

MEMORIES OF MY CHILDHOOD BY WILLIAM COX (AKA COCK)

This is a true story written at the request of Jennie Burgess, from the Birchington Heritage Trust, following a recent conversation with her. It is taken from my fading memory, as I was about 12 at the time and am now 69 years of age.

As a child I lived with my parents, Denys, (known as Dan or Den) and Mary Cock at St Nicholas-at-Wade and my Grandfather, William Cock, (known as Bill) lived at "Burma" 8, Westfield Road, Birchington. Another son, Donald, lived, in Westgate at that time.

Granddad Bill, my Father and Donald, were well known locally as they all worked for the Gas Company, (the Westgate and Birchington which later became South Eastern Gas Board) . They were always on the beaches collecting shellfish to cook and sell around the local villages, wood, coal and any other items that were washed up, (for the fire, building sheds and for selling,) and any item that could be turned into money! Dad used to collect and cook his Shellfish on a Saturday and deliver out as far as Preston on a Sunday morning, on a trade-bike!

Around the early 1950's, one of them came across a very large wooden raft that had washed up at Epple Bay. They reported this to the authorities who thought it had probably come from a Dockyard and were told that they could have it if they could get it off the beach! What a challenge!

This raft was about three foot thick and about 20 foot square and was constructed of two layers of timber each about 18 inches square. Metal rods held the timbers together, and I believe, there were also timber rods. It looked something like my drawing.

As the brothers were both working they could only get to the beach after work and at weekends. Granddad, being retired, kept the night watch to ensure the raft did not float away at the next high tide! They anchored the raft to the beach with ropes and then set about working out what to do next!

As locals will know, Epple Bay is reached from a very narrow cutting in the cliff and there were limited sea defences or promenade in those days, so there was obviously going to be a problem, not only with breaking up the raft, but also getting the timber off the beach.

I remember that a local farmer, (possibly a Mr. Linington?) offered them the use of a small lorry and driver to get the timbers up the slipway and to take them to I know not where! In return, his fee would be one length of timber!

The "gang" then set about breaking up the raft. They used oxy-acetylene to remove the iron rods, saws to cut through the timber rods and made huge wedges to split the layers apart. How long this took I cannot remember but I do know that I spent many long and enjoyable hours on that beach whilst Granddad and his two sons worked like Trojans.

I seem to remember another person helping them but this could of course have been the Oxy-cutting man, or the lorry driver.

How they managed to get the timber up onto the lorry I do not know but I can remember seeing the lorry squeezing up the slipway.

Eventually the raft was completely dismantled and removed from the beach and any local interest obviously waned.

I have memories of at least one length of timber lying on the allotment at the bottom of Granddad's garden, (where Kent Gardens was built) and of the "gang" digging a sawpit to enable them to saw up a piece lengthways! Why? You might ask! I remember seeing Granddad standing on the top of the timber over the pit with a "two man saw" whilst my Dad worked from below, each taking turns to pull the saw up or down! What workers they must have been in those days!

How long it took to dispose of all the timber, and where it went I do not know, but I do remember that my Father's told me many years later that his share of the proceeds from the sale was something like £120, a large sum in those days. To my knowledge there are no family photos of this event, and I have never seen any but maybe it caught the imagination of a local photographer or even a newspaper. This is a great pity as it would have been wonderful to have seen just what the conditions were like at that time.

I know that people who were adults at that time are fading away, but if any one has any knowledge, or better still photos, of this raft, I would love to hear from them.