

Memories of Sandfields

Alfred (Alf, aka Duke) Thomas Windsor was a Lichfield man born and bred, he never moved out of the city and he spent entire his working life employed by the South Staffordshire Waterworks Company (SSWC), see Figure 1. For many year he and his wife Emily (nee Derry) lived in one of the two tied cottages alongside Sandfields Pumping Station - always referred to as "the waterworks". I am his grandson, Alfred (Alfie) Thomas Windsor, and for many years I lived there with them.

Duke was born in 1901 in the family home at 29 Gresely Row, now the access road to the Three Spires shopping centre. Later they moved across the road into the last terraced house on the right in Rotten. Before and after living at the waterworks they also lived in Dovehouse Fields. He was a big man, at least 6' 2", broad-chested with big hands, even bigger feet and a prominent nose. He had a pale complexion, blue eyes and a mane of Brylcreemed dark hair that only gave way to some grey very late in life. His size gave him a very strong presence but he was a rather taciturn even staid man who kept himself to himself and was not given to talking much about his life and experiences. He was very strict, had strong principles and was not averse to speaking his mind quite forcibly even in situations where most people would remain silent. He was a Morris Dancer in his youth, a pastime seemingly at odds with his size and character. The world he grew up in was entirely different to today's and in his retirement he would often reflect on the huge changes he had seen in his life even down to mundane things like foreign holidays, air travel, motorways and prices –



Back Row : J. SIMKINS, R. J. ST
Second Row : A. WINDSOR, P. NEALE,
Figure 1: Alf "Duke" Windsor as a SSWC
employee

"as a lad I could buy a big bag of oranges for a (old) penny".

He had three sons. Alfred (Young Duke), my father, who was an apprentice hairdresser before becoming a career soldier with many postings at Whittington Barracks. George was a long distance lorry driver but also worked for the SSWC for a while. He and his wife Joyce (nee Crisp) lived for many years in Lower Sandford Street - once Lichfield's 'No Go Area"! Harry (George's non identical twin) worked in a factory in Shenstone and lived until recently in Shortbutts Lane. Duke rarely talked about early working life but he certainly spent some years travelling the SSWC's Sandfields' catchment area taking samples of water from lakes and water course for analysis back in the labs at Sandfields. During my childhood in the mid/late 50s he was the senior working man in the waterworks but before talking about his work and life it is worth taking a conducted tour of the waterworks as I recall it from my childhood.

The waterworks occupied a long rectangular site on the South Western edge of the city but it was a slightly irregular shape with one side extending into a long triangle down to the Chesterfield Road railway bridge. An aerial view of the site is in Figure 2. The Chesterfield



Figure 1: The Waterworks

Road cuts diagonally up on the right of the photo. The (broadly) Southern boundary was the Wyreley & Essington Canal (the “Curley-Wyreley”). I assume that originally coal for the waterworks’ boilers was brought to the site by narrow boat - there was actually a large yard next to the Chesterfield Road canal bridge but by the 50s deliveries were all by train, the canal was derelict and the coal yard was a car park. The canal can be seen in Figure 2 emerging (bottom right) from a bridge under Chesterfield Road before turning left and running along the edge of the buildings. An old stop lock was positioned on the edge of the bridge so the short section down to the lock by the Birmingham Road bridge could be drained to facilitate maintenance work. As a boy Duke’s son George fell into the overspill weir on this lock but fortunately was washed through the flooded tunnel to emerge, spluttering but otherwise unharmed, in the canal under the Birmingham Road. The Northern boundary was the South Staffordshire railway on its high embankment linking Lichfield and Walsall, with a long siding where coal trains could be shunted off the main line and offloaded. It is just visible in Figure 2 behind the long white building. At the Western end of the site were the semi-detached supervisors’ houses fronting onto the Chesterfield Road. The Eastern end abutted a narrow strip of waste land between the canal and railway embankment that extended all the way to the Foss Way. Fires along the embankment were fairly regular as large lumps of burning coal managed to fall out of passing steam engines struggling up the incline towards the Foss Way crossing. The waterworks was dominated by the huge square chimney stack that towered over the site and which, because of Sandfields elevated position, dominated the city skyline, often drawing the eye as much as the cathedral spires.

