour week could remain in force until March 1924, when it would again be 'reviewed'. Unless their interim proposals were adopted, employers threatened to revert to the original scheme for a cut of 20% PLUS an increase in working time.

The workers' organisations decided to put the employers' proposition to a vote of members, warning that should this 'interim demand' be rejected, the result was certain to be either a national lockout or strike. Balloting produced a big majority in favour of resistance in spite of possible consequences; my own union, the A.U.B.T.W., polled 25,432 for refusal as against just 7,108 prepared to acquiesce. Our truculence triggered the feared retribution. "As from the 14th April 1923," announced the employers, "men would only be employed on the basis of a 2d cut plus a 47 hour week." Both sides began to prepare for a clash.

In the event, trouble was averted at that particular juncture by the intervention of Labour Party Leader, Mr Ramsay MacDonald, who, calling both sides together, got them to approve arbitration by Sir Hugh Fraser. Becoming known as the 'Fraser Award', the arbitrator's decision, given on May 15th 1923, involved a reduction of 1d per hour for men in high graded areas (except London), with only $\frac{1}{2}$ d cut for other regions. Unions received a promise that all rates would remain static until January 1924. For their part, employers were enjoined not to reduce rates in future purely on account of 'bad trade' or high unemployment, but solely in accordance with a cost-of-living sliding scale.

Although the above agreement produced a temporary peace, Sir Hugh soon found himself recalled by the employers' side demanding new increases in hours worked. Fraser's second judgement raised summer working to $46\frac{1}{2}$ hours, only keeping the 44 hour week during winter months. Reluctantly the operatives agreed to these terms, resolving to bide their time until favourable conditions returned causing renewed demand for their skills. Upturn occurred early in 1924, therefore with building activity once more on the increase, the men took the first opportunity to regain some of the lost ground: a claim for restoration of 2d on the rate was lodged on February 29th 1924.

There then followed three months of wrangling, with the building employers eventually offering $\frac{1}{2}$ d on the rate, also expressing willingness to examine the feasibility of paying something towards time lost by employees due to bad weather (wet-time). These terms were rejected by the men after a ballot. Subsequently the employers' offer had to be raised to 1d before being accepted. It seemed that confrontation in the industry could now abate, however last minute complications concerning an existing dispute at Liverpool, produced further breakdown. A national building strike began on July 5th 1924.

When the strike commenced I happened to be working for a firm doing alterations to warehouses at Redbridge Railway Station on the outskirts of Southampton. All the bricklayers at our job came out; we received just five shillings per week strike pay from the union; these events took place two months after I got married. The strike lasted seven weeks, although I personally didn't have to go the full distance. Any builder or public body which already operated the contested rate was exempted, and, luckily, I managed to get with a concern starting up in the refinery, who had agreed the extra money. Contractors usually paid over the odds to attract men quickly. Finally, the National Strike itself ended following a Court of Enquiry, the settlement confirming the 1d rise, but keeping $46\frac{1}{2}$ hours for summer working.

My job switch, initially necessitated by the strike, proved doubly fortuitous. It saved me the fifteen mile cycle ride to and from Redbridge Station, also the new project turned out to be a money-spinner because of the overtime. They wanted the installation finished before we'd hardly begun, therefore a tight construction schedule provided unlimited opportunities for working 'over' - at least limited only by the length of time a man could continue to lay bricks without collapsing.

Employed by the International Boiler Co., we were building a second power-house to augment an existing unit on which, incidentally, I'd worked with my stepfather some years earlier. Our gang consisted of five men: a working foreman, his son, who 'waited on' him, a second labourer, plus two bricklayers, myself and Jack Welton. Jack had been able to join us when I gave him a tip-off.

Prepared to have a good go, Jack and I turned up one morning with a huge sack of food; we started work at 8 a.m. The furnace and flues needed to be lined out with fire-bricks. Despite telling the foreman otherwise, Jack possessed no knowledge whatever of fire-work, none-the-less I sort

of taught him as we went along. From an 8 a.m. start we continued to lay bricks until late the same day, then working through the night with artificial light. Next morning found us maintaining our pace in spite of not having been home during the previous twenty-four hours. Taking only snatched breaks for tea and a bite to eat, we pushed on into the second day.

Around 4 p.m. of 'Day 2', Jack and I crawled up out of the flue system to encounter the foreman and his son going at it like a couple of maniacs, building the exterior shell. The poor lad seemed just about all-in, but the father appeared resolved to 'carry on regardless' like a demented dervish. "Don't you blokes W-A-N-T to work?" demanded the foreman sarcastically.

At this slur against our manhood, we re-entered the flues without further ado determined to make it a round thirty-six hour stint of bricklaying. Returning home for a brief recuperation, we repeated our marathon over the following two day period. My wages for the week including these two thirty-six hour spans amounted to more than £11.00 - practically three times what I might have earned on a normal contract.

From time to time, when building activity in the Hythe/Fawley area dried up, I would stay with my Mother at Woolston, which made a good base for working in Southampton; I used to come back to Hardley at weekends. The arrangement suited Mother very well as Tom's work still kept him moving from place to place with various travelling outfits, thus leaving her alone for long stretches of time. I remember arriving at Mother's on one occasion to find her terrified at the prospect of an imminent British 'Red Revolution': this was at the height of a panic produced by the so called 'Zinoviev Letter'. Purporting to be a message from the Communist International in Moscow to the British party, the document ordered preparations for armed insurrection in the working class districts

of Britain. Now considered by many to be a forgery concocted by Conservative supporters in the Foreign Office, the 'Red Letter', used at the time in a wild press campaign, and reinforced by Ramsay MacDonald's incompetent handling of the affair, proved enough to ensure the return of Stanley Baldwin.

During another of these occupational 'stay-overs' at Woolston, I can bring to mind being employed on a housing development at Bitterne, Southampton : the weather was bitter. I shall include some description of building in sub zero temperatures in the section concerning the construction of Hardley School (see chapter 14); suffice it to say for the moment that conditions were grim. Desperate to get in out of the cold, I heard a whisper to the effect that Southampton Gas Works needed men for renovations. They took me on.

The works, equipped with the more modern 'vertical' retorts, carbonised considerable batches of coal at a time. Our job involved replacing broken paving which covered the top of the retorts. Unfortunately the units remained in operation beneath us, so intense heat radiated upwards from the tons of white-hot material below. Keen as I had been to work near warmth, I wasn't prepared for such a roasting. Flagstones became fearfully hot; they burnt your feet. Even wearing wooden clogs supplied by the plant manager, a man couldn't bear more than a few minutes on the roof. In reality this gas-works job turned out to be unhealthier than the housing site at Bitterne; at knock-off time you left tropical heat to cycle home on an English winter evening. I should have handed back my clogs when leaving, but I kept them as a souvenir.

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Chapter 12. An Oxford Education.

In the previous chapter I have described some of the strategies to which I resorted in order to avoid working for the meanest enterprises, the poorest payers. These tactics included cycling, contracting whenever possible, and living during the week with Mother in Southampton. Indeed, such devices were often necessary just to ensure that you remained in work at all. Through the 1920's Fawley Refinery continued to expand creating opportunities for contracting, also I used to hear about most of the building jobs at Calshot Air Base. By contrast bricklayers' work connected with liner refits at Southampton Docks became less frequently available as more vessels switched from coal to oil.

Compared with many country bricklayers I was in several ways a bit special; I could do fire-work, knew the world of travelling, and possessed good contacts, notably in the person of my stepfather Tom Stephenson. Therefore, although being, since my marriage, mainly interested in local work, if a promising travelling proposition arose, I might from time to time take advantage of it. Thus the various occupational threads connecting with my itinerant past, allowed me to cock-a-snoop at the most overbearing village builder; this bestowed a measure of independence - something I set great store by.

Among the travelling jobs undertaken after marriage I remember accompanying Tom to Chartham, a small village in east Kent, roughly three miles from Canterbury. Here we did a contract at the big mental hospital, installation of a new boiler-house. The asylum housed over a thousand inmates, the majority of whom worked on the institution's gardens and farms. Walking back to breakfast Tom and I would be showered with racing tips; sometimes we threw down a cigarette causing a brief scramble. We considered ourselves lucky.

Whilst working at Chartham we lodged with different members of staff, I myself obtaining accommodation in the house of the hospital fireman. Everyone you met in those days seemed to be poor, and wearing shabby clothes. This fireman's family appeared hard put to make ends meet, welcoming the chance to take a lodger into their drab dwelling: he was a man in a 'regular' job!

Next, moving to East Anglia, Tom and I were directed to Cantley, Norfolk, a small settlement ten miles south-east of Norwich. Here, in the heart of the sugar-beet district, they used to reline furnaces at the sugar mills during the off-season. I remember that before starting we needed to unload the fire-bricks from railway trucks in the company siding.

When 'working away' the big problem is spending too much on drink, thus nullifying the financial advantages of travelling. Mixed in with a gang of blokes, the temptation to head for the nearest pub can become irresistible, especially doing our type of work. Stranded in a strange town, the transient found the local would provide a starting point for some sort of social life. Actually staying in a pub could prove even worse - you usually drank after hours in the back room as well.

On this occasion, my stepfather and I took a room in a private cottage on the outskirts of the village. We discovered a pub situated on the River Yare; the place attracted many 'barge people', and bustled with life. One Saturday night we fell in with a real lively crowd. As it transpired, a certain bloke drinking with us happened to be the intended husband of our landlady's daughter. Regrettably, by closing time our acquaintance was rather the worse for wear, promptly lying full length on the pavement outside. Despite being almost as bad myself, I volunteered to get him home. Tom headed straight back to the digs.

After struggling across fields, and stumbling through several damp copses, we eventually made it to the lad's house. His parents didn't take to me at all, more or less slamming the door in my face; considering the late hour, and their son's condition, this brusque reception was I suppose to be expected. Somehow I managed to retrace my path to our digs where I crashed into bed. Next morning I awoke with a nasty hangover to find Tom packing. "We've got to get out," he announced. Apparently, the previous night my stepfather arrived from the pub singing and shouting the odds, whereupon the plucky landlady had leapt from her bed to give him his marching orders. Little did she know the state in which I'd taken home her future son-in-law!

Finishing at Cantley Sugar Mills, my stepfather and I were to separate, Tom going on to Luton Gas Works, while I was sent to London; my next contract would be at Harrods Store. Arriving in Knightsbridge, I soon stood before the imposing terracotta facade of the famous emporium, the building itself covering some four and a half acres. Being at that time the largest department store in the world, the shop's sumptuous interiors and lavish service attracted a fashionable clientele from all over the home counties.

It wasn't too easy to locate workmens' lodgings in Knightsbridge, but following a considerable search I got a room in a sort of guest-house some distance away. The woman running the dive struck me as rather odd, also my misgivings increased when I discovered that no meals could be obtained at the establishment. Feeling uneasy, I slept the first night with my wallet tucked inside my trousers. Darkness confirmed all my suspicions, constant comings and goings accompanied by other ominous noises left no room for doubt - the premises doubled as a brothel.

At the store a complete overhaul of the heating system was in progress; my own contribution included replacing the fire-brick linings

in the furnace. Finding myself on 'twelve hour' nights, I continued to reside at the brothel - daytime used to be quiet there. When I knocked-off in the morning, I always went for a cooked breakfast in a small back-street cafe run by an Italian; he also did sandwiches for my night-shift, thus I solved the problem of not having meals provided at the lodgings. In addition, food came my way via a different source ...

The blokes working with me down in the basement turned out to be a thoroughly bad lot, several of them had already done time for one offence or other. As soon as we'd been at work for a couple of hours they started their little games. "What would you fancy for dinner tonight, Sir Charles?" These lunatics then launched into a catalogue of delicatessen foods which no-one could pronounce. From the boilerhouse it was possible to sneak through passageways giving access to the storerooms. Without doubt this petty pilfering constituted the very height of folly, because watchmen constantly patrolled the premises. Although my young mates treated it all as a bit of a laugh, they took a big risk stealing from such a place.

In retrospect, the most important travelling trip I ever made led me to Oxford Gas Works with my stepfather, and a third bricklayer, Len Jones. This expedition is significant above all in the manner that it was to influence my thinking, and shape my outlook on the world.

Tom and I first became friendly with Len whilst working with him on the early phases of Fawley Refinery, furthermore, living at Wickham, he used to be a regular attender at A.U.B.T.W. branch meetings in Southampton. Having a reputation as a militant, our friend often found it necessary to travel in order to avoid the local jobs where he had been blacklisted.

