

## The Evolution of L J Nicolls Ltd by Simon Bridger

Levi James Nicolls was born in 1848, the eldest of 5 sons of a Robertsbridge master carpenter, all of whom became carpenters as they grew up. He became well known locally for his cricket bats and eventually specialised in making them, using local willow. At the age of 22 he married Eliza whose family came from Leicestershire and the following year their only child Mary Ann was born.



*Levi Nicolls in the doorway of the High St. Factory c.1885*

Having established an international reputation Levi, at the early age of 48, died of a brain tumour and congested lungs and, only 18 months later Eliza also died leaving Mary Ann the sole owner of L J Nicolls Cricket Bats at the age of 25. It is not clear how many men she had working for her at that time, but she was living at the High Street workshop premises with her cousin Elizabeth Morfett as a companion. Around the turn of the century two men came to work for her, Percy Bridger and his father George. They were from a Penshurst family and George had learnt the trade as a young man at one of the many bat makers around Tonbridge. Percy had been working in Robertsbridge as a general carpenter.

Percy and Mary Ann married in 1903 and Donovan Nicolls Bridger was born 18 months later. He was to be their only child. The pattern of early deaths continued as Mary Ann died in 1920 at the age of 48 and worse was to come when Percy died at the age of 55 in 1926, leaving Don the owner of the business at the age of 21. Thinking that he lacked sufficient experience to manage the business on his own, the Stock and Goodwill was put up for sale during his father's long final illness.



*Robertsbridge CC 1904 Percy Bridger seated far R.*

The resulting sale was to the Newbery family from Battle who owned a successful Jam Makers and Confectioners in Battle High Street. Len Newbery, the eldest son, was a well-known cricketer who had played some games for Sussex as an amateur. He joined Don in a 50/50 partnership in L J Nicolls Ltd and the firm grew successfully over the interwar years.

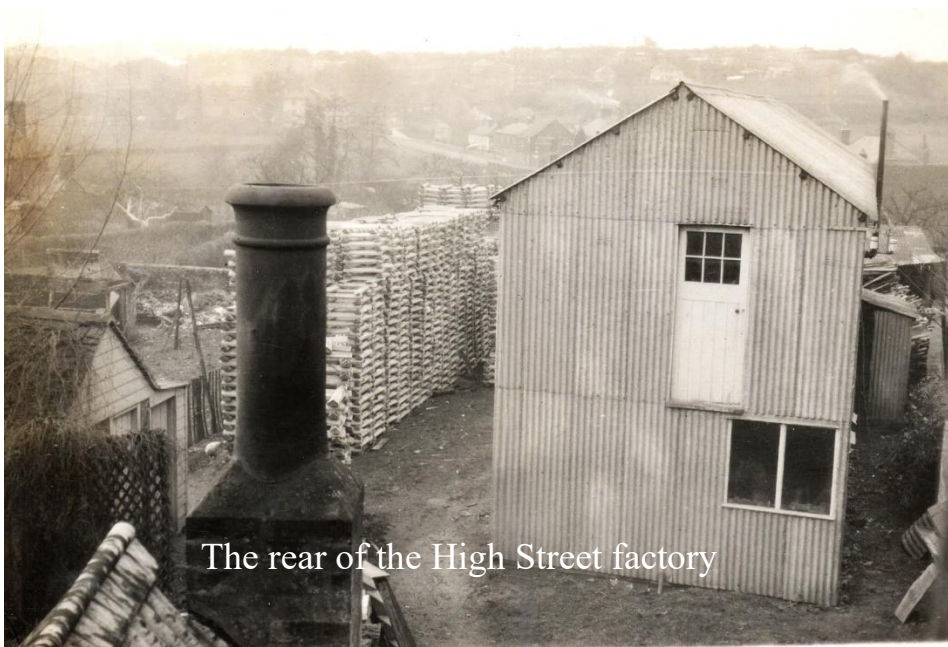


*Don Bridger inspecting bats in the factory c.1930*

The years of WW2 were not great for cricket bat makers, but they survived and at some point, in the 1940s, Don and Len went into partnership with Gray's of Cambridge creating Gray-Nicolls Ltd. The story goes that the original outline agreement was sketched out on the back of an envelope by Don and Mrs Gray in the back of a London taxicab.

Don Bridger was also to die relatively young at the age of 64 and Len Newbery died 6 year later. Their shares in the company were taken up by Gray's although Len's son John continued to work with them for a few years before leaving to start Newbery Bats.

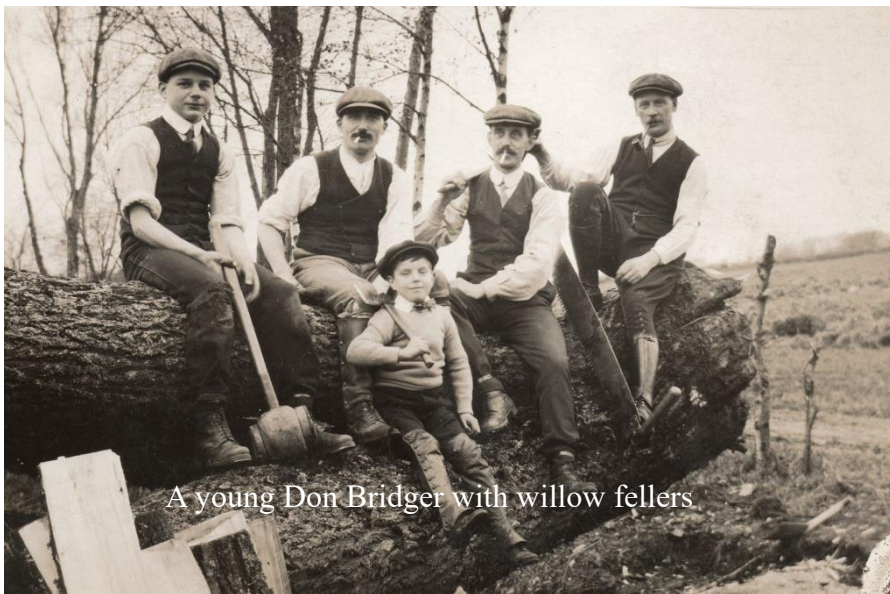
On the next pages are a few pictures of the works and family – if anyone recognises any of the people shown please get in touch via [info@aboutrobertsbridge.org.uk](mailto:info@aboutrobertsbridge.org.uk)



The rear of the High Street factory



Splitting clefts



A young Don Bridger with willow fellers



Len Newbery and Don Bridger  
with cricketers at the factory



Bridger Nicolls wedding 1903



Levi Nicolls with family and  
friends