The ‘working’ end of the waterworks complex was the large, dark brick building on the right in Figure 2 which housed the pumping machinery and the boilers. It actually had four parts. On the right was a large single story coal store - I don’t remember any windows, external access or ornamentation on this building. Facing you as you entered the site from the Chesterfield Road was the ornate Boiler House with five ornamental arches picked out in a light coloured bricks. This was one large open room with a very high overall roof with metal braces and a large skylight but a long accumulation of coal dust and grime meant that very little light penetrated down to the floor. There was a doorway into the boiler room in the right hand arch; outside was a quiet, open, airy parking area, inside was all darkness, dirt, flames and noise. My grandfather said it was:

“As black as the Earl of Hell’s riding boots”.

To a young boy it was like the doorway to hell and I was always drawn to it, even now, over 50 years on I can see the scene clearly in my mind’s eye. Along the left hand side of the room was a row of large, circular black metal boilers, about 30’ long and 12’ to 14’ in diameter. I cannot remember how many there were but it was at least six, maybe even eight. The fronts were covered in grimy dials and valves and large rivets. A forbidding metal ladder climbed between each pair of boilers to a metal walkway so you could walk between them to another elevated walkway along the back wall where a solitary door hidden in the gloom led up into the Engine House, although I never heard of a stoker daring to enter the pristine space that was the engine rooms. Each boiler had two small doors on the front which the stokers would open from time to time to add more coal to the fire. Whenever they did flames would light up the scene throwing large flickering shadows onto the walls. In front of the boilers a long brick or tile walkway led right through the building to a door and steps up to the railway siding. This let a little light into the stygian gloom casting the shapes of the toiling stokers seen from the car park end as black shadows. They would load their shovels turn and throw the coals into the flames before crashing the fire door closed again. Along the right hand wall were small bunkers of coal for the stokers, with arched openings leading through into the large coal store. It was a hive of constant activity and the huge space was always very hot, made worse by the coal dust in the air and over every surface. The noise was almost overwhelming, roaring fires, crashing boiler doors, shovels scraping into coal, wheelbarrows of coal bashing around and over it all the grunts and shouts of the stokers themselves. It was frightening and fascinating all at the same time. I was always wandering around the site but no wonder my grandfather strictly forbade me from going into the boiler room unaccompanied.

I only went onto the walkways between the boilers once when my grandfather took me that way from the Boiler House up to his domain, the Engine House. It was a spooky experience, everything was so dark and dirty and the pipes, steam and noise made it feel as if we were actually inside a living machine. The door between the two buildings was literally like moving from one world to another. Looking at Figure 2 the 1858 engine room was the square building with the chimney in its bottom right hand corner. This too was a single large space three stories high but with large glass doors facing the railway it was very light and



Figure 3: The 1858 Engine House

was dominated by two large belt driving wheels some 12 to 14’ feet in diameter. It is shown in Figure 3. I always thought this was a very metallic space, the floor was metal sheeting, the stairs and rails were metal, overhead a large gantry could roll silently across the room with various chains and wires dangling purposefully below it. The wheels were driven by compact machines nestled next to them. Everything was very industrial, extremely clean and highly polished. I always pictured my grandfather walking around with a cloth in his hand wiping everything as he passed but of course I never saw him doing it.

The belts on the driving wheels were a good 2’ wide and I vaguely remember them being of a dark brown leather-like material. They wound around the wheels - there seemed to be space for two of them but I only ever saw one - and then disappeared down into a large opening in the floor where they wound around another small wheel before rising back up to the main wheel. When the wheels were turning (generally only one at a time) the whole room shook, reverberating to a sound it is hard to describe. It must have been caused by the rotating wheels and moving belt even though they seemed to be moving quietly on well, oiled bearings. It was very loud, less than a roar but much more than a whirring sound; you

felt it as much as heard it. Standing between the wheels when both were working made you feel your whole body was being gently shaken. Presumably they were driven by the steam from the boiler room. Strangely I never knew what these wheels actually did but in my young mind they drove a huge screw that pumped water around the City! In one corner of the room (visible on the right in Figure 3) a heavy door led through into my grandfather's private sanctum. The door must have acted like an airlock as it required real effort to push open but once inside and it was closed the noise of the engine room stopped completely, even the floor stopped vibrating. The room it led to is the single story lean-to with two rectangular windows next to the chimney in Figure 2. It was a simple bright room and a full length worktop of highly polished wood (a redwood I think) lined the outer wall under the windows. There was little other furniture.