The first thing Len did on a new site was to try to get the 'nons' into the union. He argued that building workers should have this or that, wet time payments, paid holidays, etc, these things were almost unthinkable at

the time for 'casual manuals'. In the retort-house at Oxford Gas Works our tea and dinner breaks became enlivened by the furious arguments that his ideas provoked. More serious than the general run of blokes you met 'on the buildings', if he wasn't debating workers' control, nationalisation or the 'labour theory of value', Len would be engrossed in a book; a mixed collection of reading matter figured amongst his personal effects. All in all, Len Jones much resembled Frank Owen, the house-painter hero of Robert Tressal's 'Ragged Trousered Philanthropists', a work enjoying a certain pride of place in our friend's lunch-bag library.

Ever since my first trip to London with Tom, when I'd joined the old O.B.S., I could see the sense of being in the union, in fact my attachment had been increased by numerous personal experiences in the industry. Like my stepfather, Tom, who was a happy-go-lucky type, I didn't take a great deal of interest in politics, however, these lunch-time knock-about served to arouse my attention; I began to borrow some of Len's books. At this particular juncture, therefore, I came into contact with the usual 'Left' classics such as the Webbs' History of Trade Unionism, the works of G.D.H. Cole etc. I remember the great impact made upon me by John Reed's first hand account of the Russian Revolution in 'Ten Days that Shook the World'. Len's influence set me thinking about the political dimension.

Of course, my own increasing political awareness reflected in microcosm a generalised process then occurring in Britain; the working class parties were registering a dramatic growth in their vote. Formed in 1900, the Labour Party had obtained 63,304 votes giving it 2 M.P.s in the general election of that year. The party got 2,385,472 votes gaining 63 M.P.s in 1918, rising to 8,389,512 votes and 288 M.P.s by 1929. Established in 1920 the British Communist Party also attracted a small following, especially in the mining districts during the coal crisis.

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It has been claimed that this electoral surge was stimulated by the many setbacks suffered by workers in the economic sphere. Due to unemployment, total trade union membership in Britain, briefly standing at 8,300,000 in 1920, fell to 5,250,000 by 1926, and throughout the 1920's wage reductions occurred in a wide range of industries besides building.

In addition to providing me with books of a partisan nature, Len, who favoured working class education per se, sought to whet my appetite for general reading. Previously my approach to books could be considered purely utilitarian, embracing such titles as the 'Modern Bricklayer', 'House and Cottage Construction', the 'Amateur Mechanic' and so on. Intending to fill some of the gaps bequeathed by my formal education, I now made a start on a host of new subjects through series like the 'Modern Home University'. When I finally did leave Oxford my horizons were appreciably widened.

Parting from Len Jones at Oxford, he then headed back to Hampshire, Tom and I again found ourselves London bound for another maintenance job at Nine Elms Gasworks. It seemed strange to revisit these old haunts. Very little had changed since my working tours at the time of the Great War, apart from motor lorries having replaced the long horse-drawn carts collecting coke and clinker from the gas-works.

Detailed to start work on the following Monday, we arrived at Nine Elms on a Saturday morning, immediately commencing our search for suitable lodgings. Streets appeared unusually crowded. Carrying travelling gear, we made a tortuous progress amid the throng. Suddenly a hush descended ... making its way slowly along Nine Elms Lane came a funeral cortege ... a few paces ahead of the procession walked a dignified Indian as the hearse drew abreast I could see that the coffin was draped in the Red Flag.

Whispered enquiries established this to be the 'Red Funeral' of some local London socialist, and identified the Indian gentleman as Shapurji Saklatvala, communist M.P. for North Battersea. (A few months later during the General Strike, Saklatvala would be arrested for a speech at the 1926 May Day rally in Hyde Park, where he appealed to servicemen to side with the strikers against the government.) The demonstration and its symbolism evoked in me a strange and sudden response; I underwent a powerful experience closely akin (I imagine) to the process of religious conversion: I had found my faith, my flag, my fully formed identity.

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Chapter 13. - One Pot of Jam.

It was high summer. Our ferry chugged lazily. The tide-spread waterways of Solent and Spithead shone with an iridescent sapphire, while against them pushed the deeper, darker blue of open sea, just within the rim of vision. Ahead and astern the encircling coastlines of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight were a yet untarnished fringe of bright green. We could see for miles. Coming back to the south after the smoke-hung, sun-shunning, riverside murks around Nine Elms Gasworks, the alchemy of pure air acted like some rare intoxicant.

On hire to Sugdens, my stepfather and I had been detailed to do 'fresh settings', together with other repairs, at Ryde Gasworks on the Isle of Wight. Completing that project we returned directly to Southampton for a similar contract at Northam Gasworks, this being the plant where a few months earlier I acquired my keep-sake clogs. Although, as usual, Tom resumed travelling on leaving the Southampton job, I once more stayed behind to find local work. Contract maintenance of necessity involved a lot of chopping and changing of your workplace; from Northam Gasworks I switched to Southampton Power Station, a gas utility to an electricity undertaking, the job, relining firework, amounted to more or less the same thing. I'd worked at this power station a number of times before.

These several maintenance stints carried me through the summer months, so by the time we 'squared-up' at the power station, winter set in. I now moved over to house-building, at least house renovation, a large dwelling at Nursling required extensive structural alterations. Getting the Nursling job seemed a good idea. Situated on the western outskirts of Southampton, the position of the site meant a shortened journey to work, despite this it sometimes proved a difficult ride during the worst of the weather.

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One morning conditions turned particularly grim, the roads west of Southampton becoming choked with snow; I remember having to walk almost the entire length of Redbridge Lane, carrying my bike through the drifts. On finally arriving at the job my tenacity received short shrift because I was late. "I'll pay you this time," warned the foreman, "but don't let it happen again!"

Although involving a large element of inside work, the construction fell behind schedule owing to bad weather and hold-ups in the supply of materials. Out of the blue the foreman gathered the men together, springing upon us a surprise proposition. "O.K. lads," he began, "you'll be pleased to hear that you can put in as much overtime as you like... But it will have to be at flat-rate !" Now such an arrangement would obviously fly in the face of all working-rules agreed between the Master Builders' Federation and the unions. However, considering themselves lucky to be in work at that time of year anyway, it often happened in the building trade that you were laid off six weeks before Christmas, remaining unemployed until early February, my companions welcomed the chance to work over even at bare time. I demurred. The firm plainly needed extra-time working. Why should we cut our own throats ?

Being young and an ardent trade unionist, I resolved to report the affair to the branch. As in many a south coast town, the union officials at Southampton, solid enough in their way, lacked the militant stamp of London. They used to be 'respectable' socialists rather than 'revolutionaries'. A good proportion of them espoused the same Nonconformist proclivities as the country builders for whom we worked, they displayed a shared ideology. None the less, even though a frequent practice on isolated rural sites, the breach of rules I exposed, constituted a serious matter. An extraordinary branch meeting was summoned with the Nursling foreman, himself a union member, required to attend to explain his conduct to the assembled fellow tradesmen.

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In the event the foreman was reprimanded and fined; really his firm made him their scapegoat. Contacted by the A.U.B.T.W. district secretary, the builder concerned claimed that the foreman acted off his own bat, and without the knowledge of the directors, who much regretted his actions, etc, etc. Of course, knowing the score only too well, no-one believed this. Seeing me as he entered the hall, the foreman realised how he came to be exposed. "Oh its Y-O-U," he mumbled.

After the meeting ended, I found myself patted on the back by the chairman, congratulated by all, and finally departed in a blaze of glory. Things looked rather different the following morning, when I had to go back to the site. Obviously my stock stood none too high with the foreman; furthermore, as a reprisal, the company stopped all overtime of any kind! An object of hatred for foreman and men alike, I left next day under a cloud.

As it happened, quitting the Nursling job proved to be by no means a disaster, I subsequently turned the situation to advantage. For some time previously I had been engaged, during my spare time, on a certain special construction project - building my own house. Unfortunately, what with doing overtime for builders, working in Southampton, and sometimes travelling, progress remained slow. That period succeeding the Nursling incident gave me the chance to get stuck in. Looking back, there is no doubt about those few weeks being crucial in moving my endeavour towards completion.

Before the Second World War it used to be virtually unknown for the working class to own houses, millions renting from private landlords. This also applied, with particular irony, to building workers, who, spending a lifetime erecting dwellings, were precluded by the paucity and irregularity of their incomes from buying a place themselves. In this matter, at least, I was rescued from the 'proletarian' realities of my position by the fortunate circumstance of 'petit-bourgeois' origins - I

had an endowment.

As mentioned in Chapter 1., mother's family at Brockenhurst were in a small way of business. My artisan grandfather dabbled in coal retailing, joinery and other ventures, in addition to keeping a pub. Compared with local magnates like the Morant family of Brockenhurst Park, we could be classed as very small fry, nevertheless, our tiny capital sharply marked us off from the penniless labourers employed on the estate. Before father died in 1912, he placed a certain amount of money in trust. Consequently, reaching the age of twenty-one in 1923, I received £490, a considerable sum for those days.

The estate agent for Cadland often drank in the Forest Home, so through him I arranged to buy a plot at Hardley; ground was currently selling at £400 per acre. My holding, previously the location of a long-since demolished dwelling occupied by a farm labourer, comprised half an acre. (I believe it to have been the practice of country estates, who owned plenty of land, to provide their agricultural workers with large gardens, where a man might produce a proportion of his family's subsistence. This permitted the payment of lower wages than would otherwise be necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of the labour force.) Costing £200, my site-purchase left a balance of £290.

Having acquired land, plus sufficient capital to obtain materials, the labour I contributed for the most part myself; in this I seemed lucky - I knew how to build. During those four years which followed my first bout of travelling, I'd worked for various builders, picking up just enough knowledge to carry off my enterprise. Partly, I suppose, this reflected the nature of building work itself, with operatives being accustomed to using their initiative on the job. Our instructions would be general, leaving us to decide how to tackle the actual task. A construction site is not like a factory with its repetitive, closely supervised work.

Despite all this, I was engaged upon an ambitious undertaking for a man in his early twenties; the birth of my daughter, Alma, in 1925, served to spur me on.

Many of the building techniques I employed are already described in previous chapters. Sinking my well proved especially memorable. Looking over the ground, I concluded the most likely spot for finding water to be along the southern boundary, where the garden sloped down to a lane. Not more than a few feet had been excavated, when one side of the pit caved in. To my horror the collapse exposed the rib-cage of a large skeleton... It turned out that these remains were the bones of a horse. In fact, I'd driven my shaft right next to the old well used by the former occupants. The grisly discovery topped a pile of debris, probably thrown into the original well at the time people abandoned the cottage; doubtless the occasion created the opportunity to dispose of the unwanted animal carcass too. Cleaning out the well, I replaced its crumbling brick-lining with concrete cylinders. These I cast myself, pressing into service a mould left over from a job with Reg Edwards.

Before I could start bricklaying I had to 'run' three tons of stone-lime; delivered in the form of 'quick' or 'lump' lime, it needed slaking on the site. I dug two pits, boarding them round. Into the first I placed the quick-lime, breaking this in smaller pieces as much as possible. Running in clear water from my refurbished well, I commenced a vigorous stirring; each ton required some seventy-five gallons. That operation generated vast quantities of heat and steam. My first pit soon became a mass of slurry, so I began, using a 'larry', to ladle this mix into the second pit over which I'd positioned a sieve. Thin mesh removed any big lumps, I threw them back to pit number one. I knew from experience that the process must not be rushed as insufficiently worked lime might cause a 'blow-out' at the plastering stage. After a whole day of stirring, ladling, and riddling, my second pit contained a

suitable batch of building lime. Allowing this to cool overnight, I started to lay bricks the following morning. Lime from the edge of the pit would be O.K. for mortar, while the purer concentration at the centre, I kept to mix plaster.

I obtained bricks costing £4.50 per 1,000 from nearby Langley Brickworks, where my wife's Uncle Jim worked; brickmaking, at that date, remained a local industry. Clay was dug out during winter, manufacture commencing in the spring. After the clay had been thoroughly churned by the pug-mill, it could be passed to the brickmakers. These men threw the material with great force into wooden moulds, strongly tamping it down; a blade drawn across the surface produced the brick's smooth face. Freshly moulded bricks were wheeled away on a special brickmaker's barrow, and stacked under long drying sheds. Finally came firing, a skilled and semi-secret process controlled by the master brickmaker. Colour, hardness, and texture, all depended on the arrangement of bricks within the kiln, also the temperature and duration of firing. Nestling in the gouged deeps of old workings, the Langley kiln had twenty-four stoke holes. I remember the works still used gorse for fuel, so you always saw men making up farze faggots on adjacent heaths. With firing in progress, our Uncle Jim, who lodged at the Forest Home, stoked and raked out round the clock.

