

Spitfire Makers Project:

Notes from Conversations with Don Smith (August 2020)

Notes made for the Spitfire Makers project following conversations with Vicki Stacey on 1st/4th/18th August 2020.

AUTOMETALCRAFT (EMSWORTH ROAD)

Mr Randall owned a tobacconist on the corner of Shirley High Street and Emsworth Road and he had the building constructed in 1919. It was originally built as a dance hall but this wasn't successful.

[note: Don's family lived on the opposite corner of Emsworth Road & Shirley High Street]

Bryce White (Timber Firm based out at Redbridge where Newman's Garage is today) took over the building and used it to prepare timber. They had a shop on the corner with racking and sold all sorts of timber for DIY etc. They were in the Emsworth Road building until about 1935.

In 1935, **Autometalcraft** took over the building. Company originated in Brighton and were linked to 'Wallace Tins'. The Metal Foreman at Autometalcraft, **Tom Hollingdale** moved from Brighton and lived at 59 Romsey Road, opposite Clarendon Road.

Autometalcraft comprised eventually of three buildings at the Emsworth Road site.

Originally, they had the brick building and the very large metal building. The ground floor of the brick building was the **Panel Beating shop** [where Don worked] and above was the **Trimming & Paint shops**; cars accessed the upper floor by a large commercial lift.

The large metal building was the **Fitters for engine and mechanical repairs** and the **Chassis-Smiths shop** for repair to damaged chassis.

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The third building was a two-storey brick built building and in the early 1930's was a laundry. About 1934 / 35 it became the 'Tizer Drinks' company. This building was taken over by Autometalcraft in 1940. The ground floor was a **Pipeshop** for production of pipes for jettison tanks and aircraft. The upper floor was **part pipeshop** and **part canteen** run by a Mrs Furnaval; "a formidable lady" according to Don. There was access from this area to the roof of the large metal building to a '**Roof Spotters**' position. This was to provide early warning to the workforce of approaching enemy aircraft during raids so staff could access the air raid shelters. Air raids were too frequent and often halted production in the factories when a raid was much further away. System of 'spotters' introduced at factories and at Autometalcraft a wooden bridge was constructed by knocking out the window at the back building (in the canteen) and building a wooden bridge across to the roof of the large metal building. At Autometalcraft, the roof spotter would sound a bell as a warning if enemy planes were spotted. [Note: A rattle was supposed to be used in the event of a 'gas' warning.]

Prior to 1940, the work was on repairing cars but because of petrol rationing this work began to dry up. Earlier in 1940(?), Autometalcraft had taken on a contract with ??? Company at Hythe and were producing brass tanks for Motor Torpedo Boats (MTBs). The tanks were 6foot long and 5ft square and were baffled. They were also producing ventilators for the MTBs [this was Don's first job]. These were all handmade from 14 separate pieces which had to be hand-shaped.

Following the bombing of Supermarine factories in Woolston, there was a visit by 2 or 3 men in suits [Don thought they seemed like government men but might have also included a

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Supermarine representative] and the company began to take on war work making parts for Spitfires. [Note: in September 1940 some car work was ongoing but ceased completely by the end of that year as the company switched over completely to war production].

Don actually worked in the downstairs part of the Emsworth Road building [note: this is now an Engineering Company & is location where John Beck, Solent Sky, filmed Don in 2018]

The upstairs part of the building (now Maskers Theatre) was a **Spray Shop** for cars and there was a big lift to get the cars up onto the upper floor. The **Spray Shop** remained in action during the war and war work in the spray shop included articles needing preparatory paint such as the air ducts and jettison tanks. Final coats would be applied elsewhere.

Pre-War Personnel at Autometalcraft

Don remembers many of his colleagues at Autometalcraft “but not all” and those recalled are listed here.

Manager of Autometalcraft was **Mr. Northeast** who lived at the end of Oakley Road (Wimpson Road end) in new 1930s houses. Known as ‘Bloody Hell Tom’ which was the expression he used frequently to Don’s foreman who was **Tom Hollingdale**.

Undermanagers included **George Curtis** and **Len Phillips** who (after WW2) started up Wimpson Bodyworks which originally was based in Wimpson Lane School (built 1890) but the council moved them to build housing and they ended up in Northam.

Autometalcraft had a **Fitting Shop**, in which worked:

- **Fred Lingfield (Fitter)**
- **Tommy Hankins (Fitter)**

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- Leonard Leonard (Fitter)

Alongside Don in the **Panel Shop** worked:

- Tom Hollingdale (Foreman)
- 'Blondie' Collis
- Cyril Strickland

The **Carpenter / Storeman** was Fred Herrige

In the **Paint Shop** were:

- Rob Hobday (Foreman)
- Don Grimes
- Miss Marjorie Hamilton
- Bill Castle

In the **Chassis-Smith department**:

- Chris Burgess

In the **Trimming Shop**:

- Ernie Best

All of the people above are designated to their pre-war trades. After Autometalcraft went on to war work Don says "of course, we were all involved quite differently, although the production of some metal parts and fairings were only done by skilled panel-beaters".

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1940's Personnel at Autometalcraft

Wiff Stilwell was **Foreman of the Pipe Bending and Forming Workshop**. He was employed specifically for this work, which was not an element of the Autometalcraft factory's pre-war car work. He had quite a large staff producing copper pipes of various formations and shapes, up to 4 inches in diameter. These were for the Motor Torpedo Boats (MTBs). Also the shaped copper pipes were required for the **Jettison Tanks** for Spitfires which were about ½ inch and ¾ inch in diameter. The larger pipes were shaped and formed on a 50 ton hydraulic press

During the 1940s onwards, staff numbers grew at Autometalcraft from around a team of 30 staff to the point that "you didn't know everyone" (approximately 300 plus employees). New employees would be trained at the **Government Training Centre** at Millbrook before joining the workforce at Autometalcraft. Don remembers one chap coming from Channel Islands and another from France following occupation of these countries.

