

# HAROLD SNELLER

## *of Sneller & Co*

*By Derek Leach*

*This is the transcript of part of a conversation with Harold recorded by Derek Leach in 2001.*

'I was born on 1st June 1917 at 5 Millais Road, Dover and lived there until I went into the army in 1939. I went to Sunday school rather reluctantly. I was baptised into the Church of England but I went to London Road Primitive Methodist Sunday School which was just round the corner from us. I escaped as soon as I could.

The biggest fright I had was appendicitis. I was carted off to the old Royal Victoria Hospital and was operated on. There was no pre-med in those days and so you went into the operating theatre with all these people in white coats and then the mask was put over your face and you were chloroformed - it frightened the life out of me!

I went to Barton Road and then the County School - in those days you could start at age 8 but you had to pay; however, I got a scholarship later and just missed Matriculation with seven credits and one pass. The Boys' County School moved from Frith Road to Noah's Ark Road while I was there. The girls, who moved into Frith Road when we moved out got the best deal with the school in the middle of town and easy to get to, whereas the new boys' school was right at the top of Tower Hamlets

and difficult to get to. I went by bike, nearly everybody did. The bike shed was just inside the Astor Road entrance and you still had to walk up the steep slope to the school itself. Going home we all raced down Astor Avenue and the police used to take our names!

I started in the family firm in 1934 after I left school at 17. I worked in the office and also did some relief driving. We worked long hours. Father had always been up at 6am because the horses had to be fed and saw no reason why I shouldn't be up at six either. We didn't finish until 6 o'clock and we worked Saturdays. The horses had to be fed on Sundays as well.

My grandfather started the business in about 1877 with a horse bus service, from Buckland Bridge to the S.E.R. station on the Western Beach, sometimes returning after 1½ hours. The horses must have worked blooming hard. My great grandfather married Mary Cottle and she seems to have brought a butcher's shop into the family in Tower Hamlets - occupied later by Carlsden Properties. My grandfather extended the building in 1877 and stabled six horses there. He must have already been in the carrying trade, starting small and building up.

The first major contract my father got was Dover Corporation refuse collection in 1932 which went on for a long time. We supplied the vehicles and drivers with the Corporation supplying the dustmen and the tipping facilities. Alongside that, we did general haulage. We were never long distance hauliers. We did a lot of work for Mears Brothers working for the Harbour Board.

The change from horses to motor vehicles was gradual with the first vehicles in the 1930s and the last horse going in 1951. When Father got the Corporation contract he needed more garage space and rented space at the steam laundry in Tower Hamlets Street where Castle Harris were later (and now new housing). When the war came in 1939 both buildings were requisitioned and the business moved to Townwall Street.

I had joined the Territorial Anti-Aircraft battery in the summer of 1939, the AA batteries and Coastal Defences were called up very abruptly on 24th August, and I wasn't demobbed until 24th January 1946.

My father was killed by enemy action in the Market Square in 1942. The army let me have three months compassionate leave and the business was turned into a family company with my mother holding the majority of the shares and the rest held by my sister Kath (Bill Hopper's wife) and myself. I ran the business after the War when we moved to Cherry Tree Avenue to a site that had been a corn merchants.

I had a peaceful war really. I was

selected for radar training which was super hush-hush. Training was chaotic. We used the old seaplane sheds on the seafront and then we were sent to Iwade on the road to Sheerness. It was pretty primitive, sleeping on the floor and only cold water. We were taken into Sittingbourne once a week to have a bath in the public baths. That's where I saw my first radar set, but in this corner of the country there were no aeroplanes about that we could use for training. We moved to Kingshill Camp on the Hoo Peninsula - an old pre-war militia camp quite a civilised camp with huts and beds - the first time I'd had a bed in the army. Then it was back to Dover where I did see action, in the ack-ack battery on the Western Heights above Farthingloe, right through the Battle of Britain. On one occasion we saw an enemy aircraft but were told not to fire because the RAF was about to engage it. It came down at the bottom of the cliff and the pilot was taken prisoner and brought back to camp. He was in full dress uniform and so was taken to the Officers' Mess to be fed, but when an instruction book was looked up, they discovered he was only a sergeant and so he was kicked out of the Officers' Mess! Then I was posted to the Thames Estuary and afterwards to West Wales.

We closed the business in 1980. We packed up the lorry business first and concentrated on vehicle maintenance because we had our own workshops. It didn't take off. I think we were all too old to start a new business. So we closed the business and sold the site.

Harold Sneller died in 2005.