A bricklayer working for a builder is far too busy laying bricks to be able to wait on himself, having a labourer proves much more economic. However, on my own job I didn't employ helpers, preferring to mix a heap of muck, then do a good stretch of wall. By the same token I carried up the bricks; this saved money. I decided to get assistance with woodwork about which I knew less.

Taking advantage of family networks, I contracted Mother's brother, Uncle Frank, who had taken over the joinery business at Brockenhurst. Frank

commuted every day from his home bringing an adopted son, a deaf mute whom he'd trained as a first class carpenter. We'd erected a large shed to act as fabrication shop for windows, door frames, roof trusses etc. Several local builders soon got to know of our activities, therefore we found ourselves turning out various fittings for them. When my house, which I'd named the 'Nutshell', approached completion, Frank and his wife lived with us for a short time on a sort of extended working holiday. My uncle and I built three or four bungalows in the area, a bricklayer/carpenter partnership always constituting a good basis for a construction outfit.

Despite the little bit of leeway granted by my inheritance, I still needed to be careful, economising where I could. For instance, sinking a pit in my own garden, I had dug out enough 'white gravel' to do the Nutshell's foundations. Also I used roofing timbers as makeshift scaffolding. Even resorting to these little tricks, the project, not surprisingly, knocked my finances for six. By Christmas 1926 I ended up flat broke. My wife reported the sum total of our accumulated stores for the festive season as one pot of jam. The drastically whittled down endowment stood at only one pound, this amount I resolved to withdraw.

Entering the bank I instructed a counter clerk to close the account. When all formalities were accomplished, I was astonished to be presented with eleven pounds four shillings. Unused to the mysterious workings of banks, I'd overlooked the question of interest - winding up produced the remaining pound plus ten pounds and four shillings of accrued interest: Christmas cheer indeed !

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Chapter 14. - Slump.

One drawback of the travelling life is that, on returning, you are forced to adjust to a different psychology. I recall an unpleasant incident occurring soon after the 'Hansford & Collins' period, my brief partnership with Uncle Frank. At that time I found myself on day-work for a builder renovating a thatched house at Dibden Purlieu. Re-thatching produces a large quantity of cut away waste, which I bundled up and took home to use as litter for a pig. The evening in question I was collecting my tools, having rigged up some shuttering for a flight of steps. I overheard my name. A certain labourer, thinking me already gone, embarked, with much cursing and swearing, on a long accusation about Charlie Hansford stealing straw. Emerging from the tool shed, I immediately advanced on the man, punching him hard on the nose; this brought his tirade to an abrupt end. Being accustomed to the mores of transients with their attitude of 'share and share alike', the mentality of these 'foresters' seemed odd.

Looking back, country workmen, many of whom never worked beyond the perambulation of the New Forest, doubtless considered me peculiar too. For instance I would be reading the T.U.C. newspaper, the Daily Herald, and supporting Ramsay Macdonald, then just returned to 'Number 10' (1929). I'd recently purchased a new biography of the Labour leader by H. Hessel-Tiltman. My rural companions rarely thought about politics at all, although if prodded argued vehemently that the fresh administration stood poised to overturn the entire economic and social structure of the nation: of course all this happened before '1931'.

Somewhat later, employed by a Southampton firm, Ross, I was coming to the end of another spell on the married quarters at Calshot Air Base. The builder asked me to quote for the brickwork on a substantial house to be built for one of the Hythe doctors; I got the job.

This particular construction, to be supervised by a firm of architects from Southampton, incorporated a number of special embellishments, e.g. the three abutting brick arches over the door in the front porch. Providing a change from ordinary building, I enjoyed doing this sort of 'fancy' work, which, normally, you only saw in apprentices' notebooks. Two of the main rooms had large fireplaces as their centrepieces. Usually fireplaces are done after completion of chimneys, however, on this occasion they needed to be built up with the rest of the brickwork of the shell. In actual fact I really put my heart and soul into those fireplaces, making a feature of them by employing all the techniques of fine brickwork I'd learnt since entering the industry. Although I say it myself, I did a beautiful job. Unfortunately the generous accolades I so confidently expected, failed to materialize : neither the client or his visiting architect appeared to notice.

When I'd got on a bit, the doctor became an increasingly frequent visitor. He displayed an odd habit of entering the room where you worked, jingling a pocketful of coins. Many a time I felt one hundred per cent certain of a drink, which would have been the thing in that type of close set-up. It proved wishful thinking - he never pushed the boat out at all.

Finishing the first of the big chimneys, I prepared to begin number two. As I glanced again at the plans, I discovered a glaring mistake. The spec. detailed a chimney with one side of the stack to be built in a double brick thickness, i.e. nine inches thick. Often the 'posh' houses had an extra backbone added to their chimneys for strength. There, soaring up through the roof, stood my graceful two flue tower: it was single brick thick all round! What to do? Admitting my error meant pulling the whole structure down to start again. Paid on a piece-work basis, that entailed contributing a couple of day's sweat for nothing. As previously mentioned, the site came under the control of an architect, who used to travel over twice a week on the Hythe Ferry to check progress. Might

he not notice? I decided to take a chance. Chimney number two, I built strictly to plan. To me the difference in width stood out like a sore thumb, so each time there was an architect's inspection, my heart would be in my mouth ... He missed it!

Despite widespread enforcement of wage cuts during the Twenties, particularly subsequent upon the collapse of the 1926 General Strike, Britain's economy remained in the doldrums. (Incidentally, although participating in the National Building Strike of 1924, see chapter 11, I took no part in the General Strike, the southern district of the A.U.B.T.W. not being called out.) Following the disastrous Wall Street Crash of 1929, things in this country too began to show a turn for the worse with the fresh decade. By July 1931, unemployment reached 2,700,000, 22% of the workforce, and production slumped 8% below the level of 1913.

Fears concerning the radicalism of Mr Ramsay Macdonald, entertained by my fellow operatives renovating the thatched house, proved groundless. As economic crisis intensified, the Labour cabinet fell increasingly under the influence of 'orthodox' financial thinking as embodied by the Treasury and the Bank of England. On August 24th 1931, we heard the Labour government had resigned, but that Macdonald would form a new administration in co-operation with the Conservative and Liberal parties.

Only a few Labour personalities joined the coalition, however the trauma of the split produced a sensational result in the snap election of October, Labour's representation declining from 289 to 46 M.P.s. This reconstituted government, overwhelmingly Conservative, yet retaining several ex-Labour members at its head, provided the necessary parliamentary basis for the policy of cuts and retrenchment henceforth to be pursued. Macdonald himself captured the irony of the situation with his infamous quip on becoming Prime Minister of the incoming 'National

Government' :- "Every Duchess in England will want to kiss me tonight."
I unceremoniously consigned my copy of Macdonald's biography to the attic.

The malaise gripping the world economy during the Thirties soon revealed itself as deeper and more serious than the downturn of 1921; in January 1933 it was reported that of the 103,000 masons and bricklayers in the country, some 40,000, or 38%, remained workless. Unemployment in building tended to be compounded by influxes of labour shed by such depressed industries as engineering and shipbuilding. Competition for work became more intense. Around Southampton at that period, you often met tradesmen who had moved south from the 'industrial graveyards' of Wales and the North.

One of these migrants came to seek employment in Hythe, a bricklayer called Fred Noble. I happened to be working with him on a council-house at Dibden Purlieu when we got word that the British Legion at Blackfield needed men to build a new clubhouse; what's more, they paid 1d over the rate ! We rushed to the site at once. Being a 'direct labour' project, i.e. done without a builder, we found ourselves under the direction of the club committee; several of the members were themselves in the trade.

Immediately the bulk of the brickwork had been completed, we heard of a vote by the committee to award each man on the job a bonus of £2 in recognition of speedy work. Obviously this pleased us, however, Fred Noble, a more hard-bitten character, doused our rash enthusiasm with cold water. "Take my word for it," he warned, "you'll never see THAT two pounds." His prediction proved correct. Although I stayed behind to install the drains, no special payment ever materialised. We should have known better.

Any casual observer, passing a building development in high summer, is likely to form the impression that building workers enjoy an idyllic existence. Bronzed, brawny men move purposefully in the balmy sunlight; their hearty jibes are shouted above the clink of stacking, the bustle of ringing trowels or the thunder-thud of hammers. What a lovely job! Yes...but come again at a different season. The same site, peopled with shrammed scarecrows, presents a rather changed aspect at the dead end of winter.

Builders only paid bricklayers for actual time spent laying bricks; because building, like agriculture, is at the mercy of weather, this could have a drastic effect on earnings. If it rained so hard that you had to take cover, the time lost sheltering in the hut was noted and deducted from your wage at the end of the week: no 'wet-time' would be given. A 'guaranteed minimum wage' did not come in until 1945, therefore, during a damp spell, income shrank very small indeed. Consequently, blokes used to stick it out as long as possible, pushing on through drizzle and mere light rain. We lacked the oil-skins and Wellington boots, which many big contractors issue today; most men just wore old clothes and broken down shoes. Often we got soaked to the skin, having then to cycle or walk home in saturated clothing before being able to dry out.

Frost also brought its own particular discomforts and disadvantages; I remember working on one cold weather job in the winter of 1934, the erection of Hardley School. There was a square of classrooms built round an inner quadrangle; we used white sand-and-lime bricks; climate turned bitter. Arriving for an 8 o'clock start, it seemed always to be freezing. Periodically our foreman, a Mr Brett, ventured outside only to return with bad news; -"Still sharp, lads, we'll have to hang on a bit." The deadening influence of low temperature added to the frustration of delay, when you worked, at least it got your circulation going! Although not being paid whilst sitting there, one couldn't leave in case they suddenly started up.

Sometimes the gang remained stuck in the shed till past ten o' clock, then at last the air temperature rose a little, so off we went again. First we prized out the two foot diameter circles of ice, thick as plate glass, which had formed overnight in the water butts. Next we scooped away the four inch crust of crisp frozen granules covering the sand heap; this allowed mortar mixing to begin. Following only a few hours of frenzied bricklaying, the re-appearance of crystalline ice flowers in the water tanks, acted as the signal to pack-up. Our newest brickwork was protected by draping it with the, by now, board-stiff tarpaulins. Finally, plunging suffering hands into the chilled water of the butts to wash tools, we felt the last pain of the day.

Of course, these weather conditions, rain, snow, frost, and wind, unpleasant in themselves, must be seen in the context of the type of work we were doing whilst exposed to them. The combination often proved deleterious to health. When, with an east wind whistling past your ears, you are perched on a scaffold, laying 18"x9"x4" concrete blocks 'overhand to the line', the work soon winkles out a man with a weak back: ground level wind is bad enough! There always used to be some poor devil hobbling about the job with lumbago or like complaint. You laughed, but next time round it might be your turn!

Regarding the manner in which the building worker is affected by inclement weather, we found ourselves caught in a vicious paradox. The season that you most needed money (coal purchase etc), happened to fall at the time of year you were likeliest to be without it. This dearth resulted directly from wet-time losses, and also lay-off. As previously mentioned, if unlucky to finish a contract in those six weeks up to Christmas, you expected to stay out till six weeks afterwards. Not a very bright prospect for men, who in any case experienced the phenomenon of being hard up IN WORK.

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In May 1931, the editor of the 'Economist' argued that:- "We must make preparations to bring about as smoothly and as harmoniously as possible, a general fall in wages." At that juncture several groups such as engineers, potters, dyers and agricultural workers faced reductions; railwaymen's pay had already been cut. Once in power the National Government lost no time in extending the process to public employees: civil servants, teachers and the forces. Just a few months after the election, however, this retrenchment produced an astonishing repercussion - a revolt in the Royal Navy. Provoked by a 25% cut in ratings' pay (4/- to 3/- per day), the incident became known as the 'Invergordon Mutiny'.

A 'Daily Herald' correspondent wired the following eye witness report:- "The scene in the Firth has to be seen to be believed ... At the gates between the mountain peaks, Repulse stands like a sleeping sentry, not a wisp of smoke from her mighty funnels ... Behind her in line lie Valiant, Malaya, Warspite, Nelson, Dorsetshire, Barham, Hood, Exeter, and Rodney. From the shore I can see meetings on the foredecks with leaders addressing the men from gun turrets, and the cheers and shouts are picked up and passed on (the mutineers employed a cheering code as at Kiel in 1918) from ship to ship until they fade into the distance." Although the cabinet resolved the affair by agreeing minor concessions, with the story of the battleship Polesin fresh in everyone's mind, these were obviously dramatic events.

