

# Helmer & Dyer

Theo van de Bilt

We stay in the centre of High Wych for this article (first published in 2014) and look at Helmer's Yard and the white cottages. Helmer's Yard is of course so named after Len Helmer, a builder, local politician and entrepreneur.



Leonard Alfred Helmer was born in 1912 in High Wych, the son of Charles and Alice Helmer. Len's father and grandfather were both gardeners and were born in High Wych. The family, Charles, Alice, Len and his brother Bert, lived in Woodside Cottages along High Wych Lane. Len went to the village school and trained as a carpenter with Nelson Lawrence. He became a clerk of works there, and, in 1935, joined forces with William (Bill) Dyer, a bricklayer from Sawbridgeworth. Initially, their workshop was at the back of Dixon's garage. In 1938 he married Elsie Hills, at that time a nursemaid with the Wentworth-Stanley family.



Helmer & Dyer (H&D) soon became the local builder of choice. The first houses they built were both on High Wych Road: Millfields for 'Baker White' and Broad Oak for James Dixon. There are many H&D-built houses around these parts. I myself live in one, as does my neighbour, Den Lomax. The second half of the 1930s was a very good time for house building. It is remarkable how many houses Bill and Len, who were only in their 20s then, built in those early days. One of the secrets of H&D's success was that, perhaps contrary to current practice, many trade tasks were performed 'in house'. H&D employees included carpenters, joiners, painters, plasterers, bricklayers, a sign writer even: Frank Fish. I talked to two former employees who spent their entire working lives at H&D. Percy Peacock was a painter and decorator, who joined in 1943, following his dad who also worked there. Alec Rainbird, a plumber, joined a year later. H&D and its customers could depend on a loyal and capable workforce.



*On the left, Len Helmer, on the right, Eric Willson, Bill White, Ray Collins and Paul Mercer in H&D's joinery workshop.*

During the World War 2 H&D became involved with repairing bomb damage. Sometimes two trucks with 20 men on each of them went to London to clear away rubble from East End bomb sites, and do quick, makeshift repairs to make the houses more or less habitable again. Improvisational skills were needed: 'we learnt a lot in those days', Percy Peacock told me.

After 1945, the company moved its operations bit by bit from the original site to what is now Helmers Yard. Meanwhile, more and more building work was undertaken. Mansfield, East Park, Brook Road and Falconers are some of the estates that were built. They won an award for an estate in Dunmow. Another important project was the breaking up of the runways at the USAF base at Matching, where Len had been clerk of works during the war. This took several years. Hard core extracted from Matching could then be used for building purposes in Harlow New Town: another happy coincidence.

Over the years, Bill Dyer took more of a background role, whilst Len Helmer became a local VIP. According to everyone I spoke to, Leonard Helmer was a charming, persuasive and very successful man, larger than life, some would say. His contacts as a local councillor must have stood him in good stead. Between 1949 and 1974 Len served on Braughing Rural Council; he was its chairman for seven years. Between 1970 and 1974, he represented Sawbridgeworth, the Hadhams and High Wych on Hertfordshire County Council. He was chairman of High Wych Parish Council and a magistrate.



Saturday 28 April 1951: fire at Helmer & Dyer.



On 28 April 1951, fire broke out in the white cottages, used to store plumbing supplies upstairs, whilst downstairs, cement etc. was kept. Due to lack of water pressure the Fire Brigade had great trouble coping. Water had to be brought in from ponds at the Manor of Groves. Subsequently the roof was re-thatched with reed, and the building refurbished as offices. The parish council started a campaign for a better water main. Helmer's Yard, meanwhile, also hosted other small businesses: Andrews Heating bases itself there, as does Engineering Prototype Ltd., a company manufacturing plastic moldings started by my late father-in-law, Mike Elsdon.

In 1963, Len Helmer got married for a second time, to Hilda Sutton. By 1965, H&D employed about 100 people. In December of that year a party was held to celebrate the company's 20th anniversary, and also to mark Bill Dyer's retirement. In 1967, Jon Smylie joined the company Jon, quickly rose through the ranks and soon became Len Helmer's second in command.



