

## Dedham Vale Society

### Article: Wilfred Sadler - Shoe Repairer - Manningtree

Few of us on the Essex/Suffolk border where you cross the river Stour at Cattawade are unfamiliar with the mysterious Dickensian depths of Mr Sadler's shoe repairing shop in Stour St, Manningtree: the mended shoes hanging from hooks in the ceiling, the ancient hefty iron tools of his craft, the dim light by which the work is done, the musky leathery smell. When we hand over our money, it goes into a cash register over a hundred years old. But his fame spreads further: from Colchester and Ipswich they bring their shoes, from Witham and Woodbridge and Holland. Mr. Don Coggins brings his from the Azores.

Wilfrid William Woodley Sadler is 77. He was born in Deptford Green where his father was a spiderman (a steel construction worker) who helped build Deptford Power Station. The family moved first to Mistley and then to Manningtree when little Wilfrid was five. Almost all the rest of his life has been spent not more than 200 yards from the flat where the family lived in a converted pub (once the Ship) in the High Street where the café now is. There were four families in the building. At the back they overlooked a timber yard (now Compass Court) and the river busy with traffic, barges delivering to Taylor and Butler and the factory.

There were four children, Delilah, Wilfrid, Matthew and Lillian. Their mother Maud had been a Miss Durrant and in service from the age of 11. "Mother was small and hard working. We had a tin bath for Saturday nights, and a copper for heating the water for washing clothes, a range, one fireplace and an outside lavatory. Mother got a plaque from Queen Elizabeth for looking after 12 evacuees in the war.

"Nobody knew what it was to have possessions. We never roamed the streets because there was always someone to play with. All the family was involved in everything together – not like now, when it's, 'What's in it for me?' Everybody knew everybody else. If you were caught doing something bad, they'd say, 'I'll tell your Dad.'"



*WW Sadler, Shoe Repairs and Footwear, Stour Street, Manningtree*



*Wilfred Sadler in his workshop*

His father became a shoe repairer. Even then the word ‘cobbler’” Mr Sadler said, meant “a botch up”. There were five shoe repairers in Manningtree: Tommy Crisp, Fred Nunn, the two Hammond brothers (where Gwinnells and Tantastic are now) and Sadler’s on the ground floor where they lived. “People had no cars. They walked everywhere and you needed stout shoes on your feet. If you had two pairs of shoes you were well off. Kids had metal studs on the bottom of the soles to stop them wearing out.

“Manningtree was a quarter of the size it is now but there were fifty shops, and on a Saturday morning you could have walked on the people’s heads in the High Street and all up South Street, it was so crowded.” The fifty shops included Flo Chenery who sold vegetables from her front room.

On Sundays the children would go to Sunday School at the Salvation Army Hall in Mill Lane (their father had played the euphonium in a Salvation Army silver band.). Wilfrid went to the Norman primary school in Mistley and then Senior School, now Manningtree High School. “But me and one boy, we were the heftiest boys in the class and we would often spend all day long on the allotments off Waldegrave Way where they grew the vegetables for the school caterers. It was a good skive, digging and weeding and not learning your lessons.” And in wartime it could be quite exciting. “One day we see this bomber come over and he dropped a stick of bombs, the first one by Rose’s in School Lane, Mistley, a couple more in the field down Green Lane, the next one on the railway near the police station and the last one down the end of this lane, Stour Street.

“Father had an allotment off Harwich Road. Mother was a very good cook. She baked bread and made jam. We would have jam sandwiches and stew for tea. You could get a bag full of sheeps’ heads for next to nothing. Father used to cycle to Colchester and they would give him a lot of this minced fat and Mother would reduce it to dripping that we would have on toast. It was very good, specially when you got the jelly at the bottom.” His father lived in sound health to the age of 85 and his mother to 90.

What would they have on Christmas Day? “Rabbit,” said Mr. Sadler. “It cost sixpence. We got this from Mr Barber, a one-armed man with a hook who used to go out shooting. He would rest his gun on the hook and fire it. On Christmas Eve Father would take all the family to Mistley where Mr Baldwin had a little shop opposite The Anchor. ‘Here’s sixpence – to get what toy you want.’ I remember I once got a mechanical wind-up baker’s cart with a man pulling it along.”

His brother Matthew worked in the factory all his life, Lillian in the factory until she married while Delilah was in service with the Goodwin family in Garden City. Wilfrid left school when he was thirteen-and-a-half to work with his father. "You learn from reading books, taking shoes apart, looking carefully and putting them back in the same way. I would go into Colchester on the bus twice a week to get supplies. We lived hand to mouth – no money for stock piling. In them days all shoes were black or brown."

It wasn't all hard grind. His father, a member from his youth of the Salvation Army where temperance is the rule, would be asked round by a friend of an evening for a laugh and a joke. "He meant a drink and a smoke. There was another chap in the band and father would go to his house too where they had home made wine. Bill Mann, who lived in Mistley Park, made no end of wine. What from? Oh parsnip, pea pod, all sorts of fruit... The cigarettes were bits of roll-your-own stuff. That was different times."