Reporting in June 1931, the Royal Commission on Unemployment claimed unemployment pay to be 'insidiously sapping the whole social and financial stability of the country, and preventing unemployment acting as a corrective factor in the adjustment of wage levels'. The National Government sought to scale down spending on unemployment in two ways. First by a direct cut in benefit (17/- to 15/3d for adult males), secondly

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by removing as many people as they could from the register, using the mechanism of the Means Test.

Not long after the Hardley School job, I ran into a period without work myself; no matter how good a tradesman you were, there was simply nothing about it at all. The dole office used to be in a couple of rooms near the Shipyard Estate at Shore Road, Hythe; unlike the big town exchanges with hundreds of clients, the Hythe centre only opened a few hours per week. I remember that the manager, a Mr Crossfield, owned a drapery shop at Fawley, which his wife ran whilst he worked. Local unemployed considered Mr Crossfield 'a bit tight' concerning benefit, however, the official who periodically came round from Southampton to examine particular cases, possessed the reputation of being even more severe.

When I applied, the counter clerk discovered that my card lacked sufficient stamps for entitlement. 'On the building' you constantly switched between day-work and piece-work, direct labour and sub-contract, therefore, sometimes the builder stamped your card, next week the responsibility fell to you; perhaps also you had several days out of work waiting for a new start. Consequently a week might slip by without an insurance stamp getting purchased and stuck in; anyway I was ordered to present myself before the district Means Test Panel to confirm my requirement for 'special' relief. I recall they wanted to know everything, if my wife worked, whether I held a savings book, etc. They often made you sell things. Luckily my application got accepted.

My day for 'signing-on' corresponded with that of Jack Allen, a builders' labourer from Blackfield, who I'd worked with a number of times at Calshot Camp, so we cycled to Hythe together. Whenever you went to the desk, the clerk asked the same question:- "Have your circumstances changed?" Perhaps they thought you might suddenly come into a lot of

money ! I would answer :- "Yes,worse." On the way back we occasionally stopped at the Forest Home for a drink.

Jack Allen had acquired the reputation of being a rebel,an out-and-out socialist,and all that.He loathed employers.I remember working on one job where the blokes were forbidden to smoke; Jack ostentatiously puffed away at his pipe whenever the builder called at the site,and no-one challenged it.Sometimes Jack brought a copy of the communist 'Daily Worker' to read in the pub,an action which enraged my father-in-law,who insisted that my companion was 'in the pay of the Reds'. Mr Snelgrove's other complaint concerning Jack centred on the labourer's habit of making a pint of beer spin out for at least two hours: obviously the 'pay' must have been none too good.

I never encountered the hated visiting official from Southampton, probably because I didn't remain out for long - my father-in-law gave me a job.As a sideline,Mr Snelgrove dabbled in the coal business.Eddie Smith,my brother-in-law,drove the lorry collecting coal from Fawley Station; I helped with loading,and carrying in the sacks when we delivered. Fortunately I was accustomed to heavy lifting in the building trade,as we often needed to hump the hundredweight bags considerable distances to people's coal-holes.No matter what occupation I tried,I couldn't seem to escape getting smothered with coal dust.

Nineteen thirty-six found me employed by Musselwhite,a Basingstoke firm rebuilding a shooting lodge that had suffered fire damage; the building,situated at Bourne Hill,near Calshot,belonged to the Drummond family of Cadland Estate.My father-in-law happened to be in the process of leaving the Forest Home to take over the 'Cat & Fiddle', an inn on the Bourne mouth road.One weekend Dot and I went to the new pub

to help out with moving. In the midst of everything the pub generator broke down. A local handyman being unable to come because of sickness, I volunteered to attempt repair. Although knowing very little about such equipment, I somehow got it going. This incident prompted Mr Snelgrove to invite Dot and me to live with him, taking over the bar in the annexe. During the previous few years the building trade had been abysmal; often we were only saved by Dot's small income from serving in the bar at the Forest Home: we decided to try our luck with pubs. After almost twenty years, 'bad trade' had finally driven me from the building industry.

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For details of the Depression see :-
 Noreen Branson and Margot Heinmann.
 'Britain in the Thirties'.
 Panther. 1974.

Chapter 15. - Back on the Tools.

Entering a commercial arrangement with in-laws is not always a good idea, especially when one also shares accommodation; my business relationship with Mr Snelgrove did not work out. Dot and I had moved to the Cat & Fiddle in 1936, I remember the Spanish Civil War being in progress. After two years I decided to get out - this meant going 'back on the tools'.

In 1938, 1 in 8 of the U.K. workforce remained on the dole, so I realised that I would probably have to take whatever came along; my first job was on a housing development at Hinton. Whilst bricklaying there, I heard that my old travelling employers, Winsors, were doing alterations to Poole Gas Works. I made contact with them hoping to be hired. As it happened the firm could offer nothing locally, but wondered whether I might work away. On consideration I agreed to travel, although only in the south; they sent me to Bridgwater, Somerset. The distance to Bridgwater 'as the crow flies' almost corresponded to shifting half way up the country, none-the-less I took it. Outside the English countryside flew past the window; with tool-bag under the seat, suitcase on the rack and the rat-a-tat-tat of rail travel in my ears, it felt strange to be an itinerant fire-worker once more.

This Bridgwater job involved construction of heaters at Courtauld's new textile factory, and led directly to a similar project for the I.C.I. chemical works at Oldbury, Birmingham. From Oldbury I retain an impression of the vast cooling lagoons, with earthen ramparts, used to capture massive quantities of pitch. Two men spent all day smashing up the solidified by-product with heavy hammers and loading this on to a horse-drawn cart. Because the brittle pitch shattered much in the same manner as exploding glass, both men and horse wore masks to

protect their faces; the horse's mask was a large hood affair with transparent material over the eyes.

With the approach of winter my problem became one of acclimatisation - how to get used to cold again after those two 'soft' seasons indoors. I shortly found myself back on the gas-works circuit visiting several plants I knew from previous trips with my stepfather. Amongst other places I went to Oxford and Luton.

When last at Luton, i.e. with Tom just as the Great War finished, we had stayed in wonderful lodgings, the home of one of the stokers at the works, who really made us welcome. Although he still worked at the gas-works in 1938, and remembered me well, he couldn't put me up. The digs I took instead proved nothing to write home about; their toilet would normally be blocked with crumpled newspaper, while the bath seemed to have scarcely any white enamel left on it. On my first evening the main meal consisted of stew. Owing to the dumplings being rather heavy, I left them to one side, dutifully clearing up what there was of meat and veg.

Luton Gasworks possessed vertical retorts, narrower at the top than the base in order to facilitate gravity loading and discharge; I worked for Woodhall & Duckhams, a firm specialising in verticals. The men, a mixed bunch of travellers, came from all over the country. I palled up with a London bloke of my own age; a good brickie, he'd recently been employed building flats in the capital. Three younger men on the job turned out to be a wild lot, doing a great deal of drinking, then causing disturbances in pubs. Off site the London chap and I did our best to avoid them. A certain member of the rough-neck trio, a labourer, happened to have come from Southampton. By that date maintenance firms

rarely paid labourers to travel, preferring to hire locally, however verticals presented special problems. Bricking up inside the retorts, we used different types and sizes of brick at the various levels. Consequently bricklayers needed helpers who knew which bricks to feed them, and when; the Southampton bloke had done a goodly number of verticals, so was therefore sufficiently experienced. Having previously spent a couple of glorious summers amidst the sun-light and fresh air of the New Forest, lowering myself, rung by rung, into the black, cavernous retorts seemed like going down a coal-mine.

Ending my first shift I felt pleased to return to the lodgings, crummy though they might be. First course of my evening meal was unremarkable, but the sweet I shall never forget; it consisted of suet pudding generously smeared with home-made jam. Something about the dense, stodgy texture of the suet struck me as familiar. My suspicions soon received confirmation as I came across odd pieces of chopped onion embedded in the pudding: yesterday's rejected dumplings had been recycled.

Following the Luton contract I briefly linked up with Tom to do a job in the Vickers-Armstrong shipyard at Barrow-in-Furness, we were on boiler-house construction. Whilst at Barrow I was surprised to get a letter from Winsors' head office, still at Victoria Street, London; they asked me to report right away. Arriving at Head Office I found myself being detailed for a project in the Pirelli Cable Factory near Southampton. This, my first charge-hand job for Winsors, required the laying of foundations for industrial heaters. Under me I had two blokes, one turned out to be the Southampton tearaway I'd met on the Luton job. Obviously someone at Winsors noticed me and I could doubtless have travelled for the firm. Once back in Southampton, however, I decided to stay around my own area: I'd had enough of the travelling life.

On moving to the Cat & Fiddle in 1936 I tried to sell the 'Nutshell', fortunately, as it turned out, there were no takers. Back home I found a job putting up some outbuildings at the Powerboat Co. factory, Shipyard Estate, Hythe; this works manufactured fast motor launches for the navy. (During his period in the Royal Navy, 'Lawrence of Arabia', while based at Calshot, used to test these craft racing them up and down Southampton Water.) My Powerboat contract didn't last very long so I ended up back in the clutches of Mr Crossfield at the dole office.

With the threatened approach of war, efforts had to be made to disguise defence installations in case of aerial attack. I got sent by the labour exchange to Calshot Camp, they wanted men to paint the huge hangars with camouflage paint. Climbing to a hangar roof in search of a foreman, I took a dim view of what I saw; blokes scrambling about on the roof seemed to be taking a lot of foolish risks in the way they tackled the job. Resolved to give this particular project a miss, I slid back down the ladder. Just as I reached ground level, one of the heavy paint tins slipped off the roof to land a matter of feet from the place I stood. Paint splashed all over my bicycle.

When I returned to the dole office to inform the manager that the cash wasn't worth the danger involved, Mr Crossfield remained unconvinced.

"It's O.K. if you take adequate precautions," he assured me.

"Cheering from the sidelines is one thing," I said, "you come and see my bike." That settled it.

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Chapter 16. - B.O.A.C.

Within hours of war breaking out in 1939, we heard the rumble of army lorries, one of the heavy anti-aircraft batteries ringing Southampton moved into its position just down the road. After more than a decade of 'financial stringency' the government suddenly possessed plenty of money, and construction of camps, gun sites, coastal defences, docks, etc, began apace. Housebuilding came to a standstill, but builders could report to the civic centre in Southampton for their allocation of war work. Temporarily I found myself out of a job. Shortly before this I had been employed in Southampton Docks converting a warehouse cellar into an air-raid shelter for the staff of a firm of importers. Crossing on the Hythe Ferry I'd noticed a tall brick chimney going up at the riverside timber yard of Burt, Bolton, and Hayward, Totton, so I decided to investigate the possibility of a start.

Normally I would have ridden direct to Totton across country via the Forest track through Dibden, however, for a change, I took the coast road along Southampton Water. Passing the flying-boat base at Hythe, run by the British Overseas Airways Company, I became gripped by the notion of trying my luck with them. Outside the gate an uncompromising notice declared in five inch high letters that there were 'no vacancies'. Undaunted I entered. Shown into the works manager's office, an impromptu interview commenced.

"I wondered if you had any jobs."

"What's your trade?"

"Bricklayer." (That shakes 'em.)

"We don't want brickies ... I'll put down handyman."

"Handyman ! I got past that stage years ago.No,I'm a bricklayer."

"I'll say builder."

"If you like."

After this prickly beginning he instructed me to 'wait a minute' as he had to 'see the blokes'.It seemed a bad time of day.Chances appeared slim.Time dragged.I began shuffling my feet.On the very point of leaving,I heard the manager's voice:- "Hold on,Mr Hansford,we'd like you to fill in an application."

Unused to the paraphernalia of modern personnel management,the printed form came as rather a novelty.In the building trade,getting a start was considerably less ritualised; you simply stuck your head in the site office and asked the foreman if he needed brickies.He looked you up and down,making a decision there and then.Within half an hour he could tell by watching your work,whether you were any good; if you proved a duff craftsman you went straight out the gate.Termination of employment on sites used to be an equally uncomplicated procedure - in the morning they told you,that evening you left.

I read the first question:- 'Name all the employers for whom you have worked during the previous five years'.To my surprise they had allowed only five spaces for this reply.Some of the jobs I'd been on lasted a couple of months,others a mere few days.The form's five blank lines might perhaps accommodate three or four month's worth of entrepreneurs..Should I ask for more paper? If I did obtain extra sheets,could I remember them all ? What about the order in which I'd worked for them ? If I listed every one,would this office worker,with his preconceptions conditioned by an environment of stable employment,

think me some kind of fly-by-night? I resolved to compromise, putting my last employer, a firm I recalled from about five years back, then two more chosen completely at random from the period in between. As it happened I got the job.

