

## **Derbyshire joiners and woodworkers**

I have penned a line or two to 'Bygones' before about various subjects and in particular the railways of Derbyshire, and their immense input into the modern world and of course the growth of the city of Derby. Along with this expansion began the start of a skilled base in the old township which many think was unrivalled throughout the country. Naturally many of the oldest trades involved working with wood in some capacity and it is with this in mind that I began to think more deeply about woodworking and just what it has provided us with and indeed in many cases the legacy it has left. My father was a joiner and a cabinet maker and whilst growing up at our various homes I was constantly gazing upon a host of woodworking tools and a stream of crafted objects and furniture.

When living on Cherry Tree Hill in St Johns Drive our garden butted up to other equally long gardens in Cleveland Avenue, where I ultimately bought a house myself. At the top of the plot running at right angles was the well-tended garden belonging to the senior figure of Denis Cholerton.

Mr C, I readily recalled from my first days when entering the County at the start of my teens: in those days over fifty years ago he ran the village shop in Spondon opposite the church. My father and the retired Mr Cholerton spent hours chatting over the low hedge that separated the vegetables. The topic nearly always centred on joinery and the respective merits of various timbers. Our elderly neighbour readily spoke of his youth spent on the cusp of Derby's west end and of his apprenticeship and early working years following the First World War. One of his favourite tales was how an elder brother lost his cool one Sunday evening whilst still learning his trade, also as a joiner; he threw his sandwich tin across the room in a fit of pique and announced that he was not going to work the following morning. Their mother readily agreed but also advised him in no uncertain terms that he would go to the town's drill hall first thing the following morning and sign on for nine years in the Royal Engineers; this he duly did. As the ageing Denis ruefully recalled 'you didn't argue with me mam'.

Mr Cholerton's father who was also a craftsman in wood of some considerable note, had informed him that in Derbyshire the windows at the front elevation of any house should always be one seventh of the surface area: where this pearl of wisdom originated no one seemed to know but the Cholerton family of wood craftsmen adhered to it steadfastly. Another story he once shared harked back to his boyhood days and again involved woodworking. His older sister had married a

timber merchant in Shardlow; the then young Denis used to catch the tram to the outskirts of the old Derby borough at Alvaston and walk the remainder of the journey to the old inland port where he spent his summer holidays assisting her husband. On one occasion they drew up with their horse drawn vehicle near the current A6 to fell a large tree, accompanied by a team of workers. Time after time as they tried to bring down the leafy monster the saw blade snapped or snagged. Approaching from the other side of the trunk resulted in a similar outcome, eventually the tree gave way with an almighty crash and the onlooking ensemble were astonished to see a huge cannonball embedded in the felled trunk. The culprit was most likely a sphere of iron of English Civil War vintage that had been shot into the tree during a skirmish or practice: this part of the County boasts a chequered history in relation to that historical period when Royalty and Parliament were opposed. In his later years I know that Mr Cholerton left his home on a weekly basis to walk down Raynesway to Wilmorton college to teach woodworking to another generation engaged in working with timber – I often wondered if his students were also recipients of his colourful tales and story-telling.

My father when also working for various Derby building firms also spent time in rural locations within the County plying his trade and encountering odd situations particularly in old properties. Single-handed he was once despatched by his employers to work upon the timbers in the bell tower at Kirk Ireton church. " I didn't really like working there on my own" he recalled. The whole time I felt very isolated and felt I was being watched". His thoughts were probably influenced by having earlier being teamed up with his Spondon workmate George Belfield who had spent his apprenticeship shaping coffins for an old Derby based Funeral Directors business.

My father had first encountered George whilst working for the Co-op and when they were engaged in the same type of joinery - their collective tasks had a depressing effect on my father's normally cheerful countenance. George by contrast was quite at home in such an environment and readily recalled times from his early years measuring up cadavers to get the measurements and detail of coffins 'just right'. George's favourite recall was of an incident when still an apprentice; with an older colleague they journeyed out to remote farmhouse near the Staffordshire border to collect the casket measurements for an elderly lady who had just passed. The corpse was stretched out on the immense kitchen table: alongside, her equally elderly aged spinster sister gave precise instructions regarding her farewell.' Lay her out properly and put

her in this dress for her swansong' they were told. Bowing his head in respect and readily agreeing, the young craftsman asked' - was it her favourite frock, m'duck? 'Not at all' came the reply 'I bought her that gown in 1922 - she never wore it - she'll wear the blighter now'. Like many in decades passed, George was something of a character, shortly after my father had passed over I went to visit him at his home in Spondon village and noticed a change in his living room. For many years, a large fish tank had dominated his windowsill containing a single goldfish - on this occasion it was wrapped totally around with a large sheet of brown paper, secured with a piece of string. 'Why?', I enquired. 'I got sick of watching him swim about' said George 'and I've no doubt he's as sick of me; I thought I'd give us both a break'. Another eccentricity of his involved that of an ancient cannonball - similar no doubt to one a young Denis Cholerton had gazed upon years before. George kept his antique immersed in a bucket of water at the top of his garden just in case it exploded!