Just to the right of his 'office' door another door led through into the last part of the engine complex - the Cornish Engine House. All the buildings described so far have been demolished but this last space remains almost exactly as I remember it. The boiler room was dark, dirty, full of activity and clangingly noisy, the 1858 engine room was light, airy and vibrated with energy, the Cornish engine room was a complete contrast; grey, silent, alien and intimidating. Figure 2 shows two rows of windows but there were actually three floors inside. I was never allowed upstairs but the ground floor was a forest of tall metal pillars with pipes and mechanical arms shooting up from the ground into the upper floors, and a set of metal stairs disappeared into the upper floors. There were dials and wheels and all sorts of mysterious equipment. I think it had been disused for years and, like a real forest it had an accumulated silence. It was a very quiet, gloomy, slightly scary space, there seemed to be hidden corners everywhere and I could never shake off the feeling the machine, a brooding presence, was somehow watching me so I always hurried through. Large wooden doors (the main entrance to the engine room complex) led outside where, on the right were steps up to the railway line, on the left was the derelict canal embankment and opposite was the new building built in 1922/4. This building ran alongside the old canal and contained offices and laboratories for testing water samples. Duke made regular visits to the manager's office but in those days he and all the other engine house workers never felt entirely comfortable in there - it was the preserve of white collar management. This difference seemed to be reinforced in its external appearance; the new building was white in a simple Art Deco style whereas the engine rooms were all dark blue Victorian engineering bricks. Attached to it was a building containing several large water tanks, then another lower building with six filtration tanks. Finally the last small building (on the left in Figure 2) was where the filtered sludge was finally removed although I never worked out how this was done as there was only a narrow access road to it alongside the canal. A small narrow gauge railway line ran out of the central doors with short arms to right and left, inside there seemed to be several short lengths of track. There was no engine but several small tipper trucks for the sludge which must have been moved by hand. These tracks fascinated me and were an integral part of my playground - the derelict canal from The Duke of Wellington public house to the deep cutting beyond the Foss Way bridge.

Duke worked a shift system; earlies, lates and nights. When he was on nights and so sleeping during the day the whole house was on shut down. His wife Emily tiptoed around and not a sound was allowed to disturb him. You simply did not want to incur his wrath by waking him early so I normally got out of the house and off up the cut to play on the old locks where, even in the mid/late 50s, one of the locks still held a bit of water and the gates could be induced to move a little. Often in the morning a rabbit or two, sometimes a pheasant would be found hanging outside the back door, shot by Duke with his .22 rifle along the canal bank and fields on his way to or from work. He kept the gun in the corner of the sitting room behind his easy chair, alongside his binoculars. 'Nanny' Windsor would skin and gut them ready for the pot - free meat was ways welcome in those days.

He had two short walks to work; a footpath across the front of the semis through next door's garden to a gate in the wall out into the yard by the boiler house. His normal route though was up some steps in the garden and onto the railway embankment where he could wander the 100 yards or so along the siding and straight into the 1858 Engine House. This corner of the garden had a spectacular view over the city with a grandstand view of matches on the cricket ground. It was a little distant but his binoculars solved that problem. The large post and rail fence provided a perch from which I spotted engine numbers as they steamed past. An old upturned washing 'copper' provided a step up - I was convinced it was the dome from the top of a steam engine. If I was out Grandad would often chalk numbers of passing engines I had missed onto the wall for me but by an unwritten agreement these were never ticked off in my book as I had not actually seen them. I know little of his actual duties although a lot of his time seemed to have been spent walking the complex, checking on people and machines with periods back in his 'office' completing various ledgers - presumably reporting on status and activity. Duke's sense of propriety and professionalism meant family were rarely allowed into his 'office' - he was on duty and so not free to wander about with us. I solved that problem by wandering about by myself while doing my best to avoid him as he would have given me a clout round the ears for being out of bounds and sent me packing. As I have mentioned 'duty' it is worth noting that during the second world war his work was counted as a reserved occupation, vital war work, so he was not be 'called up' into the services. Interestingly he was also just too young to serve in the first world war.

If a coal train was arriving all was hustle and bustle to make sure the sidings were ready and that the stokers were ready to start shifting the tons of coals into the bunkers by hand. Train arrivals were always interesting - how many young boys had free run of their own private siding, were able to clamber up onto the engine during shunting, help throw switches, and generally be part of the railway? Getting to know the engine drivers and firemen had the added advantage of easy access to Lichfield City's yard when they were on duty there. Health and Safety concerns have, I suppose rightly, stopped all that. Once the engine departed, the battered and rusty 'windcutter' coal wagons were left in the siding behind the white buildings so that a few at a time could be repositioned by hand outside the boiler room where they were unloaded by the stokers into the bunkers. That gave me the opportunity to walk alongside free running wagons applying the brake - although heaven help me if Grandad caught me or the stoker at my side! The siding was very long, stretching right down to the back of the houses so empty wagons were then moved down to the buffer outside our bedroom windows.