Prior to World War II, B.O.A.C. flying-boats provided mail and passenger services linking the scattered entities making up the British Empire; to a certain extent this continued during the war. Once America entered the conflict the airline became important as an air bridge joining the two main western allies.

Those of us comprising the building maintenance gang at the base soon found ourselves caught up in a crash programme. Hangars needed to be painted green and draped with camouflage netting; roads and tarmac areas also required disguising with green paint. We added false roofs to several buildings rendering the straight edges of their outlines less obvious from the air. In double quick time we built a series of air-raid shelters. I realised my luck in obtaining this job, because, classified as a 'reserved occupation', the position removed me from the jurisdiction of 'direction of labour' legislation; other bricklayers I knew were sent all over the country repairing war damage.

Shortly after I started the charge-hand of the building section left, and, as I was the only real tradesman there, blokes began coming to me for instructions. Having more or less run the gang for a number of weeks, I reckoned the time had arrived that I should be paid charge-hands' money. My direct boss, a civil engineer, poured scorn on the idea however, remarking that 'we didn't want two of us in charge'. Whenever a tiny technical problem emerged, I directed the enquiry up to the engineer. Doubtless strong on his theory, my superior wasn't very competent at solving the sort of day to day practical snags encountered on a site: he rapidly agreed to promote me after all.

One problem dogging us at B.O.A.C. concerned shortage of materials, especially wood. Just before the war a brand new hangar had been built, extending out over the water. One morning I chanced to look beneath this structure, and was astonished to discover a mass of propped timber; casting the in-situ concrete floor, the contractor hadn't bothered to remove his shuttering. We'd found our vital wood, but salvage would not prove easy. Borrowing a small rowing-boat from the Powerboat factory next door, I set to work with the help of two labourers. We devised a method of releasing lengths of timber, which could, after splashdown, be towed out using home-made grappling hooks, and thus recovered. Owing to the danger of capsize, one needed to take care, however, despite a few narrow squeaks, the plan succeeded. We dragged ashore several tons of wood, decent stuff too, 2"x2", 4"x2", also planking.

Shameful though it might seem in view of the misery and loss suffered by millions, to me personally World War II brought tangible good fortune; for practically the first time in my life I held a steady job. Although perhaps not large, my wage at least came regularly - that made all the difference. Following twenty years of 'in and out' on the buildings, such security felt almost unnatural. Furthermore, working at the base, I ceased to lose money through bad weather, something the building industry itself did not achieve until October 1945. (At this date a 'guaranteed week' became incorporated into the national 'Working Rules Agreement', but only a week of 32 hours.) I started to recover financially again.

Paid holidays constituted a novel benefit enjoyed for the first occasion at 'Airways'. Looking back I'd even been forced to get married during my own time. As usual the problem in construction stemmed from the casual, shifting character of employment. No builder wanted to give his men paid leave unless they spent a longish period with him - an unlikely circumstance. (The industry eventually overcame this technicality by the

introduction of a 'Holiday Credit Scheme', whereby builders affixed weekly holiday stamps to the cards of men on their pay-roll. First paid holidays were taken in 1943.)

One morning, cycling to work, I had the misfortune to fall off, breaking my collarbone again. When this happened previously, in 1922, I'd been doing piece-work for Bill Waterman; I recalled how I tried to struggle on, continuing to plaster ceilings with a painful shoulder. By contrast, at B.O.A.C. I received sick pay during six weeks, and found myself almost as well off as at work. Never before had any firm given me money except in exchange for real work.

In addition to the above perks we also enjoyed the luxury of a company canteen, where we could get meals without ration cards. After a certain length of time one was allowed to join the firm's pension plan. B.O.A.C. used to issue fresh overalls each week, taking back for laundering the dirty pair you had worn. Deducting at source, the wages department helped employees to start regular saving. Although the conditions here described might, even then, have been considered normal rewards due to the 'staff' echelons of industry, a sort of 'welfare state' within a state, to me they came as a revelation. The war vouchsafed me a chance to see how at least the lower strata of the 'other half' lived.

Because of its important dockland, shipping and aircraft industries, Southampton presented a prime target for enemy air attack; from Hythe we were able to look across the water to see the town burning; things seemed pretty bad. Woolston suffered considerable damage. Half a mile from Mother's house, the Supermarine factory, manufacturing the 'Spitfire', experienced a dive-bomber raid in broad daylight. At that stage of the war German planes appeared to do as they liked. Despite all this Mother stubbornly refused to move out feeling safer there than with us in the country.

Following the Dunkirk evacuation, invasion seemed imminent, all men were required to register for military service, even those in reserved occupations; I recall we had to state a preference concerning the type of unit we wished to enter. A good many blokes put in for the R.A.F., i.e. ground support duties, thinking this the safest option. I chose infantry - some blighter had to do it !

Most people helped the defence effort in their spare time, joining the Home Guard and A.R.P. (Air Raid Precaution) organisations, also by fire-watching at workplaces. In the evenings I served with the Auxiliary Fire Service. We operated from a corrugated-iron shack near the British Legion Club at Blackfield, later moving the engine to better premises at Fawley. Knowledge of building work proved at times to be rather a liability. My fire-chief, who knew nothing about structures, often ran big risks with burning buildings, whereas I could see the danger of roof collapse etc. Luckily we dealt with more heath and woodland fires started by incendiaries, than conflagrations in buildings. Being primarily a back-up group covering Fawley Refinery we never got sent to assist the town brigades. The greatest threat we faced was the possibility of getting shot by the Home Guard on our way to the station. Particularly jittery during paratroop invasion alerts, the local volunteers crouched behind a tree trunk road-block on the Fawley Road, menacingly challenging every passer-by.

At home I built an underground air-raid shelter equipped with an emergency exit. At the time, a widely publicised scheme sought to encourage householders with construction know-how to provide their own shelters, thus relieving pressure on the authorities. Stalwarts erecting a private facility were promised a generous allocation of cement once the shelter had been approved by a council inspector. This official professed to be very impressed with my work, the dug-out appeared more

soundly built than a lot of the public ones he'd seen, and furthermore, sunk into the earth, it would escape the worst effects of blast. I was awarded one bag!

Besides the Hythe base, 'Airways' ran several other centres around the country, one of these being at Poole, Dorset. Eventually Hythe became mainly an installation doing refits, while passengers embarked from Poole. I remember taking some of the 'building gang' to Poole in order to convert a building purchased from Poole Potteries into a waiting room for flying-boat travellers. This involved making the place spic and span, i.e. carpentry, plastering, painting and floor tiling.

Travelling for B.O.A.C. proved a different kettle of fish than going away with fire-work firms. We didn't for instance have to tramp the streets in search of lodgings, because our accommodation used to be pre-booked by 'Airways'. I stayed at a pub in Hamworthy overlooking the harbour. By some administrative quirk we could all draw the same travelling expenses as pilots, namely 17/6d per day; this enabled us to live pretty well. We discovered a little cafe near the job, which served huge meals, yet never once asked for ration cards. There must have been something underhand about it; right next door was a navy stores depot.

I happened to be looking out across the bay from my window one evening, when the sky suddenly lit up with a spectacular display of falling lights. Familiar with air attack in Southampton, I realised that flares were dropping, and rushed to tell the landlord, a captain in the Home Guard. The officer lost no time in dashing into the cellar with his family. Mainly incendiaries, this raid, the town's first attack, lasted only a short time; a couple of small boats got sunk near the quay. As the 'all-clear' sounded the publican emerged from the cellar announcing boldly that he would "Go and see how the lads are doing."

World War II came to an end in 1945, I decided to remain at 'Airways'. In the general election which followed shortly after, Labour gained a landslide victory. Amongst the private enterprises taken into public ownership was the British Overseas Airways Company, becoming the British Overseas Airways Corporation. Things settled into a familiar pattern; the blokes knew what had to be done, so to a considerable extent no-one interfered with our routine. We did a great deal of renovation work on the B.O.A.C. offices situated in a converted country mansion previously belonging to minor gentry - the Hobart family of Langdown Estate. At weekends I often undertook little private jobs for the various managers, such as fire-places, gate piers, garden walls etc.

Occasionally we might get detailed for a trip to one of the other corporation depots like Hurn, near Bournemouth, or Treforest, Glamorgan. I recall at Treforest we had to peg out and place footings for a new aircraft shed. Close to where we worked stood a test block for experimental aero-engines, and people warned us that ear-plugs should be worn. Perhaps because the accident risk is above average in construction, men tend to adopt a devil-may-care attitude as a defence against thinking about the worst happening. Anyway we foolishly declined the ear-plugs, a gesture immediately regretted when testing began. We imagined ourselves hardened to noise on building sites, but quickly changed our tune : the din proved terrific.

A later assignment found me back in London, the corporation salesmen were mounting a promotion stunt on the Thames by the Tower of London. A brand new flying-boat was to be christened the 'City of London' by the Lord-Mayor; at that time the 'City' sought to regain its pre-war status as a major world financial centre. My job involved erecting a scaffolding platform on some steps leading down to the water, in order

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that the assembled dignitaries could greet the plane as it docked
after coming up river. I remember the Mayor launched the flying-boat
with a bottle of 'Empire Wine'.

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At the beginning of 1950, we began to hear rumours that B.O.A.C. intended to close the Hythe depot, this proved correct. The concept of an imperial lifeline maintained by the sea-plane, so popular at the time of the Westminster Bridge stunt, had been abandoned in favour of land based aircraft. They offered me a job at London Airport, but, reluctant to leave the house I'd built, I declined. Aged forty-eight, and having seventeen years to go before retirement, I now faced the prospect of returning to the 'rough and tumble' of casual building work.

It seems to me that bricklayers are always being pushed; a lot of occupations you can think of work 'steady', whereas my trade is pressured continually. Of course much of the trouble stems from the fact that people count the number of bricks we lay; it's the first question laymen ask :- 'How many bricks does a bricklayer lay in a day?' Max Gagg, himself an ex-brickie, points out that everything depends on the type of work. (See Work, Twenty Personal Accounts, vol. 2, pages 130-145, 'The Subby Bricklayer'.) He says that on straight walls which have to be plastered or buried in footings, he has laid 2,250 in a nine hour day, although this was unusual. A norm for that sort of work he considered closer to 1,500. On small piers or fiddly bits, he might place only 100, and 800 constituted a good average.

Thrown back to the 'Darwinian' realities of construction, I would be competing against not just other Britons, but Poles, Irish, and West Indians, i.e. groups accustomed to enduring even harsher conditions than indigenous operatives; this was a period of mass migration into Britain during the 'boom'. Many in the trade were young men, cocky in their prowess, and none too sympathetic to the older man who couldn't stand the pace. Invariably you find some 'tough nut' on a

building site, anxious to show what he is able to achieve in the way of breaking records: we ought to have more sense ! After having enjoyed virtually 'staff' conditions for some eleven years, all this came as a bitter blow, however, I reasoned that like a boxer, if you are knocked to the floor the best thing to do is jump up quickly, otherwise you will be counted out.

A few blokes in the threatened building section were talking about starting-up on their own. Before the war, I, myself, had done a lot of work locally as a self-employed bricklayer. There was the partnership with Uncle Frank during the 'Hansford & Collins' period, which grew out of building the 'Nutshell'. Also the bulk of work I did for Bill Waterman, Fred Bowman, and others, used to be on a 'price' basis. In many respects I preferred just such a set-up. Endowed with good ideas, I could rapidly 'size-up' the best method of overcoming any snag; the greater the complication the more I delighted in it. When employed by a firm your suggestions would be pinched and passed up by foremen and supervisors claiming them as their own: it was as if people were sucking your brains.

One person who had joined the wartime construction gang at 'Airways', and stayed on afterwards, was Bill Waterman's nephew, Fred Smith. We happened to be of the same mind about launching a building business, we'd worked together in the past, and furthermore possessed complimentary skills. An experienced carpenter, Fred could tackle plumbing; mainly a bricklayer, I knew plastering, tiling and drain work; country operatives tended to gain knowledge of all the trades. Leaving B.O.A.C. we both chose the option of a lump sum payment, rather than a small life pension, this provided our working capital. Incidentally, that was the first time I ever received 'redundancy money'.