Most of my adult years in Derbyshire were spent in the City's rail industry and in my teenage years before that, chasing trains both locally and further afield. (I've had the rail bug all my life). My first Christmas spent in the County when aged 13 brought me into the company of my Aunt's father who had spent his entire working life coach building and woodworking in Derby's celebrated Carriage Works. I often wish my then youthful mind had quizzed him further on his working life: starting as an apprentice in Midland Railway days, the then elderly Mr Jeffrey had spent a lifetime of witnessing the changes in construction and repair techniques involved with railway rolling stock. The Works has been long known for its expertise in this arena and thankfully still is, but in the days before the dawn of plastics and synthetic materials, Derby's 'Carriage side' as it was known utilised a wealth and wide variety of timbers sourced from right throughout the Globe and former Empire. The name of Pullman is still acknowledged as a byword for quality and opulence but few realise that that the American creator of that brand of status and immense comfort was first encouraged to bring his style to our shores at none other than Derby. Pullman coaches first made their UK bow in central Mercia on the Midland Railway. In fact, during the mid 1960s when first exploring the County during trainspotting trips, I can clearly recall gazing from the carriage window at speed in the South Wingfield area at a grounded Pullman coach body being then used as a tool van or store by platelayers and trackside workers. The Yankee type clerestory roof and trans-continental build lines were still evident for all to see but I doubt if the epitome and former zenith of Victorian and Edwardian grandeur still

existed within its demoted shell. Also, when first coming to the East Midlands, I oft used to spend my Saturday mornings at the Strand museum before further venturing to the Midland station. The superb 'O' gauge model railway featuring the Midland Railway within the County ran for about two hours up until about mid-day. This spectacle for a rail obsessed youngster like myself was a sheer delight. Years later my father took his trade to work for Derby Museums both at the riverside Industrial building and at the Strand site. One of his tasks aided by his long term pal George was to undertake the preparatory work for the re-introduction of the model for public display after dormant years in storage. For many years his work and that of others was side-lined, due no doubt to economics cuts; however, I believe it has now returned and is in situ for all to see. If that is indeed the case I must view next time when I come to Derby – I feel I have a personal link to the model layout on several levels. I would love to gaze upon some of my late father's work again and that of his old Spondon pal. Before coming to the Midlands my father once advised me about a rather amusing woodworking situation he encountered. Prior to being placed in central England he had plied his trade in enumerable locations, Tyneside, Glasgow, Southern East Anglia and elsewhere, additionally like many of his peers spending time in uniform during wartime service. A lot of his days had been spent fitting out ships on rivers such as the Tyne, Clyde and Colne – sadly Derbyshire being landlocked could not offer him more maritime linked woodworking experience but compensated in other varied ways.

In the early 50s when working on an admiralty contract fitting out a minesweeper; the workforce of joiners and carpenters were instructed to use old stored and seasoned timbers for the ratings quarters and the newly introduced kiln dried wood only in areas where the officers on the vessel would be placed – this they duly did. Upon completion of the able seamen and matelots' quarters they looked superb but the finish in the officers' cabins with the kiln dried wood looked vastly inferior. Naturally there was an uproar but as my Dad rightly mused 'you cannot season timber quickly, it needs time and age to mature, just like learning your trade'. This he used to emphasise by quoting a Scottish joiner he heard speak at a woodworking convention just after the War when woodworkers were fast tracked by the government over an eighteenth month span of training as opposed to the previous then standard seven-year apprenticeship. 'Timber has a soul' spouted his older colleague, 'and as such it such not be placed in the hands of triflers or fools?'

My own recall regarding joiners particularly in Derby seem to involve a lot of waiting around. The meeting rooms for the union of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers in the town was in Charnwood Street and three or four times a year my father used to ask me to drive there in order for him to pay his union dues. While he quickly popped in to see the secretary, Mr Hodgkin, (my young scouting pal Ant's dad) the five-minute slot he promised would invariably take over an hour whilst he no doubt talked timber with the like-minded ensemble inside the room. I know I almost inevitably seemed to spend a lengthy cold dark evening sitting in the car outside their HQ. Joiners of years past and possibly even now for all I know, took their work and trade very seriously. While working for Derby museum my father was asked to fit a heavy cabinet with shelving onto a wall adjacent to some stairs used by the public. After careful examination it revealed a stud wall that would not adequately bear the weight and my mild mannered father steadfastly refused to fit it on the grounds of safety – for a while he was not popular with the museum management but stuck rigidly to his guns – for if something was not right regarding load bearing and safety, it could just not be countenanced.

Finally, I would like to close again with a thought in connection to the old central library in Derby and the museum buildings in the Strand. If you have any interest whatsoever regarding quality woodworking, pay a visit to the library building with its entrance in the Wardwick. Instead of just picking up a book from the shelves, glance upwards to the gallery above. The craftsmanship is simply superb and is a lasting testimony to the best of woodworking and craftsmanship that can be offered.

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