

Hamble Local History Society held a series of meetings where members talked about their own, or their family's, experiences in the village. These were popular and became more like discussions than talks, with members of the audience confirming dates and details. The following article is based on a tape recording of the meeting, and is in an informal style to reflect the atmosphere.

## WORKING IN HAMBLE VILLAGE GARAGES

My name is David Wilde and I was born in Hamble. For most of my life I've worked in the motor trade in the village. When the petrol station closed a few years ago, it was the end of an era, because it was the last of what was known as Hamble Garage. When I left school in 1954 it was a bitter winter and, for my sins, I decided to take a job at the local garage, much to the disgust of my father who was an aircraft man. The garage was already up and running, having been started by Les Walker in a wooden shed alongside the Coronation Arms, or the Harrier as we know it now. He formed a relationship with the landlord, Jack Austin, who advised him on how to run it as a business and not an 'odd job' concern.

By the time I joined, Les had moved to the village garage, which was a building opposite the White Hart. In fact it was the garage for Hookers who ran the bakery next to the pub, and was where they kept their vehicles. Les took it on, but it was already up and running with petrol pumps and things like that. He had also established the facility known as Longmans Shop, which is now Barclays Bank. This was also a repair shop, but dealt mainly with cycles. I started my apprenticeship on the princely sum of 30/- a week and, as I said, the weather was pretty cold and dismal. A guy, who was obviously a mechanic because he had overalls on, said "Who are you?" I said, "I'm Dave Wilde, the new apprentice." " Good God!" He said, "Not two of you!" So, obviously, there was another apprentice as well. It turned out to be Johnnie Akland, another local chap.

The first day didn't get off to a very good start, because I remember being told to get the kettle on, and make a cup of tea. So I took this rather posh electric kettle, filled it up and put it on, but on the heating stove which was already going well. I learned my first swear words then. \*\*\*\*\* "What're you doin' with that kettle, Wilde? It's the only one we've got!" And that was the first day. In fairness, it was a pretty basic arrangement, and the luxury that chaps have these days like ramps and other equipment, just did not exist in those days. You were lucky if you had a trolley jack and a couple of axle stands. Some years later we dug a pit, but that kept filling up with water and wasn't very successful. But we did have a pit and things progressed from there.

In those days cars were pretty basic things. If you had a car with a heater in it, you had a posh car. A 4 speed gear box with electric components on it? I never saw a radio in a car. Often air or vacuum operated wipers, when you went uphill they stopped. But nevertheless, those cars were a joy for well-to-do people. Where I lived in Verdon Avenue, there were only 3, possibly 4 people who owned a car. Nowadays count the houses that haven't got a car!

To give Les his due, he did try to get us to do things the right way, and I thank him for his patience and understanding, especially with two lads who weren't very keen to work in such basic conditions. One coke stove over in the corner of the workshop was all we had. I suppose we had the luxury of the bakehouse over the road, and Roy Hooker's lardie cakes. We used to go over there and get our buckets of coke from him, walking through the bakery while they were kneading dough. There were perks to it as well, because Hookers used to keep their delivery van in the garage, which was a condition of being able to use the building. At the end of the day, there were usually one or two cakes left over in the van, and we used to help ourselves.

It was a pretty varied existence because, being in a village like this, it wasn't just a garage, it was a general DIY shop. If you had anything mechanical that went wrong, you took it to the local garage to be fixed. A garden mower, or bicycles, motorcycles, cars, lorries, we did the whole thing - that's how we existed. We also had to fix TV aerials, not much to do with cars, but that is what was expected of us. There was the river as well, which was a good source of business for us. It was quite common for a local yachtsman to drop his Seagull outboard motor over the side. If he was lucky, he retrieved it and brought it back to us to sort it out and get it working again. A lot of people bought generators to supply their houses with electricity. So we were getting single cylinder Listers and Petters diesels to repair, which was something the bigger dealers didn't get. And, I remember my first experience of working on a boat. You soon learned to tie things on, especially the tools, and I had all these spanners on bits of string because, if you didn't lose them over the side you might lose them in the bilges. I remember the first time we went out on the river to fix some chap's motor, and we had to take the batteries out. We stood them on the side deck and, when we came to refit them, we found that they'd fallen into the river!

The shop at Barclays Bank was quite big with a good size workshop, and the two Williams brothers ran that, Tony and his brother Geoff. Tony was quite successful in the motor trade, because he had a big hire business in Southampton. He was renowned for going to the motor show and ordering 500 cars! Geoff was a motorcycle man, so it was a bike cum TV repair shop, and anything else that we didn't want to do at the garage. One of the radio chaps from the air college used to come in and pick up people's radios and fix them, and do other electrical repairs.

