

## A Waterworks Family

Alec Roberts, who retired from the Company in 1978 as Foreman at Ashwood Pumping Station, got in touch recently with a view to finding out more about the careers of both his father and grandfather who also worked for South Staffs Water at a variety of locations. Using a combination of personal recollections by Alec, documents from the Company's archive and records from public sources it has been possible to discover quite a lot of factual information about Alec's family.

Alec's grandfather, Israel Roberts was born at Wednesbury in early 1862 and is recorded on the 1881 census living with his widowed mother Martha Roberts and younger brothers and sisters on the Holyhead Road.

1	Martha Roberts	Head	19	Washerwoman	Widow	Wednesbury
	Israel do	Son	19	Iron Worker	do	do
	John do	Son	17	do	do	Felling Heath
	Martha do	Daughter	15	Unemployed	do	Wednesbury
	William do	Son	13	Scholar	do	Felling Heath
	Wm do	Daughter	8	do	do	Wednesbury

Extract from 1881 Census

At this point in time Israel was 19 years old and employed as an iron worker. Israel married Sydonah Gillet, also from Wednesbury, in 1884 and in 1891 the family, including their eldest son Edward were living near to the Cemetery Chapel at Wood Green.

1	Israel Roberts	Head	29	Stationary Engine Stoker	Widow	Staffordshire Wednesbury
	Sydonah do	Wife	28	do	do	do
	Edward do	Son	3	do	do	do

Extract from 1891 Census

The first reference to him at South Staffs Water is in the 1893 wages book where he is recorded as a stoker at Wood Green Pumping Station, his rate of pay being £1 4s 6d for working seven days.

Wood Green					
R. Morecom	Foreman	7	1	18	✓
R. Turner	Engine Worker	7	1	8	✓
J. Odgers	do	7	1	8	✓
G. Shuman	do	7	1	8	✓
J. Millington	Stoker	8	1	3.0	
do	unloading coal		7.0	1	10
J. Roberts	Stoker	7	1	4 6	✓
S. Clifford	do	6	1	1	✓
S. Gutton	Carting Ashes			7	✓

Extract From 1893 Wages Book

By 1901 Israel had been promoted to engine driver and was now living in a Company house adjacent to the pumping station. Alec's father, Israel jnr, is also on the 1901 census as a nine year old with his parents and siblings.

Walsall Co. No.	Name	Relationship	Sex	Age	Occupation	Worker	Do	Do
	Israel Roberts	Head	M	39	Stationary Engine Worker	Worker	Do	Wednesday
	Sydney Do	Wife	M	37			Do	Do
	Edward Do	Son	S	11			Do	Do
	Israel Do	Son	S	9			Do	Do
	W. Harold Do	Son	S	7			Do	Do
	S. Silly Do	Daughter	S	5			Do	Do
	Albert Do	Son	S	2			Do	Do

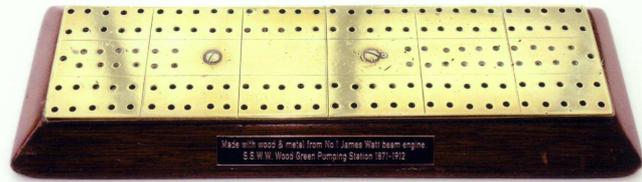
Extract from 1901 Census

Wood Green Pumping Station had been opened in 1871 and its purpose was to re-pump water that had been delivered to Walsall Reservoir from Lichfield on into the heart of the Black Country i.e. Tipton and Dudley. The first steam pumping engine to be installed was manufactured by the James Watt Company and this was quickly followed by two more engines supplied by Harveys of Hayle in Cornwall. These are the engines that Israel snr would have been familiar with while working as a stoker and later as an engine driver. Unfortunately there seem to be no surviving photographs of the James Watt engine, but the Harveys engines were captured on camera shortly before their demise.



