

Fleetville Diaries Oral History Project

Bert Hewitt

Interviewer: Liz Bloom

Date: March 15th 2013



Fleetville Diaries
the local history people

Liz Bloom
40 Arthur Road
St Albans AL1 4SZ

07507 684531
01727 568863
bloom_lz@yahoo.co.uk

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<http://fleetvillediaries.weebly.com>

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My name is Albert Edward Hewitt but I have been known as Bert all my life. I originate from Bernard's Heath and was born on August 27th 1934. I went to the Infants' and Junior Schools on Bernard's Heath and then on to the Hatfield Road Boys' School. From there, I went to work for Charles Forbes on George Street which was a boys' and gents' outfitters. I worked there until I left to do National Service for two years. When I came back I was a little bit unsettled and I transferred from there to Peakes, into the gents' cutting room. I went to see my uncle, who already worked for Peakes, and asked him if there was any chance of getting work there. (I was missing the company of other young people, working in the shop, just the governor and assistants and that sort of thing. After doing National Service, you got a bit disorientated.) My uncle kindly asked the cutting room manager and he said, "Yes, there is a space there for somebody." They took me on as a stock cutter. It was started off by W O Peake and they often used tweeds from Scotland. What stands out in my mind is that they made the Gannex coat which Harold Wilson wore. That was a cloth with a gabardine coating over the top of it. We did quite a few of them over the years.

I started off on the linings and finished up cutting the coats on the band knife. Unfortunately, after a time being on the band knife, I severed my thumb. I've still got my thumb; it was sown back on by Mr Rushforth who was the surgeon in those days. I stayed in the firm although I had difficulty using shears because of the accident so they transferred me to the office side. Eventually I was moved to London when the Aquascutum group took us over and I was moved up to the Production Office which I stuck for about four years. In the meantime, I was having a slight breakdown through the pressure of work and I decided that I had had enough.

They offered me a job back in St Albans but I had a clean break and I had twelve months at Nicholsons and that again was on the cutting board. You were given the pattern of the style of coat that you would be making which you laid down on the cloth, marked it round with your chalk and you cut it out. I would use shears sometimes if it was a single item but if you had three or four coats of the same size, then you used an Eastman hand cutting machine. That was electric; you could take your hand off with that if you got your fingers in the way Well, I mean, you made sure you didn't! Men usually operated the cutting equipment and the women worked on the sewing machines. It was slightly lower quality than Peakes but there wasn't a great deal of difference. Peakes was the cream of the coat business.

That was 1966 to 1967 when I stayed at Nicholsons. In '67, I passed my driving test and I spoke to my father who worked at the Co-op Dairy and asked him if there were any vacancies there. He

said, "Are you going to stick the cold weather?" I said, "Until I try it, I don't know." He spoke to the manager, Mr Judge, and they took me on. I stayed there for 23 years! My father actually did 30 years with the Co-op. I started off with a petrol vehicle and my round started at Lemsford Road, then along Lancaster Road into Battlefield Road, over into Beach Road, then Valley Road. Then I went over into the Chalkdell Fields estate, Furse Avenue, round there, and then I went all the way down to Sandridge and the Sally Army home. All those houses on the banks, we used to take the van up one part of the bank but other than that, on the next section of bank I had to cart the crate of milk up and deliver that way.

We delivered milk, of course, but also bread and potatoes. I had to walk up the garden paths with them. Eventually, they branched out with tins of fruit and all that sort of thing but the highlight was when they let us sell ladies' tights! I had some fun with them; I said to a customer, "Look, we've started a new range of ladies' one size tights. Are you interested?" She said, "I suppose you want to help us on with them!"

I had 440 customers on that round. That was my round for the whole time I was there; 23 years. I was part of the family in some places. Two of my customers (one lived on the Chalkdell Field estate and the other one lived on the Valley Road) were a Mrs Rump and a Mrs Bone. They used to run the meat raffle at the Valmar Club on the Sandridge Road. Couldn't have been more apt! I knew Mrs Rump from childhood, actually; my parents knew her. She never ever locked her back door. I was always told that if I wanted to use the toilet and make myself a cup of tea, to come in and do so. But I would never do that if I had somebody training with me; if she was there, then fine, but if she wasn't, I wouldn't go in. One day, I went there and I thought, "My goodness me, where is she?" Her washing machine was boiling over and water was all over the floor. I realised that she had gone out and left it going. I went in and twisted it off, pulled out the rugs which were absolutely saturated, mopped some of the water up with a couple of old towels and threw them out. I left a note saying, "Machine overflowing. I've cleared it up as fast as I can. I'll see you tomorrow."

I got lumbered one day in Sandridge on a Friday when I knocked on the door for the money, a mother in her mid-twenties comes to the door; a baby in her arms, still at her breast. She said, "Oh, hold him, and I'll go and get you some money." She gave him to me and I was holding the baby on the doorstep.

In a lot of places, I could just walk in and say, "Only me." They'd say, "Right, make yourself a cup of tea. I'll have one with you." I was treated as part of the family in a lot of places. I still see some of my old customers in Morrison's.