

Memories of John Stenning & Son – Robertsbridge

By Len Woodgate

Up until the end of World War 2, timber was hauled into the saw-mills from the surrounding woods by horse drawn “tugs”. A load usually consisted of about 3 tons and was pulled by a team of two or three horses – there were several horses stabled at Robertsbridge.

After the end of WW2 the demand for trees increased considerably and mechanical transport had to be used, initially an ex-War Department Morris Quad and a Fordson Major tractor, both equipped with winches were used. These could travel further and faster than the horse drawn teams and also pull heavier loads.

At one time, after Italy was liberated, great big Dock Blocks could be seen loaded onto railway trucks in the Stenning’s sidings and earmarked for rebuilding Taranto Docks.

The 150th anniversary of the founding of John Stenning & Son (in East Grinstead) was due to be held in 1942 but with the war in progress this was actually celebrated in 1952 with an organised party of employees from both East Grinstead and Robertsbridge having a trip to Pulborough for lunch, then on to Brighton for an evening meal before a show at one of the theatres – the name of which I cannot remember! The large carved sign which used to hang outside the offices at Robertsbridge, (which can be seen in one of the photographs –Ed.) confirms the formation of the company in 1792.

In the late 1950s, after the amalgamation with Oakover company from Ticehurst and the transfer of the Eats Grinstead business to Robertsbridge, new plant was installed and the volume of timber demanded necessitated other haulage firms being employed to cope with the demand for timber and to travel greater distances to locate the quantity and quality of timber. During this time the saw doctors shop (seen in one of the photographs – Ed.) brought in large rolls of special steel and made up their own saw bands. This was a specialised process and was of vital importance to the running of the entire business.

At one time there was a complement of over 100 employed at Robertsbridge and was regarded as probably the largest home grown timber saw mills in the U.K. During the miner’s strike of 1972 a three day week was decreed by the Government and initially this made longer working hours necessary which at the outset meant a start at 7am and finish at 7pm on Thursday and Friday and 7am till 4pm on Saturday. However, it was considered to be of National importance to build up stocks of mining timbers for repairing the coal mines when the strike was resolved and a special licence was granted to a return to the normal working week. However, this only applied to the Home Grown Timber industry as far as I know and was not very favourably viewed by certain other industries!