His working dress was unchanging; a shirt, tan or dark brown dungarees, a large (and actually quite superfluous) leather belt and a lightweight tan cotton jacket. I never saw a mac or overcoat even in the worst of the winter weather, although a sleeveless woollen pullover might be hidden under his dungarees on really cold days. I never saw him wear a hat. He wore heavy black (size 14) working boots which he polished every day, even polishing the raised part of the sole underneath in front of the heel. His 'best' shoes, also black, were regularly spit and polished, a habit I picked up and continue to this day. A visit to the pub, always the Duke of Wellington a few minutes walk along the old canal, was part of his daily ritual although only after work. His sense of responsibility meant he never drank before going on duty. He always used the Public Bar (on the left) and very occasionally I would be allowed to join him although I had to sit outside the bar in the front porch under the Off Licence window. In those days most pubs sold beer to take away from an Off Licence window. Emily was never invited except once a year when all the adults in the family would be allowed to join him on Christmas Eve for a drink. Her role was in the home, cooking, cleaning and looking after the children. Apart from that one night each year I do not recall the two of them going out socially or ever having a holiday.

The semi-detached houses were very simple and compact, the layout of ours, number 105 Chesterfield Road, is shown in Figure 4. A flight of steps led up from Chesterfield Road and the path then split to run around the fronts of the two houses. Ours was on the right and the front door was kept locked and rarely used; family and friends knew to come around to the back door which was always open. At the back of the house there was an enclosed concrete yard facing a 10'-12' high brick wall backing onto the railway embankment. A tall single signal and quite often a row of tired coal wagons loomed over the wall. In one corner a small brick outhouse contained the outside toilet and a 6' high brick wall was the boundary to next door. Duke collected lengths of wood which might come in useful one day and they were stacked up against the outhouse but never actually used for anything. There was no loo in the house so every bed had a 'potty' underneath which Emily emptied each morning. Potties were only for fluids, anything more serious meant a trip across the yard in the potentially freezing cold, there was no light in the loo so all business had to be conducted in the pitch dark. Next to the back door a large water butt collected water from the roof and a hand driven mangle stood waiting for its next set of pressing.

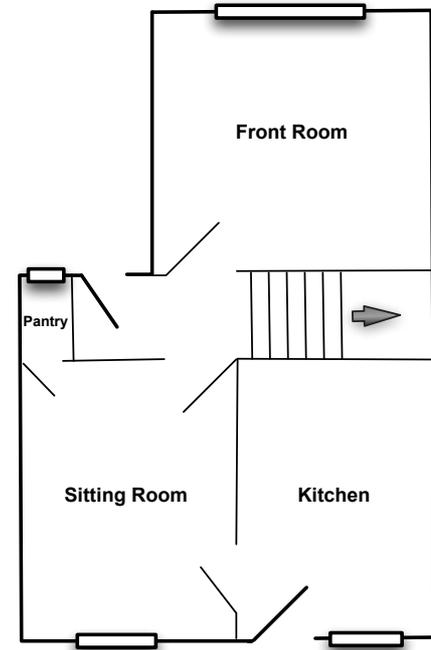
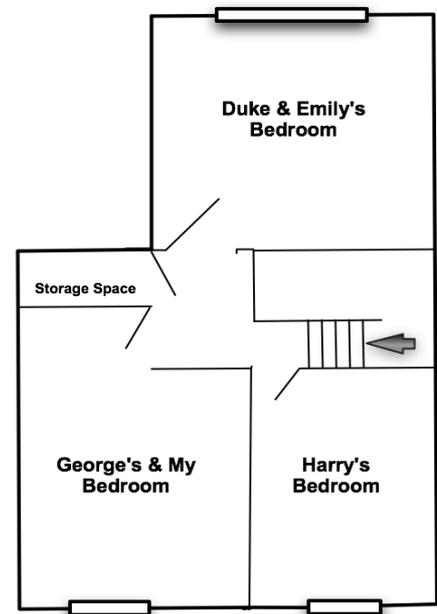


Figure 4: House Floor Plans not to scale

The back door led into the kitchen which was very sparsely furnished. On the right, under the window, was an enamel 'butler's' sink with a wooden draining board and a cold water tap. Later, a small gas water heater was installed over the sink. Along the right hand (party) wall was an old fashioned boiler (the 'copper') for washing clothes and a gas cooker. Immediately behind the back door was the door into the sitting room and on that wall was a tall free standing kitchen unit holding food and crockery. The back wall was bare apart from a tin bath hanging on a hook. There was no bathroom so the bath would be put on the lino covered stone floor and a curtain drawn around it on bath nights. Water was heated in the copper. I had a lukewarm bath once a week whether I needed one or not. Emily seemed never to leave the kitchen from where she served up hot drinks and meals to Duke, her sons and me. In fact every minute of her day evolved around Duke. Meals were always basic meat and two veg., but huge - served on platters rather than plates. Duke had a canvas satchel to take tea and a sandwich to work for his break. Our crockery was a cheap pale green utility make with a couple of embossed bands around the tops or edges - you often spot it in antique centres today.