The initial contract undertaken by Hansford & Smith involved putting a room in the roof for Mr Rann, the Hythe carrier. Oddly enough, this happened to be a bungalow we'd built whilst on for Bill Waterman - in fact the place where we set the joke wine bottle and glasses into the chimney-breast using pink plaster. Returning again to that site, it felt strange to think of the twenty or more years which had vanished in between.

Our second job came from Exbury Estate, riverside property of London banker, Lord Rothschild. During the war, Exbury House served as a secret D-Day planning centre, also a naval establishment had been located in the grounds. We got the task of converting all the old Nissen huts, abandoned by the Admiralty, into deep-litter poultry houses. This led to further work. At Lepe Farm we modernised a milking parlour installing galvanised-iron partitions, together with stalls, troughs and a drainage system. Hansford & Smith also did structural alterations to Exbury Sports Club.

Lord Rothschild's interests included many tied cottages, at various times the firm worked on these. I recall one project in particular, a gamekeeper's residence near Inchmery Hard, tenanted by Mr Jack Eyres; this proved a really satisfying job. Dampness problems afflicted the building, large areas of floorboards were rotten, and mould was spreading all over the inside walls. It looked as if the place might need to come down, but we said we'd have a go at saving the dwelling.

Ripping out the floorboards, Fred and I soon discovered the seat of the trouble, a strong spring welling up under the centre of the house. To cure this we built a deep man-hole over the source, leading the water out from beneath the building along a culvert. The dwelling had originally been erected without any dampcourse, so it was decided to

remedy that defect. Chipping into the solid 9" walls, we could insert a short length of dampcourse, then bricking up the gap. Thus, employing a 'cutting out' technique, we worked our way, section by section, around the building until arriving once more at our starting point. Finally, wooden floors required replacing with concrete, inside walls had to be re-plastered, while outside walls were rendered, and pebble-dashed for appearance.

It turned into one of those perfect summers. The site was situated close to the mouth of Beaulieu River, therefore mounting the ladder gave us distracting views of a sparkling Solent with sun-baked hills of the Isle of Wight beyond. Evening tide-turn brought the strange music of huge flocks of waders as they wheeled in to forage on the acres of shining mudflats; it would be time to clean the tools and go home. Our operations succeeded in granting the old cottage a new lease of life. So much estate work began to come our way that we needed to take on a full-time employee, Mr Sid Pitt.

Despite an increasing volume of work, however, the relationship vis-a-vis the estate proved less than completely satisfactory. At the start we received a number of good contracts on which the firm made money. As time went on the estate office seemed to find all sorts of odds and ends to do, e.g. fitting a down-pipe here, or a couple of roof-tiles there. Such tasks are almost impossible to estimate for, so it was agreed with the agent that we should undertake most of it on a day-work basis, submitting a 'time-sheet' type bill on completion. Always optimistic that some new allocation might be a profitable one, we tended to charge less than the real cost for the bulk of these fiddly projects. Annoyingly, even our cut-price invoices caused quibbling from the estate office: we were getting fed-up.

Things eventually came to a head when they sent across a young clerk, waving one of our accounts, and bearing a blunt message :- "The agent thinks your price is too high, he wants it cut." That constituted the last straw. Determined to clear off the estate right away, I soon talked Fred round. We dropped what we were doing, slung the tools in the trailer, then quit. Actually the situation had reached such a state that we welcomed the chance to make a break. In that sort of set-up the idea begins to creep in that the estate does a little firm a great favour by letting it have work - you end up working for nothing out of 'obligation'. Ultimately a bust-up occurs after which the same process is repeated with another small outfit.

I believed it better for a tiny enterprise to serve a wide range of customers, rather than becoming dependent on just one big paymaster; tied to Exbury we neglected opportunities outside. Immediately following the row, our firm secured its first contract to build a complete house from start to finish; the client, Mr Huxham, had purchased a plot at Limekiln Lane, Hardley. Hansford & Smith did every operation from groundwork to house-painting, contracting out only the electrical wiring side. On a 'whole house' job it's possible to keep a large gang continuously employed, so we took on two young lads, Vic and Dave.

Whilst engaged on Huxham's project we found ourselves hounded by the local authority building inspector. Obviously some planning control is necessary, but this chap's interest seemed to amount to harassment; he caused delay at every turn. We resolved to spike his guns. Sid Pitt volunteered to act as our 'hatchet man', because it might prove inappropriate for the partners themselves to be involved in the type of shock tactic we were cooking up. Should the scheme misfire, our employee would need to appear to have expressed a purely personal opinion. Fred and I contrived to dodge the official's next

visit.

The moment the inspector began to throw his weight about, Sid went to town on him, accusing the man of badgering a small firm, while all sorts of infringements got nodded through on big developments. Having recently left the R.A.F., Sid tended to retain a devil-may-care attitude, even going as far as claiming it to be common knowledge that the inspector was taking 'back-handers' from large sites in the area. That could have landed Sid in a load of trouble! Anyway, perhaps we struck some raw nerve, because after this incident the official provided no further cause for complaint.

From Huxham's we moved to another house-building job for a Mr Shotter, at West Common, near Blackfield; the plans had been drawn up by an architect friend of the client. During the autumn we heard a distant dirge of fog-horns as ships nosed their way along the dredged channels to the port of Southampton. Now iron scaffold poles stood in iron ground and sea fret gave way to clear days of tenacious frost; winter had returned.

Whilst on Shotter's job I suffered an attack from the building worker's traditional enemy, a slipped disc, and so bad did it become that I was forced to see a doctor. He ordered me to rest it, but, unfortunately, this is not a cure readily available to a man running a small building business. To support my back the doctor supplied a broad belt, reinforced with metal strips like a lady's corset. This aid had obviously been designed for patients in sedentary occupations. Returning to the site I found it impossible to bend down, and as a bricklayer needs to touch his toes several hundred times a day, the belt proved rather a handicap. Taking a pair of pliers, I removed all the metal strips, continuing to wear the belt itself for warmth, it granted some protection from wind.

Hanging from the cross-bars of the scaffolding with my feet dangling in the air,afforded the most efficacious method of treatment. In the course of his work,a bricklayer uses the spine like a human crane with its fulcrum located in the small of the back.Pole-hanging, therefore,served to push my spinal discs back into their proper alignment; I practiced this technique whenever I had a few minutes. Thus,by the adoption of that self-cure,plus lying flat on my back as soon as I got home at night,I managed to keep on the move.

One source of trouble was Mr Shotter's architect friend,who, after producing plans,tried to act as if he controlled construction. This led him to order sudden changes, ask for samples of everything, and generally put a spoke in the wheel.Finally we went to the client demanding either an end to interference,or a revised estimate to cover the delays being caused.Mr Shotter decided to trust us,we were then able to do a first rate job at a reasonable price.

Parallel with house-building,we continued to undertake small jobs such as garden walls,and garages,also accepting extensions and renovation work.I remember taking one contract from a Mr Davies of Roman Road,Dibden Purlieu; several local builders had refused to tender because of the complications.The project involved the erection of a new house,over and around an existing structure,while the family remained in residence.These sort of challenges always attracted me, furthermore,I believed we could make money on it.

A typical 'Forest' dwelling,the cottage had developed in a ramshackle fashion,over a considerable time span,through a process of ad-hoc extension.It now consisted of a weird mixture of daub (dried mud reinforced with heather),brick,timber and corrugated-iron sheeting.Stretch by stretch,corner by corner,room by room,the new building grew,enveloping and integrating with the old.All services

were required to be kept going as the job progressed, so, for instance, if the original sink came out, its replacement was installed, connected, and working that same day. Fortunately, Mrs Davies happened to be a very patient woman; at completion we felt sorry to move on.

Local waterways acting as a magnet for yachting enthusiasts, various families of minor gentry established themselves in the district during the Victorian and Edwardian periods. In the new century their large houses proved too expensive to maintain, consequently, by the 1950's most of these grand residences had been sold off for conversion to other uses. Several became hotels, partially sustained by the custom of a steady stream of managerial personnel visiting the expanding oil refinery at Fawley. It was in one such adapted mansion, namely West Cliff Hall Hotel, that we undertook another of our more tricky contracts.

Two adjoining medium sized rooms needed making into one main dining area; we found these rooms already linked by a small opening, but this would have to be considerably widened. There were two upper storeys, and the partition wall between the rooms supported great weight, this necessitated the insertion of a load-bearing girder across the top of the opening. The real problem concerned how this huge weight could be held up in the interval from the demolition of the wall to fixing of the girder. We took out a hefty insurance, because if anything did go wrong with the propping-up operation, structural damage caused throughout the building, might well bankrupt our firm should it receive a bill for compensation. All in all it looked a dangerous project.

One morning, visiting the hotel to plan the job, I noticed that the 9" double wall was built in English bond. In other words, all the 'stretchers' went the right way to permit the removal of half the wall, i.e. a single brick thickness, at a time. By using twin girders instead of

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one big girder, we could do the job in two stages. The initial phase involved cutting away one side of the 'double' wall in order to insert the first girder, meanwhile, most of the weight would be supported by the remaining 'single' wall. Once positioned, this first girder took on the load-bearing function, during the period when girder number two was being installed. With both girders fixed we'd simply need to pull out the rest of the brickwork beneath the girders, and tidy up the opening. Such a technique promised to save a complicated propping operation, therefore considerably shortening time taken; the hotel proprietor concurred, so, that's how we finally tackled it.

Hansford & Smith continued to accept a wide range of contracts: a plumbing job at Blackfield, special fire-places for a garage owner at Purlieu, shop front alterations for a barber at Holbury. However we found ourselves undertaking an increasing proportion of house-building work; in fact the firm put up half a dozen new dwellings in the Purlieu area, including a bungalow for our own employee, Sid Pitt. It happened to be on one of these house-building sites that we experienced a very narrow squeak indeed.

Normally we preferred to rig-up shuttering over windows and doors, casting lintels in-situ as required. On this particular occasion the client insisted on pre-stressed lintels, which came from a builders' merchant in Southampton. Heavy and awkward, the largest lintel had to be placed spanning a wide window-space in the lounge. Lacking mechanical lifting gear, we set about raising the bulky concrete unit, using muscle power, at the time scaffolding reached window-height. Five of us wrestled to man-handle the unit along the planking platform, when, insufficiently strutted, the entire framework began to topple sideways. Somehow, pushing away the dead-weight lump as we fell, everyone managed to jump clear of the collapsing scaffolding. To this day I marvel how we escaped unhurt !

During the early years of the firm, Fred and I only drew tradesmens' wages, ploughing any profits back into the business. We heard that the British Legion Club at Dibden Purlieu had come on to the market. The clubhouse was being constructed under one of those self-build schemes, using the voluntary labour of members, like most similar stunts, initial enthusiasm soon waned leaving a half completed building, roofed over, but unfinished inside. Surrounded by a large plot of land, the premises would, we realised, make an ideal builders' yard, which the growth of the company now demanded. With accumulated capital plus a hastily negotiated overdraft, Hansford & Smith purchased the site.

Our clubhouse proved a useful store for cement, plaster, and other materials, also, having a bigger yard enabled us to stockpile bricks, concrete blocks, glazed pipes, man-hole covers, etc. Items left from one job could be kept for a later project. Additional investment involved the acquisition of a 15 cwt. truck, as the tiny trailer towed by Fred's car no longer met current requirements. It was decided to employ another full-time man, John Holes, who doubled as driver and general labourer.

We were becoming known as a reliable family enterprise, always taking care to stick to our word concerning starting-dates and so on; workload increased. Shortly after moving to the new yard, we won a contract to build a fair sized house, to be known as 'Darkwater', for a Mrs Crossley, daughter of Major Drummond of Cadland. Normally this type of job is done with the supervision of an architect, however, our reputation for decent work appeared sufficient, because we enjoyed complete control of construction ourselves.

Although never keen to work under the direction of architects, there are occasions when such an arrangement can prove a boon, especially if one has a very demanding client. Interposed between builder and purchaser, the architect deals with a customer's day to day queries, problems and suggestions; on the 'Darkwater' job, all this liaison work fell to me. Both Fred and I were working builders, tradesmen taking part in the bed-rock physical activity of the site; we couldn't afford to remain just office-based supervisors. Mrs Crossley would often wish to call at my house in the evenings, perhaps to discuss incorporation of some new feature recently seen in a journal. I used to feel so tired that at times I found it difficult to concentrate on what was being said.

Securing the 'Darkwater' contract seemed to cap all our previous successes. With four regular employees, a large yard, new lorry and full order-book, the future looked assured.

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Chapter 18. - Going Backwards.