There were wartime excitements. He could remember doodlebugs coming up the River Stour being shot down by the ack-ack guns at Harwich, and the Mustangs that could tip the doodlebugs off course with their wing-tips and make them crash. "Near Manningtree station on a clear day you could see them being launched and some of them looping down again leaving a vapour trail behind them. I remember one morning a fireplane strafed the town and hit Manningtree church. Old Mrs Ruggles lived opposite and she picked up an unexploded bomb and banged on a neighbour's door with it."

Wilfrid was a year too young for the war and did his National Service as an aircraft mechanic in the Fleet Air Arm at Portsmouth. "While I was away, Father had a bad skin complaint and I was allowed home to wind the business down. It was still in the High Street, but I didn't wind it down. I took it over completely."

Thirty years ago, he moved from the High Street on a Saturday night with the help of the Manningtree Fire Brigade, of which he was a member, and opened in Stour Street on Monday morning. He would work fifteen hours a day six, sometimes seven, days a week, mending 300 pairs of shoes. Four shillings and sixpence it cost then to heel and sole them - £24 now. He had married twenty years before in St Michael's Church, Manningtree, and he and his wife Maureen had a son, Steven, born in 1967, the last baby to be christened there before the church was demolished. They bought a motorbike with a sidecar and lived in Crown Yard, beside The Crown facing where Dr Kelly's surgery used to be. Greene King had installed a bathroom. They took ten days holiday year in Margate. Steven now works in the shop and Mrs Sadler does the books.

There was a worrying moment eleven years ago when Mr Sadler had a stroke and lost the use of his right hand. Who, we wondered selfishly, would mend our shoes? In no time at all, he seemed to be back in action. Young Philip Lucas, now 33, the grandson of sister Delilah and son of Charles Lucas, the postman, moved in and he and Steve work there in navy blue aprons, quite at home with the ancient green skiver that takes the edges off the soles, the red Castor from Denmark, the last, the ranger, the shoe stretcher, the blue trimmer and the Blake that stitches the top to the bottom of the shoes. The Blake is 120 years old and would look quite at home in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It cost £35 sixty years ago and weighs 365 kilos, more than a third of ton. Mr Sadler wheeled it round on a trolley when they moved from the High Street. (The modern equivalent, a lockstitch machine, would cost £15,000)

I did wonder whether Mrs Sadler might not be tempted to give the whole place a good Hoover – for instance why didn't they throw out what looked like hundreds of bits of tatty old leather? "A thousand quids' worth of leather there," said Mr Sadler mildly. And what about all those old shoes on the floor? Still awaiting collection apparently, some of them after thirty years. Philip picked up a pair of men's Guccis. "These belonged to someone with more money than sense," he said. And what was in those old biscuit tins? "That's the stock cupboard," he said gravely, removing from a battered Quality Street tin a pair of pin tops for the stiletto heels on which he was working. "It wouldn't be a workshop if it was tidy." Mr. Sadler quite agreed. "The moment you tidy it up you lose something." And indeed Steve produced in a matter of seconds the original booklet of working instructions for the ancient Blake. Mr. Sadler services the machines himself, the sort of thing he learnt to do in the Fleet Air Arm.

He is a contented man and – like his shop where you seem able to get all the things you can't get anywhere else in Manningtree – full of surprises. He loved being a firefighter. "Nothing a fireman likes better than a big fire. When you put it out, you have achieved something." He remembers particularly the time thirty years ago when Woolworths in Colchester caught fire, and the fire in Harrison and Gibson

in Ilford High Street where there were forty fire engines and the heat radiation was so fierce it set fire to houses across the street. He was president of the Manningtree Business Chamber for two years and chairman of two different dart leagues: the Constable Dart League and the Manningtree and District Dart League. (You can buy darts in Sadlers.) He was a champion darts player. "Look," said Philip, and he put his hand flat on the wall, fingers wide apart, "He could shoot a dart between your fingers." Darts, we decided, must be very good for the wits because you have to add and subtract at the same time.

He and Mrs Sadler have lovely summer holidays all over Europe and they live in Bendalls Court behind the fountain in the market.

Shoes, he says, are not what they were. "Modern shoes are absolute rubbish. Modern glues are so good you could stick a piece of rag to cardboard and that's a shoe." Jones, Church, Grenson still made good shoes. A proper shoe, in his opinion, is a welted shoe that has a cork filler in the sole. Steve produced an example. Mr Sadler has mended shoes that cost £1,000. The best leather comes from Germany. It's tanned in the old-fashioned way in oak bark pits ten foot deep. The wet cowhide lies in layers of bark for twelve to fifteen months. Steve knows all about this. He's been to the Rendenbach tannery in Trier to have a look and Philip is off to Germany this summer to do the same. He was polishing a pair of black riding boots. "Nothing to beat elbow grease," he said.

So it seems we don't have to worry. We can still come from Witham and Woodbridge and Holland. Mr Coggins can still come from the Azores. Nothing will change. "They've been taught," said Mr Sadler with certainty, looking at the two men in their blue overalls, "They will carry on."

*(Maureen Cleave)*



*Steve Sadler (foreground) and Philip Lucas, the new generation of shoe repairers*