Wood Green Harvey Engines (1877 – 1920)

The engines were scrapped around the time of the First World War which is when Israel jnr, who had previously worked at the nearby Lloyds steelworks and seen service in the First World War, began his career in 1919 as a fitter's mate, also at Wood Green which by now had started to develop as workshop. Most of the men in the Fitting Shop took the opportunity to make cribbage boards from wood and metal reclaimed from the scrapped engines. Alec still has the one made by his father.



Israel jnr did not remain at Wood Green for too long, in 1924 an opportunity arose at the newly constructed Slade Heath Pumping Station a few miles north of Wolverhampton and the family, which now included Alec who had been born in 1914, moved into Company accommodation at the nearby Somerford Pumping Station at Brewood. Slade Heath was the last steam driven pumping station to be built by the Company and had a relatively short life as electric pumps replaced the steam engines in the late 1960s and the imposing structure which had become a landmark on the Wolverhampton/Stafford Road was demolished.



**SLADE HEATH PUMPING STATION**

In 1924 the Company founded its superannuation scheme and Israel's application to join can be found in the Company Archive. A further move came in 1934 when Israel transferred to Shenstone Pumping Station. A sentence in the January 1934 issue of News Review, the company magazine, records Israel's promotion to Driver in Charge. A traction engine was kept at Shenstone to haul coal

from the nearby station sidings; the corrugated shed used to house the engine still stands to this day. No doubt Israel's duties included the maintenance of the traction engine and supervision of the daily trips to and from the sidings. Promotion to Foreman at Shenstone followed soon afterwards as this photograph shows him in 1938 with his staff on the steps of the station.

SHENSTONE PUMPING STATION



Back Row: G. T. LITTLE, F. HYDE, R. ROWLANDS, W. H. ALSOPP, T. PRICE.  
Front Row: J. HODGKINS, I. ROBERTS (Foreman), A. SMITH.

The News Review also recorded the death of Israel snr in its April 1936 issue. Alec joined the Company on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1934 and was employed as a waste inspector at Tipton Depot. A transfer to Sutton Depot followed in early 1936 and it was whilst working there that Alec met his future wife Peggy Wallington, daughter of Walter Wallington who also worked at the depot.

Israel jnr died in 1949 at the relatively young age of 57 while still employed at Shenstone. In 1943 Alec moved on to Ashwood Pumping Station. Ashwood had been the first borehole station built by the Company in the southern part of its area in 1893 and abstracted groundwater from the sandstone deposits in the Smestow Valley. The water was pumped to Springsmire Reservoir on the western side of Dudley after 1900. When completed in 1906 Ashwood had a total of three steam engines drawing water from six boreholes.



**ASHWOOD PUMPING STATION**

When Alec arrived at the station all three engines were still in operation, however 1950 saw the commencement of the electrification of the station and over the next ten years the three engines were progressively scrapped and replaced by electrically driven pumps. Some fifteen years later Alec also witnessed the automation of Ashwood which allowed the station to be left unmanned and monitored remotely from the central control office in Walsall. Between 1950 and his retirement in 1978 therefore, Alec saw the workforce at Ashwood reduce from a total of 24 men on three shifts every day manning the steam engines to just two men working an eight hour day for five days a week. Today, following improvements to the automation and monitoring systems, Ashwood is unmanned for most of the time.



Alec, front row right, with some of his colleagues

Three generations of the same family with service to the Company spanning nearly a century is not untypical. Employment at South Staffs generally offered security and subject to satisfactory performance men were promoted to better paid positions when they became vacant, so a youth initially employed as a general labourer could aspire eventually to become a pumping station foreman in charge of say 10 men or similarly it was not unknown for trench digger at one of the area depots to eventually be promoted to Depot Superintendent with a staff of 50 or more. Consequently fathers encouraged their sons to join the Company and no doubt “put in a good word” to ensure they would be engaged. The progress and fortunes of Alec, his father and grandfather provide us therefore with a good illustration of “A Waterworks Family”

*The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance provided by Alec Roberts and his grandson Neil Hughes in compiling this article.*