I remember reading Marx's comments on the petty bourgeois being the most unstable element in society, constantly seeking to rise above the mass of workers during expansions, only to be 'hurled down amongst the proletariat' by the return of bad trade. If you've ever been in a small way of business in the building industry, you know exactly what he meant; the process noted in 1848 can be seen in operation today. Although we subsequently did a number of other jobs, the 'Darkwater' contract proved the firm's high-water mark; afterwards things began to go wrong on a number of fronts.

Hansford & Smith ran into a slack period as general building activity slowed; we scratched about trying to organise odds and ends for the blokes to do. I suggested buying moulds to manufacture pre-cast concrete units such as paving stones, path edgings and gulley kerbs - the D.I.Y. boom was just beginning to take off. This would have given us something to fall back on when short of work, and products stockpiled over the winter could be sold once the landscaping craze returned with the spring. Some years later I became involved in precisely this type of operation, however, at that particular juncture, nothing got done.

Early in 1957, the local Rural District Council slammed a 'stop-order' on us, claiming that our 'change of use' at the British Legion constituted a breach of Town and Country Planning Regulations. This came as a nasty surprise, because the club happened to be an ideal premises. I believe that had we fought the order through the appeals procedure, our chances of obtaining permission were high. Even if eventually forced to quit the new

yard, we possessed alternative facilities at the respective homes of the partners, from where, incidentally, we'd operated previously. In the event we didn't bother to appeal.

In truth the firm's problems centred around personal differences between Fred and myself. Whoever might have been to blame, the fact remains that we found ourselves unable to sort the situation out, consequentially everything tended to drift. Being mutually fed-up, we both used the council restriction as an excuse to torpedo the company in order to go separate ways. Our last job happened to be a house construction at Mullens Lane, Dibden Purlieu. Towards the end of 1957, the business went into voluntary liquidation: it seemed a pity.

Actually, in my own case, an additional factor lurked in the background, a circumstance about which, at the time, I was unaware. Throughout the period leading to 'wind-up', I experienced a spirit-sapping fatigue. At first, thinking the phenomenon a normal side effect resultant upon running a small building concern at the age of fifty-five, I ignored it. People were commenting on my sallow complexion, so eventually I agreed to see a doctor. He diagnosed my trouble at first glance - the great white half moons at the base of each fingernail clearly indicated pernicious anaemia.

Following a brief rest and a course of injections, I soon started to regain vigour. With retirement age still ten years distant, I prepared myself, once again, to re-enter the trade as a common brickie, to go back 'on the tools'. Really, of course, I'd never been off them, because I invariably combined the entrepreneurial function with a daily work-stint alongside the blokes on the site.

The late fifties in Britain saw another very rapid expansion of

the petro-chemical sector; close to Fawley Refinery several new plants, mainly subsidiaries of American groups, were established; using oil as their raw material they manufactured a range of by-products: synthetic rubber, polythene, ethylene, plastics. Across the road from my house a large depot for tanker lorries, delivering petrol and fuel-oils, was under construction; I noticed a small electricity sub-station being built in brick. My affairs vis-a-vis Hansford & Smith awaited final sorting out, also I happened to be still under the doctor, however, with this job literally on my doorstep, it seemed a good idea to try for it. I approached the foreman who took me on.

Following the sub-station contract, I stayed with the same outfit to do brickwork on some toilets at the local Pentecostal Church - this institution needed re-siting lock stock and barrel at the oil company's expense, because it occupied land required for the tanker terminal. Eventually I quit owing to friction with the foreman. He appeared to tackle the job in a silly way. Having experienced a spell of self-employment it's never easy to get used to supervision again.

Over the next few years I was to work with contractors both in the central refinery, where a huge extension had been opened by Prime Minister Attlee in 1951, and at the by-product factory sites. For instance, employed by Laings, I did a lot of brickwork on the administration block at the International Synthetic Rubber Company at Hardley. Firms I remember include Foster Wheeler, Matthew Hall, Whessoe, and Mowlems. Much had changed since my first refinery building period back in the early twenties with my stepfather, and later Jack Welton.

All the old building textbooks, which I'd read as an aspiring novice, went out of their way to stress that bricklaying should be considered as a 'highly developed craft, implying a knowledge of the principles of construction, and an appreciation of art'. Absence of these finer attributes, they claimed, demeaned the trade to a 'mere form of manual labour'. Instructors used to draw attention to the ancient lineage of our occupation, citing examples of good brickwork from Georgian, Tudor and Stuart, Norman and even Roman times. It felt as if, interrupted whilst stooping to set the initial courses of Silchester, Londinium or Venta Belgarum, the archetypal brickie might straighten-up, and leap from the pages of craft tradition to muck-in, language barrier notwithstanding, alongside any 'modern' gang. Such is the continuity of technique and tools; a diamond shaped 'brick' trowel can scarcely evolve more perfect proportions.

Much of this craft pride focused on the mystique of tools; you derived a great deal of satisfaction from owning decent ones. There were types reasonably well known to the general public, the range of trowels, the array of hammers, also cold-chisel, bolster, levels, straight-edges, line and pins, rulers and plumb-bobs, to list but a few. In addition the initiate possessed some exotic implements, rejoicing in a stranger nomenclature: frenchman, scrutch, zax, dog, jointer. Conventional wisdom asserted that it's a poor workman who blames his tools, so the young apprentice struggling to get a set together, would be told in no uncertain manner that cheap equipment proves dear in the end.

When I started in the industry, tradesmen supplied personal tools, labourers too being expected to provide their own shovels. People in those days took care of hand-tools. Navvies always kept shovels silver-shiny, you could eat your dinner off them, in fact, men often did - I've seen many a fried egg, or slice of bacon

cooked a treat on a shovel blade suspended over brickbat hearth. On these post-war oil industry jobs, the Yanks dished out tools at the site stores like combat provisions from a logistics center. Nobody bothered to clean anything, and shovel blades got put away smeared with ferro-concrete. Craftsmanship was succumbing to the science of 'speed-up'.

Between periods of refinery contracting I would look for work on housebuilding sites. One evening, browsing through the situations vacant section of a local paper, an announcement in bold type caught my attention :- 'FAST, CLEAN TROWELS WANTED'. The stark message encapsulated in this whimsical proclamation came over crystal clear to any construction worker; you were expected to go at it like mad, yet still do a first class job ! Situated at Butts Ash Lane, Dibden Purlieu, the project, a Wimpey site, happened to be conveniently close to home. Following an 'in-person' application to the shanty office, I found myself hired. After looking me up and down, the foreman delivered his customary caution, emphasizing that :- "This site is a young man's job". Plainly no quarter could be expected concerning work-pace. I assured him I knew.

Housebuilding since World War II had undergone important changes. A growing proportion of the sector's output was now produced by the big, national developers, building estates all round the country. By comparison, small family enterprises such as Hansford & Smith relatively declined. The activities of these giant groups increasingly tended to be speculative in nature, augmenting the profit derived from constructional operations with extra margins accruing from the inflation of land and property values. Development land might be purchased fifteen or twenty years prior to the first brick being buttered. Wimpey, the

country's foremost housebuilder, typified the process.

Parallel with the emergence of these large scale concerns, came alterations in the organisational structure of the industry, in particular the widespread adoption of 'labour-only' sub-contracting, also known as the 'Lump'. Previously a builder directly employed the men who worked on his sites. Under the new system the job got broken down into its constituent parts, groundwork, bricklaying, roofing, flooring, dry-wall partitioning, etc., and then farmed out to subbies contracted for a lump sum. For instance, bricklayers charged so much per house, or per 1,000, or per 'yard super', i.e. 98 bricks laid. Subbies might be anything from one-man bands to sizeable firms, themselves employing operatives; often a more substantial subbie passed on some of his own work to smaller lumpers, if he could still make a profit by so doing.

Whereas the traditional specialist sub-contractor provided tools and materials on a 'supply and fix it' basis, therefore representing a healthy division of labour, the new breed of subbie spawned since the war, contributed just labour. In actuality, what was happening involved a change in the form, but not the nature, of the employment relationship. Although styled as 'self-employed', and enjoying the tax privileges of this group, the labour-only subbie remained, in reality, a worker at one remove. Highly indicative here, one can cite the attitude of the National Federation of Self-employed; clearly understanding the essence of the lump, this body, formed by the traditional petty bourgeois, proved none too anxious to recruit subbie builders into membership.

There were several advantages for an employee switching to this set-up. First he had the pleasure of feeling that he worked for himself, thus savouring a measure of independence. Also an ambitious

man, prepared to have a go, gained the opportunity to earn money well in excess of normal hourly pay - at least during the boom he did. Many operatives considered the role of the building trades unions, with their restrictive emphasis on 'standard rate', and preserving work, more suitable to the 'Hungry Thirties' than the full-employment economy of the late Fifties, and early Sixties. However, in 1951, after seventy years of opposition to 'payment by results', the unions had agreed to bonus schemes.

There are, too, a number of obvious gains from the employer's angle. It removes the need to keep men on in between jobs; the very second a worker completes his immediate task, he vanishes off the site. Administrative expenses can be dramatically reduced, because the builder transfers all responsibility for tax affairs, insurance and other paperwork, to the operative. Subbies turn this drawback to advantage; evidence suggests that income-tax fiddling and national insurance evasion have burgeoned as rapidly as the lump phenomenon itself. One side effect of the subbie craze is a bonanza situation for the accountancy profession.

A huge benefit to the employer lies in work-force self-motivation. Piece-work sub-contract has proved a powerful spur to effort, usually achieved with a concomitant reduction in supervision costs. The operative who becomes a petty employer, albeit of fellow self-employed, will drive his own workers a great deal harder than he would ever have been prepared to graft, whilst himself an employee. There exists here, of course, an element of co-exploitation. I recall from my own youthful days, when doing piece-work for Bill Waterman, it seemed a big joke to push poor Bill Parnell to the limits of physical exhaustion at the Pylewell Road job.

One obtains scant satisfaction from working on a subbie site.

Nobody is interested in the tradesmen who precede him, or the ones following on. Each man aims to complete his own little bit in the quickest possible time, so as to move to the next contract.

Workmanship deteriorates, while cutting corners becomes the order of the day. For me this goes against the grain. Having spent all those years with family builders, I am accustomed to being in a gang that saw a job through from start to finish, and could identify with it. In the old days we would pass a house saying :- "Yes, I built that place".

As far as site safety is concerned, in today's frantic atmosphere, you might as well forget it. Because clearing-up represents unpaid work for subbies, people are constantly tripping over piles of bricks and other rubbish. The same thing applies if a lorry appears which needs unloading, everyone vanishes. It is to do these unwanted, unprofitable aspects, tidying, unloading, fiddly bits, etc., that, even on a predominately subbie site, the main contractor finds himself forced to employ a small number of men.

I was taken on 'direct' by Wimpey at the Butts Ash Lane project, although the clustered name-boards at the front entrance indicated the site must be a sub-contract jungle. We 'directly employed' men detested coming along behind subbies to sort out their scamped work. In spite of what does get let through on a big development, local authority inspectors occasionally make a stand. No tradesman enjoys pushing over a wall to rebuild it after some cowboy has caused a cock-up. Nor did we relish completing work abandoned by subbies - here the lump gangs select those parts of a contract lending themselves to rapid completion, then, on receiving 'progress payments' for these, they quit, despite foregoing 'retention money' over the whole job. Direct labour gets detailed to pick up the pieces. Much the same situation occurs when, as

frequently happens, a sub-contractor becomes bankrupt. I can't claim that lumpers never achieve decent standards of work, but subbie-style organisation is not conducive to this.

For all the above reasons, friction usually breaks out on sites between direct labour and subbies. Furthermore, whenever an opportunity arises, the main contractor seeks to reduce even the tiny residue of direct men which he has. Trying to pass work, previously carried out by direct employees, to a sub-contractor, not surprisingly, provokes resistance from his own men - it means loss of overtime, perhaps also their jobs. There were continual upheavals at Butts Ash Lane over this; we used to be calling in our local delegate almost every week. From the Wimpey job I went with a firm building houses for Esso 'key workers' at Rosebury Avenue, Hythe. I thought the bloke hiring me was a bona fide builder, however he soon proved to be another subbie. At the end of a week I left. Running battles concerning the lump issue took most of the pleasure out of construction work.

Although the explosive growth of sub-contracting seemed to sweep all before it, (one estimate showed that during the period 1965-1973, the number of building workers involved in labour-only deals climbed from 160,000 to 400,000), a few of us could grasp the long term dangers, consequently backing the union fight against it. As Terry Austin* has pointed out, the survival of an apparently archaic employment form such as the lump, is not necessarily a mere historical quirk. In fact it probably fulfils a very 'modern' function ideally suited to prevailing conditions at a certain point in the Twentieth Century.

