

PETER ELLAMS OXTON'S BLACKSMITH

It is said that at the turn of the 19th Century there were some 3.3 million horses in Britain, a million of which were working horses. They made a massive contribution to the creation of wealth and wellbeing of the population until the advent of the horseless carriage and the devastation of the First World War resulted in a dramatic reduction in their numbers. For generations a trade of importance was that of blacksmith, trained in the manufacture and fitting of horseshoes and general metalwork.

Born in Everton in 1869 a young boy named Peter Ellams was to follow this trade for most of his life and much of it in Oxton. Peter had been raised in an orphanage in Ormskirk, following the death of his father, William, at sea and the early death of his mother, Catherine. He soon found himself at the beginning of his lifelong trade. His son Bill wrote..."he was apprenticed to a blacksmith in Skelmersdale at nine years of age, ran away twice, was brought back, but what a fine blacksmith he became".

It may have been surprising to him to know then as a small boy in the hot, physical workshop of the forge, that he was destined to play an important part in the both world wars and to become a well known figure and to raise a family in Oxton.

Peter met his future wife Elizabeth in Scarisbrick, in "The Morris Dancer's" pub it's said. And they had a family of nine children, living in a variety of addresses in Liverpool and Lancashire. At some date between the 1911 Census and the start of the First World War the family took up residence at 29, Ridley Street and Peter began doing work on contract for the Oxton Carriage Company, whose fleet of taxis and hearses and their animals needed the constant attention of a farrier and blacksmith. The Oxton Carriage Company was an important employer in the district, having premises and stables in the old tram depot at the top of Palm Grove, offices in Argyle Street, workshop and storage in Wellington Road and a garage and mortuary in Fairclough Lane, premises now occupied by Speedwell Motors, who have preserved some effects from those early days.

Like many other Oxton residents the First World War took Peter away from his everyday life in Palm Grove but only as far as Warrington, where it is understood he both worked as a farrier to the army and trained others in the work.



Peter Ellams shoeing horses for the army in the field.

His skills were used again in the Second World War, coming out of retirement at 70 years of age to train soldiers in metalworking skills once again, this time nearer to home at Cammell Lairds.



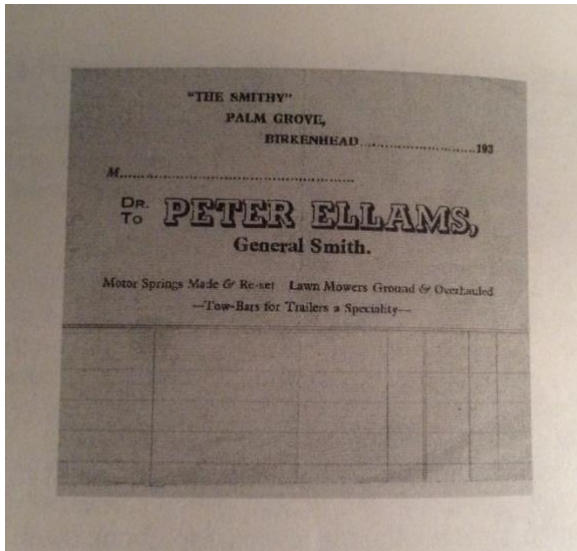
Peter at the centre of
a group of soldiers

After the War the family moved into “The Smithy”, Palm Grove, which he rented from the Carriage Company. This will be remembered as the old Tram Depot that was demolished some years ago. It was both the family home and Peter’s workshop and a smithy. It is remembered as a somewhat rough and ready dwelling and photos from the 1930s show it in some disrepair.



The Old Tram Depot, which was
Peter’s family’s home and his
workshop

But it is also remembered in the family as a happy home in happy times, with the sun always shining, much like “The Darling Buds of May” perhaps! Next door were the stables and it is said the heat from the horses’ bodies provided an early form of central heating for the children’s bedrooms. Peter dressed and looked the part of a fine Victorian smith. He wore a flat hat, a leather apron and waistcoat, laced boots and of course proudly sported a splendid full moustache that earned him the nickname Tickle Lickle, the result of his giving hairy kisses to the children on greeting them. His constant companion was as can be seen the family dog, Prince.



Peter's Invoice
From Palm
Grove

We can imagine that Peter was known to just about everyone in Oxton and his business prospered, serving the needs of the mansions and their fancy horse drawn vehicles, making wrought iron gates, many of which are likely to still be in place even today. Though a happy time in Palm Grove, some of the shine was taken off, it seems, by the reluctance of Oxton residents to pay their bills on time! It was evidently Elizabeth who had the skills necessary to persuade the late payers and it was she went out to collect the arrears.



Elizabeth Ellams in the back yard
taking the sunshine

After retirement Peter lived with his son Wilf at the bottom of Victoria Mount. Wilf Ellams cared for Peter until his death at the age of 93 and Wilf himself became a well known character in the Village, doing chauffeuring, gardening and odd jobs for many families. He was a keen fisherman like his father and a talented artist.



Peter's son Wilf, who looked
after his father in his old age.

Their home was one half of the building that is now the left side of the Shrewsbury Arms as you look at it from Bennetts Hill. It was more or less in its original condition into the 1970s...an early Victorian dwelling that had once been a farmhouse, a mangle in the small enclosed yard leading to the back door, into a small scullery kitchen with a stone sink, a dimly lit sitting room with an iron range, still used for cooking.



Peter at 90 years old

Peter was remembered by his grandson Richard Copland as a kind and gentle old man, who became much like “a revered holy man”, relaxing in his bed and watching the horse racing on the television.

Bob Knowles