

The Cricket Bat Factory

By Dorothy Martin

In 1876 L.J. Nicolls, a carpenter by trade, began making his own cricket bats. His friends on seeing these asked, as friends do, if he would make them some. From this small beginning the bat factory came into being. It was seen that these hand made bats were of good quality wood and were well made. L.J. Nicolls had his factory on the west side of the High Street (*Robertsbridge*), just below the George Hotel and it was a corrugated iron structure reached from the shop front by a bridge, so one can imagine a raised building and maybe clefts of willow stored beneath.

In December 1924, as far as I can remember, a fire broke out in the factory and being seasoned wood in the building it soon became a real blaze. At that time there was an old hand pump fire engine in the village, the handles of which were on both sides of it and it was manned by four men each side. The firemen quickly responded to the call to tackle the blaze, but it wasn't powerful enough to do a lot of good and as far as I remember, a larger appliance came from Battle as soon as possible. The blaze was very fierce and it was feared that it would extend to the house in front where L.J. Nicolls's daughter lived. She had married Mr P.C. Bridger who assisted his father-in-law at the factory; upon L.J. Nicolls retirement he managed it until he retired it in 1926 owing to ill-health. A.L. Newbury and Don Bridger took control of the business. Don Bridger was the son of P.C. Bridger and both he and A.L. Newbury were well known cricketers. A.L. Newbury, or Len as he was known, had played for Sussex as well as for other well known teams, of course, Robertsbridge had a good team of its own, which was captained for a number of years by Mr T.J. Barnes, who owned a grocer's shop in the High Street.

From 1926 to 1939 the Nicolls Bat Factory continued to flourish and was famous for its bats all over the world of cricket, but the war (*WWII*) brought changes and the firm amalgamated with Gray and Sons Ltd and thus became Gray-Nicolls Ltd. They continued to work at the old factory at the back of the High Street but, after the fire the new building was entered from the shop by way of steps instead of a bridge. In 1940 the firm moved to larger premises out of the village to a building situated in a wood at Hackwoods. It continued to make bats there until 1980, when it moved to premise which have been used as a toy factory on the north side of Station Road (*and also used by Sherwood Brothers, Builders Merchants after the toy factory, Ed.*), where bats are still being made in 1992, but the method of manufacture is very different to L.J. Nicolls day, although the process is still the same. In the early days everything was done by hand and it was the skill of the workers that counted. These days they are made by machine.

Many famous cricketers have used Nicolls bats. I suppose the best known was Dr W. G. Grace who scored his 100th century using a Nicolls bat and the following letter was received from dated 8th October 1895.

Dear Sir

I used one of your bats at Hastings in 1894 and scored 131. I may mention that it was perfectly new. I kept it until this year and have scored 2,000 runs with it. I used it when I made my 100th century and scored 1,000 runs in May with it. So I think I may call it my record bat. This year at Hastings I scored 104 runs with another of your bats and hope it will turn out as well as the old one.

Bats from the Robertsbridge factory have been used by most of the famous cricketers and Gray-Nicolls bats are known throughout the cricketing world for quality and good workmanship.

What are cricket bats made of and how are they made?

They are made of willow *Salix Alba Caerules*. These trees are mostly grown from cuttings or setts, as they are called, which are cut from mature trees and are about 12 feet long. Only straight setts are planted and they like damp positions. Great care is taken of them whilst they are growing to keep them straight and all shoots and buds must be kept off to a height of 10 feet. These are grown for about 12 years when they usually reach the circumference of about 50 inches at about 5 feet from the ground, the whole tree having reached the height of around 49 feet. Willow is very fast growing and one tree felled at Robertsbridge reached the desired circumference after only 9 years. Occasionally they have been known to grow to 100 feet in height and 15 to 18 feet in girth.

After the tree is felled it is cut into 2 feet 4 inch lengths, then split into clefts by using a wooden wedge, using the way of the grain, each cleft will make a cricket bat blade. These are then made roughly into the shape of the blade and stacked in open sided sheds, with a slat between each layer to enable the air to circulate and left for 9 – 12 months to season. After seasoning they would be inspected for flaws and roughly cut into correct width and the face and back roughly shaped, then they are pressed, each blade is pressed 3 times during manufacture and the edges are also pressed. This is important as the bat needs durable wood, elastic but tough, this makes it ideal to stand the force of the ball.

After the bat has been roughly shaped a ‘V’ is cut in the top of the blade for the handle. This has to be exactly right for, if it was too loose the handle would not be firm, or if too tight it would split the bat when in use, for the handle is only held in place by glue and a perfect fit.

The handle consist of strips of cane with rubber or sometimes cork between, each piece of rubber is glued to the cane, 12 or 16 pieces being used to make a handle. When set the handle is turned to the correct shape on a lathe and a ‘V’ cut at one end to fit into the blade. When this has been done the bat is then ready to be finished, a skilled job, and it done using a draw knife, spoke shave and plane until the right shape and balance is obtained. The blade then has to be sanded and burnished until it is smooth and glossy. The bat is then ready for its handle to be bound with tape and string. This done the rubber grip is fitted and another cricket bat is ready to have the firm’s stamp fixed on its blade.

Whereas in the old days everything had to be done by hand, in modern times most of it is done by machine, but still each blade has to be finished by hand. A skilled job, in fact to make a cricket bat by hand was the work of a craftsman.

It was always interesting to visit the Bat Factory, as I did from time to time. My father-in-law, Joseph Martin, worked for the firm for many years, right from the time he was a young man working for L.J. Nicolls, except for the time he was in the army during the First World War. I think I am right in saying he worked for the firm for over 60 years, for after retiring from the actual factory he made miniature bats at home for several years. My husband, Brian, was with the firm for, I think, over 46 years, starting at the age of 13 cleaning up shavings on Saturday mornings and starting work there fulltime at the age of 14 and retiring at 60 through ill-health. Of course he was away from the factory for a few years during the Second World War. Three other long service employees were Edward Jolley, Norman Walter and William Lucking.

My two sons were able to see the miniature bats being made by hand as well as seeing the more modern way of making full size bats. They were lucky to have two grandfathers and their father who were real craftsmen. Their father also could make a cricket bat by hand from the rough cleft to the finished article.

I am indebted to Gray-Nicolls Ltd, Edward Jolley and William Lucking for help in compiling this article, for although I should have known the sequence of making a bat, it needed their help to jog my memory.