Newbold Verdon Parish Archive

Transcript of Conversation with John Finney about Newbold Verdon Woodyard, now known as Verdon Timber

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RK: When did you start working at the sawmills? 1965

JF: It has always been a family business. It was started originally by my dad's uncles' dad. His name was John Finney. And it started at Shackerstone originally and then it moved to what we call 'the Parson's Yard where the bungalows in Bells Lane are today. He had a small sawmill there, because he used to have the old saw pit.

RK: What was he using the sawmill for?

JF: I would guess it would be agriculture at that time. They had the saw pit there and they lived in one of the houses on Dragon Lane. Bells Lane used to be called the Backey Lane. I haven't got the exact time it was started but it is going back some years.

From there they bought the front yard of where we are now. It used to be an old Victorian ash tip. This would be after the war That front yard is where it all started and where we used to be based, originally. But with it being an ash tip it wasn't solid ground. As we brought the trees round for cutting we had to use a crane with a jib on with a four-wheel drive otherwise you couldn't move you would sink in. Its fourteen foot of ashes. When dad dug the pit to put the band saw in the concrete block, he had to dig fourteen foot to get to solid ground.

RK: When did you go to work there?

JF: I went to work there in 1965, aged fifteen. We were producing for agriculture, but before we got there they were producing a lot of coffin boards out of elm. They also cut a lot of ash for shoe heels to feed the shoe trade. I have been there since I left school and I am still there now even though the business has been taken over.

When I left school and started working there, we used to cut a lot of mining timber: lagging boards for the archways they worked under. Cutternogs and chocks.

Some years on, the French started exporting mining timber to Britain, which cut the price a lot, so that's when we moved into the pallet trade which it still is now. We would cut the pallet boards from the trees. We did a lot of timber supplies for Tubes at Desford. They needed elm blocks for fitting under the machinery, but they wore out and we would supply them monthly. The off cuts we used for the pallets and we sold the sawdust back to the Tubes for clearing up oil spills and leaks.

RK You have had to ebb and flow with industry as it changed?

JF: Oh yes. Pallets are not a big profit margin trade, but the quantity is there. So provided you do the volume it is a viable proposition. Before we started on the pallet trade we used to make racks and mangers for the cattle. All the timber was cut out of the trees and in the carpenters' shop we would make the mangers and sheep troughs and hedge stakes.

RK: Where would you source the wood from?

JF: As locally as possible at that time. My dad's uncle would go out to the contacts he had. We had a lot of trees when they extended Castle Donnington airport (East Midlands) runway. A lot of the farmers knew us, and we would buy the trees from them. Fortunately with having the Caterpillar Factory on the doorstep we started producing pallets for them and it got more and more. We couldn't produce the timber ourselves, so then we

had to import it from Portugal. We used to use Portuguese Maritime Pine. We get it from Scotland and Wales now. It is basically pine.

RK: You have been quite a vital part of the local commercial infrastructure over the years?

JF: Yes. When my dad came out of the army he joined his uncle Wilf. When John Finney had the yard on Bells Lane I found a sign which said he was a carpenter, painter, wheelwright and undertaker. While he was at Bells Lane his wife had a shop opposite the Miners' Institute. I can remember the tapered blue paper bags you got to put the sweets in.

RK What was it like to work at the Woodyard in the early days? Was there much Health and Safety?

JF: No, just common sense. We never had health and safety. In fact, we only had two lightbulbs lighting the saw. It wasn't the best. The roof leaked and there were no sides around the building. Just open. Our hands were frozen in the winter.

RK: Have there been any momentous events in the time you have worked there?

JF: Once the Duke of Edinburgh came to the Tubes at Desford. The way they made the tubes they led the World, and the Duke came to see. They wanted to give him a brass plaque and we made the wooded backing board for it.

RK: What about the totem pole that stood at the front of the yard?

JF: I asked a friend, Tony Gardener, from Market Bosworth to carve it for me. We often found him pieces of wood for him to carve for other people and I thought wouldn't it be notice if we had something really nice to have at the front. It would also be a landmark for lorry drivers to find us as well. He carved it out of a 30' soft-wood tree. Once it was carved we had it pressure treated.

RK: You told me that you still loved your job, so what is it that has given you so much satisfaction over the years?

JF: I started for 4 or 5 years with the carpenters. I enjoyed that. I made the great big wide doors at Wilkinson's garage at the Heath. Then after a while I decided to go on the big bandsaw to learn that side. It was dangerous but it was common sense, though it wouldn't be the first time those saw blades snapped. They are about 20' long and 4 inches wide but if you watch what you are doing and take your time you are OK.

RK: Did you eventually end up doing office work?

JF: Oh no. My brother and sister did the office work and my mother and father to start with before my sister joined them.

RK At its height, how many people were working there?

JF: Well, we had a carpenters' shop at the front, and we employed three carpenters as well. There would be about ten and everybody was local. We built on the front yard, then as the fields around the back became available we bought them. I have slides of the building of the yard.

RK: When you did agricultural work was it seasonal?

JF: Yes and No, because the farmers were always doing work. The seasonal side, we had a section at one point we made sheds for the general public mainly in the summer. We would take them out and erect them. We also made fence panels. We had big tank at the back and we made these interwoven or light-slap fence panels. We used to dip them in to the thank but it was no good using gloves. So it was roll up your sleeves and put them in.

RK Was it essential you adapted?

JF: Oh yes. You had to adapt. You had to move forward and this is another reason we went into the pallet trade.