May were young women (including teenagers). During the Shirley Heritage Project, Don shared a photograph three ladies on their lunch break in the old yard right at the back of the Emsworth Road site and shared their names:

- **Nell Sennett** (who was to become Don's wife for 42 years)
- **Pat Pruce** (LH side of photograph)
- **Lilian (?)** (sat down). Sadly, Lilian died from TB 3 months after this photo was taken.

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Spitfire Production & Division of Labour

The whole works were involved on various aspects of Jettison Tank production. The skilled panel-beaters were sometimes involved in shaping **farings** for other aircraft from Duralamin. This was treated in a salt bath process to soften it. If the subsequent shaping operation was not completed within 20 minutes, the item would be returned to the salt bath for re-softening. The salt bath treatment was done by an outside firm as Autometalcraft did not have salt-bath facilities. Following the salt-bath treatment, the metal would then be brought back to be wheeled and shaped by skilled metalworkers (who were all men). There was one woman who worked for Autometalcraft prior to WW2, **Marjorie Hamilton** – who worked in the Paint Shop rubbing down the cars in preparation for painting. She continued to work for the company during the war.

Girls who worked at Autometalcraft tended to do the repetitive jobs such as riveting, completing the assembly of the Jettison Tanks, making brackets, silver-soldering etc.

Workplace Memory

Don recalls '**Blondie**' Collis, a lad a bit older than him [note: Don joined Autometalcraft in a the age of 14 years].. 'Blondie' and Don were responsible for moving the Wheeling Machines which had to be concreted into the floor & holes drilled in the ceiling to take their weight. Once the concrete had not set properly and the machine fell over on its first use.

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AUTOMETALCRAFT (RE CABITE HALL)

Bill Horsewell, Deputy Foreman in the Pipe-bending workshop at Autometalcraft became the Foreman of the Recabite Hall. Bill lived in Wellington Road near the (then) Gardners Arms so was well-placed as his home was very close to the hall.

All women worked at the hall – mostly young women so were known as ‘Bill’s Harem’. Don recalls that “the girls were in charge”! There were approximately 30 girls who worked in the hall– from teenagers to early 20s.

The work done in the hall was silver-soldering (rather than brazing) pipework. Because this could be done at a lower heat than brazing, the gas board fitted the pipes into the Recabite Hall so that coal gas & air could be used for the silver-soldering work. Working on jettison tanks and air ducts – nothing big but all component parts.

Don isn’t sure about the addition to the Hall at the front of the building. He didn’t think there was any form of ‘pill-box’ built outside. There was a pill-box on the land opposite the Ice House pub (now recreation ground). This was a hexagonal shape and was built in to look like part of a building.

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AUTOMETALCRAFT (SWANICK)

Don never visited the site which was taken over in Swanick so can't provide exact details of its location but "it was close to the boatyard" [now Moody's]. Don remembers a Bedford lorry with wooden benches, or 'box seats', would transport the Autometalcraft workers out to the Swanick site each day. The twenty or so workers from Autometalcraft who would go daily to the Swanick site were all men and were local Southampton-based.

The driver of the Bedford Lorry was called **Len**.

Don shared his story of cycling through an air-raid to take a bucket (as the can didn't fit on his handlebars!) of siphoned petrol to the lorry which had stopped on the forecourt of **Wadham's Garage** on the Avenue. Turned out that the lorry hadn't run out of petrol – the brakes had jammed as they rushed back to Southampton during the air-raid. [note: a full version of this story is included in Don's oral history interview for the Shirley Heritage Project].

Don's workmate **Bill Allen** was directed to work at Swanick making air ducts. After the war, Bill and some of the other lads (Bill Castle, Cyril) went to work for **Autocrash** in Henstead Road workshop (linked to **Modern Light Cars** owned by Stan Smith and where Don worked in Lodge Road post-war). Bill Allen emigrated to Canada and ended up as Fire Chief in Ontario.

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REDBRIDGE GOVERNMENT TRAINING CENTRE

Nell Smith nee Sennett (who became Don's first wife) was from Portswood and volunteered for metalwork training at Redbridge. She was then transferred to Autometalcraft in Emsworth Road where she and Don met.

Others came from further afield. Don remembers a Policeman from Plymouth coming to work at Autometalcraft after signing up for war work. Approximately 75% of the workers coming from Redbridge were women. Mostly young women but a few middle-aged women.

SEWARDS GARAGE (WINCHESTER ROAD)

Sewards garage had a long ramp up to the upper floor and Don saw big lorries with wing segments coming in and out of the building. This was during the daytime.

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SOLENT CARPET COMPANY

Based in South Mill Road in Millbrook, off Regents Park Road with a back entrance in Stanton Road which most staff used.

Don and Nell both worked here – Nell had worked here prior to the war making carpets.

Don worked here in 1942/1943 when a bout of pleurisy meant his Doctor advised him not to do Factory work [note: there is more information in Don's recorded interview about working on the trams in 1943]

There was a 50/50 split in the workforce between men and women at Solent Carpet Company.

At Solent Carpet Company, the looms & benches were pushed aside although the machines were belt driven by the system used for working the looms.

Work here included (not necessarily Spitfire specific):

- pilot seats (making the metal shell – a 'bucket seat' shape),
- co-pilot seats (different shape to pilot seats as 'sit up and beg' style seat),
- jerry cans for the desert,
- bomb releases,
- air ducts for amphibious tanks

Solent Carpet Company moved to Budds Lane, Romsey after the war and at some stage a DIY company was based in the building.