

The Eley family in Dedham

It was listening to Mr W.E. (Ted) Eley's reminiscences when I was a child that first sparked my wish to know more about the history of our village. His memories reached right back to the beginning of the twentieth century and to the end of his long life he had perfect recall. My notes made after a succession of talks with him and his sister Connie in the early 1980s provide an enormous amount of incidental detail which would otherwise have been lost.

I am greatly indebted to Ted's granddaughters, Ann Pearce and Janet Bugg and Ann's husband Mark for the generous loan of their family albums and their kind permission to reproduce the photographs used here.

Part I: The Vale Bakery 1891-1962

John Eley (1859-1941) was a baker in Fore Street, Ipswich in the 1880s. He was already using the Clovers' flour from Dedham Mill when he heard from them that the tenant of their bakery on the corner of the High Street and Princl Lane had gone bankrupt and they were looking for someone to take it on. John and his wife Julia Minnie (née Bloomfield) were already intending to move out to the country, as she was most anxious to take their two young sons, Cecil (1887-1961) and William Edward (1890-1987), away from the unhealthy part of the town where they were living, which suffered from drains which were dangerously inadequate; so

in 1891 the family moved to Dedham where their daughter Connie (1896-1983) was born.



John and Julia Eley with their children Cecil, Edward and Constance, 1903

John Eley set up his Vale Bakery in a shop with a small bow window (later enlarged) overlooking the High Street. Behind it on the west side of Princl Lane were the dwelling house, the bakehouse, a range of sheds and four stables. Further down at the end of the lane they had garden land, a run for chickens (60 at one time) and an orchard. John took to breeding pigs and had his own hams, he always made 5 gallons of beer, he kept bees for honey and he planted walnut trees.



John Eley's Bakery, as it appeared when he opened it in 1891

Above all he had grazing for the horses, which were essential because deliveries were a very important part of his successful business. In the early days they were all made by horses and carts which could even make use of narrow lanes like the one, now reduced to a footpath, which ran from Rookery Farm in Cole's Oak Lane down to the Stratford Road. By being the only bakery delivering around Dedham daily (and every other day in outlying districts like Brantham and Boxted) Eley's gained a commercial advantage and because it stocked a range of everyday groceries, such as tea, butter and OXO as well, it

had the edge on other grocers who only came round weekly. Selling bread was a very competitive market because there were numerous bakeries in the immediate vicinity, including Young's in Crown Street, Sharp's near the Anchor, Bennett's on the Heath, Seaborn's next to the Live and Let Live pub on the Ardleigh Road, Harvey's shop at Lamb Corner, Mrs Garwood's on Grove Hill and, just outside the parish, Thorpe's at Stratford St Mary and Downing's at Ardleigh.

As soon as he was grown up William Edward, always known as Ted, joined his father in the business, which acquired further premises and expanded to provide teas and boat hire for the

tourists who were arriving in increasing numbers. In 1923 he married Dorothy (née Smith) and in due course their son Jim (1925-2003) worked with him. Ted's elder brother Cecil (1887-1961) was not involved with the Bakery but went into a business selling bicycles and cars which was owned by his mother's family in Braintree. Connie spent her life baking and running the shop, becoming famous for her skillfully iced cakes.

As an enterprising business man and property owner John Eley played an important part in community life and was involved in many village activities such as acting as Master of Ceremonies at dances in the old Grammar School building on Frog Meadow and singing in the church choir. He was one of the earliest people in the village to own a car. When war was declared in 1914 he

feared that his horses might be requisitioned and converted one of his horse vans into a motor vehicle. However when Ted was called up and spent two years with the Army in Salonika there was no one who could drive it! By 1919 the Bakery owned a 1906 Humber with two interchangeable bodies which could be hoisted up into the garage roof and dropped on to the chassis, so that it could be either a car or a van as needed.

In 1925 John Eley and his wife retired to Braintree where she had grown up but after her death in 1940 he returned to Dedham and took a furnished rental of Walden in Brook Street while negotiating to buy a building plot for a bungalow to share with Connie.

Postcard c.1913, showing the Bakery with enlarged shop windows





John, Jim and Ted - three generations of Eleys outside the bakehouse, 1934
Connie and Ted Eley at work in the bakehouse just before they retired in 1962





The Bakery with staff in the 1920s

He did not live to see Boot's Hole (now Reynbank) built in 1943 but Connie occupied it for the rest of her life and Ted joined her there after his wife died in 1970.

Following their father's retirement Ted and Connie ran the bakery together for nearly forty years but after WW2 Dedham's traditional way of life began to change.

Serious problems emerged in the 1950s when increased car ownership and the inexorable rise of the supermarkets began to put local shops out of business. In 1956 they were obliged to dismiss their staff, who to their relief were able

to find new jobs, and do all the work themselves.

Long mornings in the bakehouse were followed by tiring afternoons doing deliveries but they kept going, always smiling and cheerful. Finally in 1962 they retired and the business closed down, a victim of changed times.

@Lucy Archer

**Next time:
Part 2:
Eley's Tea Rooms and Boat Hire**