Petrol was quite an important side of the business then. We used to sell National Benzole, and Pool. The shop sold Cleveland Discol, quite a sophisticated petrol. I think the tanks are still in that garage, and there used to be a plinth outside which the petrol pumps stood on. Engine oil was delivered to the garage in what looked like large milk churns, and we had big tin cabinets with pumps on top to pour the oil into. We used to display it in pint bottles, and it was part of my job to fill them. Every time a car came for petrol, we would check the oil and water, tyres etc. Sometimes we got a 6d tip, because it was a 'hands on' job. We sold a lot of paraffin for use in home heaters too, at 2/- a gallon. We also used it to clean our hands. Another thing that came into our lives was sawdust, not for putting in cars, but for cleaning the floor. We got it from Lukes Yard in Back Street, now Rope Walk, where we filled our sacks from their dustbins. After wiping the floor with paraffin,

then scrubbing with water, we spread some sawdust, swept it up and burned it in the fire.

Mrs Austin at the Coronation Arms kept the books. One day she phoned and said, "David, you'd better get Mr so-and-so's car back because it hasn't got any oil in it, and he won't be very pleased about that." I thought, "What is she talking about. Of course it's got oil in it," and I said so. "Well, you haven't put it on the job sheet," she replied. Mrs Austin kept a tight hand on the financial side of things! Later, the Austins moved to the Festival of Britain pub in Burley. One of the jobs I enjoyed most was to take the garage's books out there by motorcycle, for Mrs Austin's attention. I never got a pint out of them, but it was a nice ride out in the forest.

The wages weren't very good, compared with what the lads were earning in the factories, and I began to have doubts. But our jobs were secure and there was always work to do, which wasn't the same in the factories. We spent a lot of time in the bakery, because it was warm, and we used to see Roy Hooker and Bert Jones, who used to bake the bread. They were always absolutely covered in flour, and how they lived to the age they did, I shall never know. Dick Hooker did the deliveries, and he also lived to a ripe old age. I never did find out how they put the holes in doughnuts!

The houses we had in the village were really quite varied. One of the most impressive was where the Emmons lived in the Copse, down School Lane. A fabulously big house, huge gardens, big greenhouses, swimming pool, the lot! We used to look after their cars. They had two, a Rover and a big American Lincoln. The workshop they kept them in had a parquet floor which was better than most people had in their front room. It was another world! He was a retired millionaire, doctor or medical man I believe. A funny story about him was that, when I eventually got my driving licence, I used to drive a Ford 10 pickup truck into Southampton to collect parts. I was asked one day to take the Emmons to London Airport in the Rover. I'd never driven that sort of car in my life, but we got there ok. But I got lost coming back. Pop Emmons was with me, having seen off his children to America, and he'd fallen asleep in the back of the car. Although I eventually found my way back to Southampton, he was none the wiser. Unfortunately, his large American car got demolished when Les was driving it and ran into a petrol tanker. It was a beautiful car, with all sorts of electrical gadgets.

Another interesting character was Batty Carr, Captain Carr who ran a charter boat on the river. He also had a rather large Daimler, which must have been 25 horsepower. During the petrol crisis over the Suez affair, when we had petrol rationing, the average driver managed ok. But Batty never had enough petrol coupons to run his Daimler, so he used to run it on paraffin. It produced clouds of smoke! We also used to see people from TS Mercury, who brought their vehicles to us. Another lady, Miss Evans, who lived in the Lodge to the Vicarage, had a little BSA sports car. To look after it, she put a paraffin heater under the bonnet - anti freeze was not common in those days. I came out of the garage one day, and she asked me for some petrol, and to check the tyres and oil. I opened the bonnet, and there was the paraffin heater! She'd driven around Hamble with it swinging under the bonnet!

I also remember the Whitworths who lived in Ferryside Cottage. He was a director of a London goldsmith's, Bensons. Mrs Whitworth was a bit of a taskmistress, and she had a brand new Volkswagon Beetle. Mr Whitworth had a lovely, black Mercedes, a beautiful car. It came in one day to have windscreen washers fitted. It was at the time when these devices were coming in, and Mr Whitworth wanted some fitted on his car. Les told us to keep away, and said he would do the job. He had to drill the bonnet to put the jets in, and you can imagine what he did. The drill zipped across the bonnet taking the paint off.

Driving made a big difference to my life, because I could road-test cars myself. I remember going over Hamble Halt bridge, I wasn't actually driving, and the bonnet flew open and across the top of the car. Another chap drove out without the wheel nuts being tightened, and he nearly lost a wheel. We used to look after some commercial vehicles, but we couldn't get them into the workshop, so we used to use Bartlett's yard. Unfortunately, some geese also lived there, and they used to flap and hiss, and fly about. There was a Civil Defence wagon in the village, and a chap called Mike Kidd used to drive it. Also the local collier's wagon was looked after by us, out in the yard in all weathers. One or two disasters I can remember. I was under a car one day, when the hydraulic jack came down and pinned me under the car. Fortunately, someone came along and jacked it up again and pulled me out. I thought that it was the end of my working days! Thereafter, I always double checked. We never had ramps like today. We did everything lying on our backs on a board which had wheels on, pulling ourselves under the vehicle. I remember Les had a great vocabulary, he'd be under a car and say, "Get me a bloody hammer. Get me a bloody chisel," and things like that. He had huge hands, and was of Welsh origin. How he ever did nuts and bolts up with such huge hands, I don't know. The Doctor had a nice Rover, and would drive in and say, "Fill my car up with petrol!" We never argued!