The sitting room was quite small. There was a pantry in the far corner for fresh food - the rabbits and pheasants were soon transferred to hang here - it included a stone slab - the traditional equivalent of today's fridge. Fresh food could not be stored for long so Emily would walk to town every day to buy food for the main meal and fresh bread. She never used sliced bread and always buttered the end of the loaf before cutting a slice. Sometimes she made more than one trip so she could walk miles in a day. Once their sons and I had moved out Duke and Emily gave up the Chesterfield Road house and moved into the old militia barracks at Victoria Square much closer to town and with the incredible luxury of a

fridge, running hot water and a bathroom. There were about ten terraced council homes in the enclosed square. George and Harry and their wives occupied two of them and at one point the Windsors and relatives occupied all but two of them. The milkman called at Chesterfield Road every day with fresh milk and would often left me sit in his milk float as he delivered to the farm along the track on the other side of the railway. If he was feeling very beneficent I was allowed to drive the electric float. Duke kept some beer in the house just for him which was always drunk from a very small glass - presumably to discourage any impression of serious drinking. A small shop in a house down the Chesterfield Road provided urgent necessities, including ice-cream. Duke would have a family block for himself and the rest of us shared another one. The sitting room had a dark oak sideboard (children were forbidden from opening any of the drawers or cupboards), a small settee, Duke's easy chair and a folding dining table where meals were eaten. We always sat to the table to eat and if Duke was present his sons and I were absolutely not allowed to speak unless spoken too. If Emily ever had time to sit it was usually on a hard upright dining chair. An early TV occupied one corner - it was floor standing with a miniscule screen and was only in black and white with one channel. Absolute silence reigned on Christmas Day while we all gathered round to watch the Queen's speech. A door by Duke's easy chair led into the inner hall which was windowless and so very dark. To the left was the front door with coat hooks opposite, stairs went up to the right and opposite was the door into the front room. This was kept for best and I can recall it being used only once or twice in all the years we lived there. It held a smart three piece suite, another sideboard (even more out of bounds than the one in the sitting room), a piano no one knew how to play and a small under stairs glory hole, an absolute no go area, but jammed full of interesting stuff. A large window looked over Chesterfield Road to the maltings and the 'common'. It was the site of a Prisoner of War (PoW) camp during the second world war where the regime was apparently fairly relaxed for the mainly Italian PoWs. Apparently they were allowed to walk into town from time to time. People in the city seemed to have looked on them kindly. When we lived there it had reverted to rather wild scrubland and is now an industrial estate.

Upstairs there were three bedrooms. Duke and Emily had the largest room which was on the right at the top of the stairs with a huge double bed with a feather mattress and covers. The house obviously had no central heating so there were fireplaces in almost every room. These never had fires so it was common to wake up on winter's mornings to find the windows covered in a thin sheet of ice. The second double bedroom opposite the stairs was shared by me and my uncle George. It faced and was level with the railway line and was probably no more than 40' away from the then busy line. Despite the loud noise from regular passing trains, including the very early morning milk train, my night's sleep was never disturbed. The third bedroom, occupied by my uncle Harry on the left of the stairs, was a large single. As remarked earlier, if Duke was on nights, even his grown up sons didn't dare go upstairs until he was awake. On the landing outside Duke's bedroom was a small storage room. When we left the house it was converted into a bathroom.

He retired in the mid 60s with a smart company watch and he and Emily moved back to their old council house in Dovehouse Fields - his large collection of scrap wood went with them and was never used there either. In his retirement he passed his driving test, bought a car and took to the roads travelling further than he ever had during his working life. He even made it to North Wales to see me at my naval training school on the island of Anglesey. He found the sea endlessly fascinating - strange for a man whose whole working life had been surrounded by water. He was also fascinated by aircraft and would travel to Heathrow and Birmingham airports to watch the planes landing and taking off - a modern miracle in his eyes. It was perhaps a part of his nature that after a lifetime's service with the SSWC he never went back to the waterworks. He drew a veil over that episode in his life but kept up his visits to the Duke of Wellington until his death.