*Len & Hilda's marriage in 1963; note Len's mother, and best man Alfred Mabey.*

Len Helmer passed away in 1976. By that time, Jon Smylie had already acquired a minority share in the business. The company then carried on under his management and with Len Helmer's widow, Hilda, in the background. After Hilda died in 1997, John Smylie took over full ownership. This situation continued until 2006, when H&D was sold and moved to Ware. But the new owners did not make a success of it. In January 2008 the London Gazette published an insolvency notice: H&D was bankrupt. Jon Smylie, meanwhile, continued as owner of the Yard and landlord of companies such as P&R Travel and Willis Architectural Ironmongery.



*Len Helmer's gravestone in High Wych churchyard and his obituary.*

## DEATH OF MR LEONARD HELMER

MR LEONARD (LAC) HELMER died at his home, Grasslands, Pye Corner, High Wych, on Sunday after being ill for some weeks. He was 64.

He entered public life in 1949 as a member of the late 1940s being a member of High Wych Parish Council between 1949 and 1968 with one three year break because of illness.

It was also in 1949 that he was elected to Braughing Rural Council where he served until 1974, being chairman between 1963 and 1970.

Between 1970 and 1974 he represented Sawbridgeworth, the Hadham and High Wych on Hertfordshire county council and was a member of the highways, fire and civil defence committees.

Mr. Helmer was appointed a magistrate in 1968 and was one of the deputy chairmen of the now combined Hertford, Ware and Buntingford bench.

He became a governor of Leventhorpe School, Sawbridgeworth, in 1964 and was vice-chairman between 1965 and 1976.

For many years he was governor of Hadham Hall School and High Wych Primary School, and for six years he served on the board of governors of Ware College of Further Education.

Mr Helmer was a chair-

man of Sawbridgeworth Chamber of Trade and he was a trustee of the Fawbert and Barnard Trust.

He was born in High Wych and lived in the area all his life. He went to High Wych primary school, leaving at 14 to become apprenticed as a carpenter.

While in his early 20s he founded the building firm Helmer and Dyer at High Wych.

He built his own home at Pye Corner and on one occasion this made him ineligible to stand for Braughing council because he lived 200 yards outside the ward boundaries.

When relaxing he enjoyed working in his two and a half acre garden. A keen caravanner he was treasurer of the Safari owners caravan club. He recently became treasurer of St. James Church, High Wych.

Mr Helmer leaves a wife, Mrs Hilda Helmer, a daughter and two grandchildren.

The funeral is being held tomorrow (Friday) at High Wych church and will be conducted by the Rev. David Wright. At the church a memorial service is being held on Sunday October 17.

## Parting glass for Percy and Alf



● CHAMPAGNE all round at the double retirement celebration. Pictured from left to right: Hilda Helmer, director, Percy Peacock, Alf Oakley and John Smylie, director.

A BUILDING contractors firm in Sawbridgeworth has lost two of its most experienced workers.

Alf Oakley (67) and Percy Peacock (65) retired from Helmer and Dyer, High Wych Lane,

with more than 90 years' service between them.

Company director John Smylie invited the two men back to the site last week to present them both with a cheque and to toast their retirement with champagne.

He said Mr Oakley, who lives in Chantry Road, Bishop's Stortford, had been with the firm since 1952 and had worked as a workshop supervisor. Mr Peacock, of The Plashets, Sheering,

joined in April 1943 at the age of 14 and, apart from two years doing his National Service, spent the whole of his working life as a painter and decorator.

Mr Smylie said both men were not leaving their jobs behind entirely after retiring: Mr Oakley was planning to do some work on his son's house and Mr Peacock had decided to paint his own home. "They will both be badly missed," he added.

1997: An article from the Herts & Essex Observer.

Sources this time were: Jill Clark, Roger Kempthorne, Percy Peacock, Alec Rainbird, Bob Springham, Jon Smylie and Eric Willison.