Funny things like spanners come into my mind. The garage had some, relying on mechanics to provide their own, and I can remember spending my whole fortnight's holiday pay on a set of sockets. I've still got them! We treasured such things, and every night we used to clean them and lock them in a toolbox, because they were essential for our job. I remember the first car I bought, a Morris 8 from a chap called Morgan Harris. He had a big house in Lowford, and was a bit of an Arthur Daley. He was asking £75 for it, a staggering sum. I brought it to the garage the next day, and they all said, "What have you got there, where did you get it? Oh no!" Apparently, I had been done! Money was never plentiful, and we used to pool what we had in the pub at night to see if we could buy some petrol. I used to say, "I've got the car, how much have we got for petrol?" Then we'd all pile in and drive off.

I can remember the aircraft being towed through the village from Faireys. The Fire Brigade - Roy Garnier used to drive the fire engine, and he an old Royal Enfield motor bike which I am sure I could hear him starting right down at Faireys. He would race up this end with a tremendous noise. A lot of the parts for repairs used to be delivered by the bus company. Lankester's and Croke's used to act as agencies, and we used to go down and collect them. It saved us from running backwards and forwards to Southampton. But later, suppliers used to deliver them, and there was one unfortunate incident. A girl pulled up in a Morris 1000 delivery van, got out and brought the parts in. We

looked round and saw the van disappearing down the hill. I ran after it, and caught it just as it was about to mount the pavement outside Mrs Keats's shop.

Later on, the petrol station opened. It was owned by Shell, who asked Les to run it for them. He tried to sell parts himself, but Shell wouldn't let him. It was built on the site of a big thatched cottage, which I think was a restaurant. This was demolished, some bungalows built, and the petrol station installed. This was the first place that we had a ramp to work on vehicles, a great milestone in the garage's life - this would be about 1958/59. I actually served the first gallon of petrol there, to Mr Jack Austin. We had some interesting characters there, one was a little coloured chap who ran the lubrication bay for us. He also used to operate the ramp, and used to turn up in his best suit, carrying an umbrella and briefcase. Then, he'd put his overalls on and start work. Another chap who worked there was Louis Davis, who had a hard time during the war as a prisoner. He worked a lot of hours at the garage. I left in 1961 after a 5 year apprenticeship, including some good days on day-release at Tech College, where I was called 'Mr Wilde.'

The students at the Air College were also customers, and most of them were relatively wealthy coming from well-off families. They would turn up with some pretty fancy cars, one had a brand new Austin, another a BSA Gold Flash motorcycle. One chap had a display in his window, a large phallic symbol. The local Bobby was a bit of a character who rode a motorcycle, and he was always on the ear'ole. The other lad who worked there, Johnny Ackland, was also motorcyclist. He used to tear up the road on his HRD scramble machine, much to the annoyance of the local copper who said, "I'll get you one day!"

Odd things we got up to. One of the shipyards was run by a Bruce Campbell, who was the brother of Sir Donald Campbell. He wanted a tractor to pull his boats up the slip, and we took him to Portsmouth, to Harry Pound's yard, a notorious dealer in ex-MOD equipment. Bruce had spotted a tractor there and wanted it checked over. Afterwards, we looked around the yard, and saw some amazing stuff. There was a huge packing case, and we prised the end off to see what was in it. Inside was a steam engine, a railway engine! Bruce got the tractor back to Hamble somehow, and used it for towing boats.

Question: What do you miss most about Old Hamble?

In those days everything was delivered to your door. The Baker, the Butcher, you never had to go out shopping. I used to go into Southampton on a Hants and Dorset bus for 9 old pence, down to Woolston, onto the floating bridge. A bus up to East St, then shop there or St Mary's St, most of the rest was pretty flat due to the bombing. Another thing was the picture night at the Memorial Hall. A mobile cinema used to come on Monday nights and show all the latest films. The hall was heaving when we had Elvis Presley in Jailhouse Rock, and people even sat on cupboards. The grumpy old chap who used to run the cinema had a limp, and a big rubber torch which he whacked us with if we misbehaved. Roy Hooker, Roy Garnier etc, throwing things down the front to annoy people. There was a Boys Club in the village, in the grounds of the Vicarage, behind the Scouts Hut. It was run by Mr and Mrs Young, beans on toast for penny, a game of snooker. Scrumping from the

Vicar's orchard. We never had to leave the village for entertainment. Bar billiards in the King and Queen, half a pint would last all night. Then, a big night at the Vic on Friday, and sometimes the Bugle. I didn't, but most lads got involved with boating. In those days it was a much smaller community, and everybody knew everybody. Towing aircraft across the road, I remember that. They used to tie them down and start the engines to run them in. Sometimes they ran all day and the noise was terrible, but we just accepted it and there wasn't much point in complaining.

There were two sad events I remember about the garage. One was the death of Les, and the other was when Trevor took his own life in the workshop. I grew up with him, and we did everything together. I left in 1963 and went into the retail side of the business in Southampton. One thing that puzzles me is, all of the businesses I worked for in Hamble no longer exist. The petrol station, Petters, Glovers, all now gone!