



...she goes!

The London Road Garage

This is a rather special newsletter as the London Road Garage, the premises in which the early Elva chassis and sports racing cars were built, is no more. I wanted to share with you some of the history of the cramped workshop where so much was achieved by a small group of talented and innovative engineers under the ever watchful eye of Frank G. Nichols. I am indebted to the help of the local library service and in particular Don Phillips of the Bexhill Museum who had previously undertaken detailed research on the property named "Sussex House".



"Stream Cottage" Belle Hill in 1901 before London Road replaced the smaller North Street just in front of the hedge and street lamp in the middle of the image.

The origins of the small coastal town of Bexhill-on-Sea on the south coast of England can easily be explored on the Internet but this story starts sometime prior to 1808 when "Stream Cottage" can be traced at the bottom of Belle Hill to the north west of the town. This building was in fact two timber framed cottages, one being extended to include a small shop which was used by a butcher from around 1890.

The property was rebuilt in 1908 as a single house retaining a shop, just a few years after the very first UK motor race was held at the eastern end of the sea front in Bexhill. It was the 8th Earl De La Warr who secured the town's place in history by hosting Britain's first automobile races on the 19th May 1902. The event was organised by the Automobile Club of Great Britain and Ireland and attracted international attention. The races did not occur in isolation but were part of a campaign to promote Bexhill-on-Sea as a fashionable new resort and used the Bicycle Boulevard, which the 8th Earl had built along De La Warr Parade in 1896.

The Earl's interest in motorcars was also linked to his association with the firm Dunlop, of which he was chairman. The event was run along a one kilometre track with a flying start from the top of Galley Hill; the existing Cycle Chalet was taken over and used for timekeeping. The races were deemed to have been a great success and more events were planned for later in 1902 and in 1903. However, the excitement was cut short when Mr Mayner, a property owner on De La Warr Parade, took out an injunction against the Earl. This banned all future motor car racing. Further details can be found in an interesting book "Brands to Bexhill" by ex F1 photographer Max Le Grand.

Also in 1902, a railway line from Crowhurst to the Bexhill West terminus station was completed, which ran on an embankment just to the west of the house. The new shop continued to be occupied by a butcher, but now owned by F. H. Pilbeam. Subsequently the area became known as Pilbeam's Corner.



"Sussex House" in 1910 with the railway embankment of the left and the apex of the "L" shaped stable block roof on the mid far right of the image.

The garden was large enough to allow for another small "L" shaped building to be added a short distance from the house, facing onto the London Road (previously called North Street), and this seems to have been a stable and cart house, possibly with facilities for the slaughter of animals destined for the shop. It is likely that this stable building was built at much the same time as the rebuilt house and shop (1908) which was now known as "Sussex House".

The first use of the stable block as a separate entity from "Sussex House" was some forty years later when the butchers shop became a retailer of fish & chips and an asphalt contractor was recorded as the occupier of the stable building, separately listed as 129A London Road, Bexhill.

Later records dated 1953 indicate that this stable/workshop building was occupied by F.G.Nichols 'Motor Engineers' and Frank was also shown as owner/occupier of "Sussex House". The owner/occupier of the house changed in 1956 to E. J. Nichols being Frank's brother John. The fried fish business continued, now run by a tenant Gordon Buss, and it stayed as a fish & chip shop under various tenancies until the end! In more recent times it was called "The Viking Fish Bar".

By 1956, the FGN motor engineering business located in the old stable block had become known as the London Road Garage (Bexhill) Ltd., complete with a single petrol pump providing the sale of fuel to the locals. During those early years the garage provided general motor repairs, welding, spraying etc., mostly for pre-WW2 vehicles.



The Elva Engineering ex. London Road Garage showing the roofed over frontage which added to the available workshop space. (1956)

Of course the emphasis had changed from general engineering to the production of the early Elva chassis and sports racing cars, and the company name changed again to incorporate the Elva Engineering Co. Ltd.

The original stable building would have been very cramped and was extended by roofing over the yard which had fronted onto the London Road probably in 1956. This gave the team a workshop of around 2500 sq. ft.

When Robbie Mackenzie-Low was enlisted as a driver and part time store keeper, he often stayed in the hay loft at the London Road Garage, the three small rooms accessed via some very steep wooden steps from the main workshop area.



A closer look at the tubular steel roof trusses which are remarkably similar to the tubular chassis frames! Perhaps Charlie Toghill was involved in their manufacture. Maybe???

With business growing rapidly, due to the sports racing car production together with the Formula Junior and Courier development getting under way, there was the urgent need to find more workshop space.

The larger workforce were soon using an old Drill Hall behind the York Hotel at 92 London Road just a few hundred yards away; the metal work being undertaken at the LRG with the assembly in the drill hall. It was not long before a similar drill hall was in use at Grove Road Ore, where early Courier bodies were produced and sprayed until a neighbour complained that her undies on the washing line had turned red! However these scattered workshops would have created many production difficulties and new premises were urgently needed.



The stairs that 'works' driver Robbie Mackenzie-Low climbed to the small accommodation above the workshop when he also worked as the store-keeper.

By early 1959 the entire production had moved to a purpose built 16,000 sq. ft factory in Sedlescombe Road North, in nearby Hastings.



Frank Nichols displayed the aluminium bodied prototype Courier outside the workshop (1959). 129A London Road in 2005 with the apex of the original stable block showing where Robbie Mackenzie-Low spent time so as to be race ready in the mid 1950's.

The original London Road Garage workshop was subsequently occupied by various manufacturing and engineering companies, the last being Galm Engineering.



Interior views taken in 2005 when occupied by Galm Engineering Ltd. Note the steel tubular trusses for the flat roof extension rumoured to be made from round chassis tubes. Who knows? However the end plates suggest these were bought in items. Shame!!

Time marches on, Bexhill needs a new relief road and many properties in the London Road have been demolished. The new road uses part of the old railway track, which was removed in the mid 1960's, heading north to the site of the old Sidley station and goods yard, where you will now find Elva Way and the Elva Businesses Centre.

Much has changed but thankfully the ELVA name lives on!!

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