* Terry Austin - 'The Lump in the U.K. Construction Industry'. See pp. 302-315, Capital and Labour: Studies in the Capitalist Labour Process, Edited by Theo Nichols, Athlone Press, 1980.

An acute shortage of labour, both skilled and unskilled, characterized the construction industry during the post-war boom. In 1973, (a little after my time) a National Economic Development Office report indicated that, in the South-East region, ten vacancies existed for each bricklayer. Such a market situation would tend, in normal circumstances, to augment the membership, influence and bargaining power of trade union negotiating bodies, and bring a strong likelihood of them achieving increased control over the work process. Growth of labour-only sub-contracting proved successful in forestalling this eventuality. Those financial improvements which became an inevitable consequence of heightened competition between rival firms for scarce labour, were offered through the TEMPORARY mechanism of high lump earnings. In other words, they never got PERMANENTLY incorporated into any nationally agreed framework of rates and conditions, remaining instead a maze of bloated special payments co-existing alongside a puny, almost static 'standard rate'. Actually subbying led to widespread disregard of previously hard fought gains on matters like the guaranteed week, wet-time, holidays, safety and training. Above all the lump allowed the industry's 84,000 odd companies to preserve, indeed reinforce, the casual nature of the building trade.

In circumstances generally understood as being highly conducive to union expansion, the very opposite trend manifested itself. Lumpers embraced in large numbers the 'every man for himself' mentality - the competitive, individualistic ideology of the private employer. The resultant exodus from union membership, taking those organisations to the edge of bankruptcy, did spur amalgamation moves involving the bricklayers, woodworkers and others. U.C.A.T.T., the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians emerged in 1971.

Everyone is familiar with the old adage that 'What goes up, comes down', sadly this was to ring true. As happened so many times before during my own lifetime, the grim dialectic of the trade cycle would reassert itself. Hothouse conditions of the up-swing were laying the foundations for a future setback, bringing the usual rider of unemployment. In the four years 1973-1977, output in construction fell by almost 30%, while the number of unemployed building workers rose from 90,000 to nearly a quarter of a million. The 221,817 men concerned constituted some 14% of total U.K. workless in 1978.

Robust bargaining power briefly enjoyed by labour at the point of production, had been frittered away: 'big money' began to vanish. Subbies still working started to put in silly prices, just to keep going. I've noticed that solicitors, accountants and people like these, never rush around engaging in cut-throat competition with each other - they don't even advertise. Considering the type of work we do in construction, we ought to be equally cute.

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I next worked on one of the first blocks of flats built in Southampton; the job, at St. Mary's Street, happened to be another Wimpey contract. As usual there was a simmering dispute concerning bonus. The corporation building inspector demanded an exceptionally high standard of brickwork. Each time he called, something needed knocking down for re-building. On the one hand we strove to maintain good brickwork in order to get it passed, at the same time attempting to reach the firm's bonus targets. An impossible situation. Eventually Wimpey pulled strings at the Civic Centre, threatening to quit the town altogether unless the official acted more reasonably. In the end he did calm down a bit.

Conditions on the site can only be described as vile. Despite being a contract of at least five years duration, (i.e. this block and others) virtually nothing had been organised in the way of facilities for the blokes. Our mess room consisted of a dirty wooden hut with a small counter at one end, where you could purchase tea and rolls. Having no proper drying room provided, men hung their steaming, wet clothes all around this makeshift canteen, while muddy rubber boots got strewn about the floor. Outside stood the toilet, a rough breeze-block structure thrown up in a hurry. It boasted a damp floor and newspaper stuffed pan. Either from budgetary constraint or incompetent design, no-one deemed it necessary to install electric light, or relieve the monotony of its four-square walls with a pane of opaque glass. Consequently, on closing the door you found yourself plunged into a black limbo. Finally somebody bashed out a breeze-block, so at least we might see what we were doing. Men washed using the site stand-pipe. Little seemed to have altered from more than forty years before, when I'd lived in Mrs Stone's shack, on the labour camp at A.G.W.I., with my stepfather in 1921.

A number of us decided to ask for some improvements, a foolish move to make because you immediately become marked men. Nonetheless the card steward, myself and another bricklayer, went to see the general foreman. This audience proved short in the extreme. Obviously no devotee of workforce consultation, on discovering the purpose of our mission the general unceremoniously ordered us to 'Get back on the job'. Advising him not to be so 'darn silly', we complied. We next took the matter up at local branch level; during that period the 'Bricklayers' used to meet in the Royal Oak at the bottom of East Street. In due course a full-time official visited the site with some representative of management. Nothing tangible came of this however. Facilities apparently conformed to all legal requirements! To be honest, the bulk of the blokes couldn't care less, and gave us nil support; at the first opportunity, I left the job in disgust.

Through the union I managed to obtain work in connection with the conversion of Portsmouth Power Station from coal to oil fired operation; Britain still enjoyed cheap Middle East fuel. Bricklayers were required to re-line furnaces. Getting to the station involved a long journey. At 7.30 a.m. the works' coach picked up the Southampton gang outside the dock gates; to catch it I needed to leave home early, crossing Southampton Water by ferry before sunrise. Once under way the charabanc proceeded via Thornhill, Fareham, etc., collecting bricklayers, boilermakers, and the other trades along the route. We arrived in Portsmouth around 8.30 a.m., then taking our morning tea-break. By the time you struggled into protective clothing to face the filthy interiors, it would be past 9.00 a.m. when the first fire-brick got placed.

Following afternoon tea-break men commenced cleaning-up, and although always paid till 6.00 p.m., we'd find ourselves speeding homewards long in advance of that. On being put down again near Southampton

docks,I had to complete my final leg back to Hythe,which made a long day of it.Despite this,however,the Portsmouth contract suited me down to the ground.What it amounted to was that for part of the time I got paid to ride on a coach; at my age this seemed preferable to eight or more hours of solid bricklaying.

Engaged on the Portsmouth job,it felt strange to find myself surrounded by the discarded relics of a previous 'Coal Age'.I remember looking at the huge clinker washing-plant,a massive frame of rusting ironwork,disused and derelict.This period was rendered especially poignant by the death of my stepfather,Tom,in December 1965; I sat with him the night he died.When I called to register the death,a mystified registrar couldn't resist asking what 'Retort Setters' were.

From Portsmouth I went to another giant Central Electricity Generating Board site,namely Fawley Power Station,built on reclaimed salt marshes near Calshot.Once in operation,this oil-fired installation, fed by direct pipeline from Fawley Refinery,would win a number of efficiency awards.

Construction has an infamous record regarding safety.Accident statistics for Britain show building to be the most hazardous occupation after coal-mining,while American figures put the industry in first place.The trade journal 'Engineering News Record' on November 15th 1979,gives the average injury rate as 8.5% for all U.S. industries,but 15.7% amongst construction workers,i.e. twice as high. Every year in Britain several hundred building operatives are killed on the job,and some thousands suffer severe injury.A disproportionate number of these will be aged 16 - 24,the greater mortality of this group is related to the extremely dangerous,though relatively better paid tasks undertaken by them,often on the lump.

Some injuries stem directly from the nature of the working environment, for example cave-ins, falling from heights, or materials and equipment falling from heights on to men. An accident might be a simple matter of slashing your hand open with a sharp trowel to something much more complex. Mike Cherry in his study of American ironworkers* , records a very involved disaster where a swinging crane-boom touched the steel skeleton of a building, setting off vibrations which dislodged a man from a girder several floors away. Many mishaps can be attributed to bad weather. Such cases include slipping on surfaces that are wet, or icy due to rain, snow or frost. People exposed to the discomfort of feeling cold tend to grow careless through being preoccupied. Because a building site, unlike the static office or factory, constitutes a constantly changing work situation, altering as the structure goes up, any momentary lapse of concentration must mean potential danger.

I remember that during the construction of Fawley Power Station, all the contractors' men assembled once a week for a safety briefing, in one of the huts. However, there used to be an element of eyewash about it, as, under the contracting system, everything is subordinated to making a profit. Both management and men adopt a reckless 'get it up' attitude. If creating too much fuss over safety, you soon become a pariah, particularly in the eyes of the other men prepared to run risks in the cause of boosting bonus earnings. On one occasion a gang of us bricklayers was working 'overhand', building the walls of a roadway raised on stilts. Blokes walked about underneath. I asked the foreman whether we should pause to rig up safety cages in case someone dropped a lump hammer over the side. His reply illustrates the problem. "Don't bother," he advised, "you'll just have to be careful."

* Mike Cherry - 'On High Steel: the education of an ironworker.' Quadrangle Press, New York, 1971.

As usual the job produced its crop of accidents; you almost expect a couple of deaths on a big site. I recall one fatality at Fawley which shook everyone. Ascending in the lift, a chap was foolish enough to lean out to peer back down the lift-well, a cross girder in the shaft chopped his head off.

On the power station contract the main bone of contention centred around bonus. When, shortly after World War II, incentives began to creep in, I thought this a good thing. During the bad old days there were no targets, it being simply a case of how much work a foreman could get out of you; mass unemployment acted as the goad. I reasoned that on bonus one would at least know how many bricks had to be laid for a certain amount of money. That seemed better than a 'sky's the limit' situation; in practice drawbacks emerged.

While spurring men on through the mechanism of bonus, employers' organisations continued to oppose increases in basic rates. Consequently we've now reached the ridiculous pass of bonus payments bulking as high as 50% of total earnings. Because building involves strenuous handwork, target chasing doesn't do you a lot of good. Statistics show that a forty-five year old builders' labourer cannot expect to live very long after retirement. Older men are considered a liability in a bonus gang, many becoming unemployable before pensionable age anyway. Safety aspects of the speed-up and the effect on workmanship have been mentioned already. Furthermore, in a casual industry, the faster you work the sooner you find yourself laid-off. In retrospect it is obvious that the introduction of bonus prepared the way for labour-only subbies.

The bonus system naturally makes plant bargaining more important than national agreements, therefore at Fawley we experienced the customary conflict over targets. If we got too much out of a particular

package, the firm wanted it cut back. Almost every week saw the introduction of new and more complicated formulae; most proved difficult to understand - of course, intentionally so! We were caught several times by starting a job before target finalisation, the contractor would then refuse to come anywhere near a decent figure once the building stood. Finally the blokes 'wised-up', refusing to commence any work where bonus had not been sorted out beforehand. Events moved towards a set-piece tussle.

One morning the foreman detailed a Totton bricklayer, and myself to start work on one of these disputed jobs: why he picked on us I don't know. We declined. Within minutes the general himself appeared, in a state of some agitation, and again instructed that we should tackle the symbolic wall. I advised him to contact our card-steward as the job happened to be in dispute. Next the general rounded menacingly on the Totton man, repeating the previous order with vehemence. I'd seen it all before, but, being a youngish chap, the Totton bricklayer was less phlegmatic. In a flash they began to argue. The air became thick with foul language uttered in raucous voices; they almost came to blows. "O.K. you wankers." proclaimed the general, "I'm giving you both a minute's notice!"

Gathering up our tools, the two of us set off towards the site office to collect our money and cards. Looking back we noticed that all the other bricklayers were following us. They downed tools for the day.

Oddly enough, on arriving home I discovered a letter waiting for me from Humphries & Glasgow, a company building the gas-making plant at Hardley; I'd left my name and address with them six weeks before. They required bricklayers. I contacted my fellow rebel from

Totton, and we got taken on the following morning. Nearer to home, the Hardley gas-plant turned out to be a better proposition than the power station contract, I did myself a favour getting the sack. When they heard about it, the blokes at the station, who had come out in sympathy, were furious: they just would not believe that we hadn't stage-managed the whole affair.

Later I took the case to an industrial tribunal, winning the day because the firm had omitted to go through the correct procedure in dismissing me. The local A.U.B.T.W. officer represented us at the hearing. Although granted the right of reinstatement at Fawley, I preferred to remain with Humphries & Glasgow.

I really enjoyed these last few months building the gas-works at Hardley. (Incidentally the plant produced gas from oil, not coal.) No disputes spoilt the job, and we had a good bunch of blokes. The most serious incident that occurred concerned teacups. Men could be touchy about them. Cracked, chipped, handleless, and lacking enamel, each utensil was nonetheless SOMEBODY'S cup. A visiting electrician got severely bawled out for drinking from another man's personal vessel. On quitting, the 'sparks' fixed the entire collection of mugs to the mess-room table, using a nail-gun. I ended my bricklaying career as I had begun it ... in the gas-works.

THE END.

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