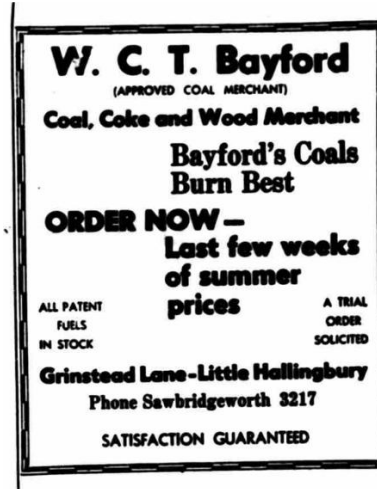


The Age of Coal

Theo van de Bilt.

Which child of the 1940s, 50s or 60s does not remember going outside to the coal bunker or downstairs to the cellar to fill up a hod with house coal, anthracite or coke for the family's fireplace? Who does not remember the coalman coming round carrying heavy bags of the stuff on his shoulders? No need to answer that question really! Coal figures highly in our collective memory.



Peter Agnoli, a third-generation coal merchant came to talk to the SLHS in January 2026. Though he is not the man in the picture above he does today still have trouble with his knees due to all the hard graft involved in his former trade.

Coal is nowadays often dismissed as a dirty business. We've come to prefer alternative ways to heat our homes or provide fuel for our factories. Without coal though there would have been no industrial revolution no lamp posts to light our streets no functioning factories, no warm homes. Coal's negative aspects did become evident over time however, so regulation just had to be brought in : the Clean Air Act of 1956 which outlawed some use of it and promoted the use of smokeless fuels. Coal merchants naturally had to adapt.

William Charles Thomas Bayford, Peter Agnoli's grandad, was born in 1903 in Little Hallingbury, the son of James and Emily. In 1926 in Harlow he married Ethel Wakeling. The couple had two sons, Ernest (who died young) and Ronald and two daughters: Ethel and Jessie.

In 1929 together with Arthur Bennett, William started a coal merchandising company: Bayford & Bennett. They traded together until the late 1940s when the partners decided to split dividing their territories between them with Sawbridgeworth and High Wych to be served by Bennett's, the rest by Bayford's.



William and Ethel Bayford's wedding in 1926

Sergio Peter Agnoli was born in 1948, his mum having been born Ethel Margaret Bayford, his dad Edoardo Agnoli a former Italian POW at the camp in Hatfield Heath who was sent out to work at Bayford's. Margaret and Edoardo fell in love, married in 1947 and settled down in Little Hallingbury. Regular visits to Edoardo's hometown of Fiuggi, famous for its healthy mineral waters, were a regular feature in the young family's life.

In 1969, after initially working for Smith & Nephew and Hayter's lawnmowers Peter was invited by grandad William Bayford to join the company, later also to be joined by brothers Nick and Paul. Father Edoardo also continued working there. The company thrived, appreciated by customers, fellow workers and suppliers alike.

As said the Bayford Bennett partnership ended in the 1940s. Arthur Bennett himself died in 1969. In 1989 the Bennett company was then taken over by Bayford's and customers had to change their allegiance. Bennet's coal yard was in Knight Street, at the back of what was long Barclay's bank and now some sort of night club. It eventually became a small housing estate.

Bayford's, now a limited company with the three brothers as directors continued to prosper. Apart from Bennetts they also bought the assets of a Takeley based competitor who had ceased trading. Naturally, over time, as they became the main supplier of coal related products in our area the brothers were courted by suppliers and would be suppliers with invitations for VIP treatment at corporate events such as the British Grand Prix at Silverstone and horse racing at the St. Leger where they mixed with the likes of John McCrick. In 1982 at Doncaster Steve Davies presented Peter with a snooker cue(which he of course still has!). Famous customers were Sir Malcolm Sargent, High Wych's own Valentine Fane and Christopher Timothy known from the original version of the tv series All Creatures Great and Small. In 1997 the company made the local press delivering free coal to Sawbridgeworth's Alfred Hibbert who was Bayford's oldest customer and at 105 also the UK's oldest person.



The Bayford coal yard from the air

Time marches on though and sadly nobody amongst the next generation of the family was prepared to take over. So, never mind its continuing success, a decision was made to sell up. Several candidates came forward but, in the end, K.G Smith & Son of Northampton, another family run business, won out. Friday 18th September 2018 was the last day of business. Today, 9 years later, K.G Smith & Farmhouse Fuels is still trading as one of the few coal merchants still about.



Bayford's remained profitable until the time they sold out. The above 2 pictures, taken in 2017, may prove the point.

Information for this article was gathered from and sources were Ancestry.co.uk, Wkipedia, the Hertslive website but primarily Peter Agnoli.