



# A glimpse inside the factory gates

By David Melsome

The back-page article in our February edition on the history of the huge Simms motor parts factory that used to operate off Oak Lane, N2, has evoked a flood of memories from those who used to work there or had family members who did.

As noted in Charles Haydn's article, during its heyday in the 1940s and 1950s everyone in East Finchley is likely to have known someone working at the plant. It employed hundreds of local people, working four shifts across 24 hours.

One was Vic Nutting, whose son Chris wrote to us about his father's working life at Simms, and his own memories of being taken into the factory for family parties. He recalls the workers pouring out at the end of the day "like ants" and all the thriving clubs and facilities that together made the plant feel like a mini-town in its own right.

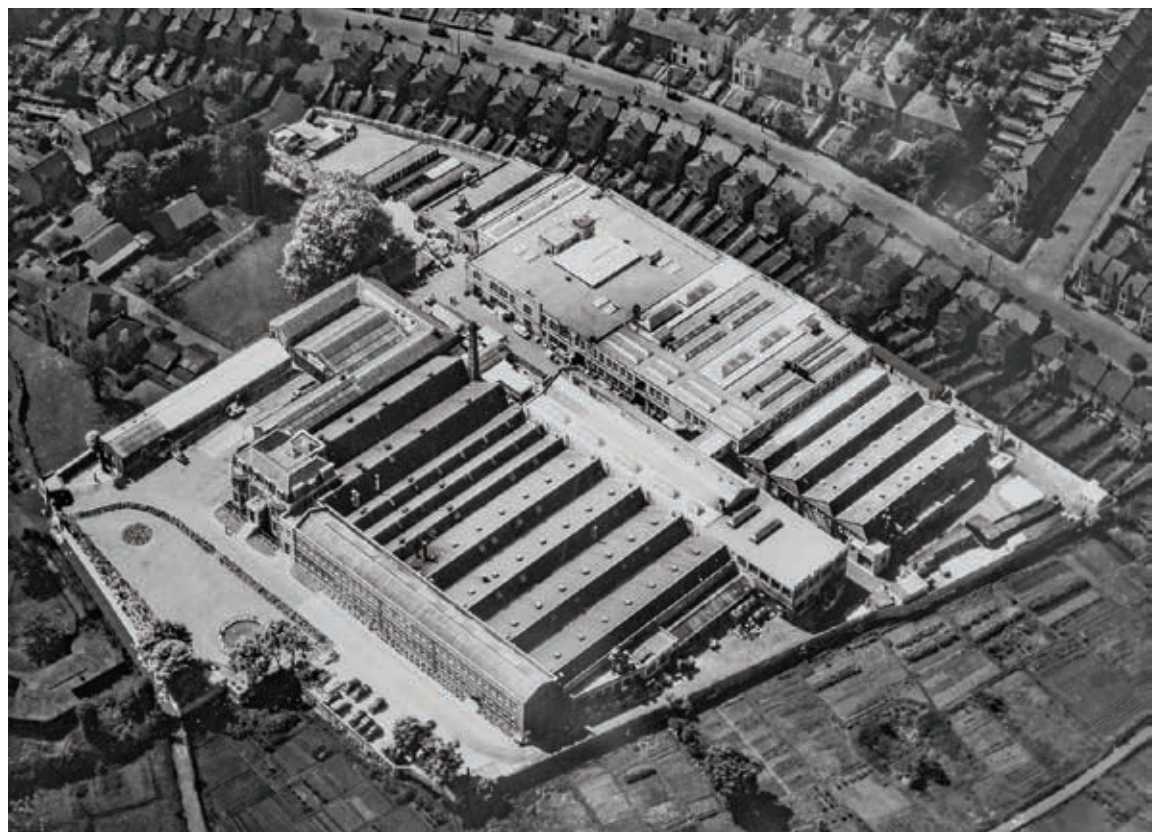
Another is Ray Walker, who served his apprenticeship

at Simms from 1957 to 1962, staying on for another three years before taking a job in east London. He paints a fascinating picture of what life was like for the workers inside the factory gates.

## Dads' Army

And at the same time our photo editor Mike Coles was browsing through the book *Barnet at War*, issued by Barnet Borough Archives 23 years ago, when he came across a wartime photo of the factory's very own Home Guard unit from 1944.

The photo shows 45 men in full uniform in one of the factory yards, with their two senior officers in the middle rows. Although many of these



Mini-town: The Simms factory occupied a huge site alongside Long Lane, N2

men would have been of fighting age, presumably their job producing engine parts for tanks and trucks was a protected occupation and therefore they were allowed to serve on the home front.

## Four canteens and a boxing club

By Ray Walker

**I served my five-year apprenticeship at Simms Motor Units. They took 10-15 boys a year, I think over three grades: craft blue collar, technical red collar and engineering green collar (the clever lads).**

It was excellent training with day release for HNC and HND certificates which stood me in good stead for the rest of my working life. We had a good canteen, four in fact: the works canteen, the staff canteen, the senior staff canteen with silver service, and a directors' dining room at The Grange manor house next door to the factory in Oak Lane.

The works canteen was used for amateur boxing shows occasionally in the evenings. We also had a social club with a shop and a big games room, a decent sur-

gery where the apprentices had an annual medical, and a works' barber, would you believe?

I started at Simms in 1957 as a technical apprentice on £2-16s-4d a week and had 6d for the social club and 1d for the Red Cross deducted. I left Simms in 1965 and went to work for Scholl, the foot people, in east London, for an extra £1 a week. I retired 19 years ago aged 60 as the operations director of Scholl's factory in Derby, where I still live. I can say that Simms training helped me enormously over the years.



Fighting on the home front: The Simms Home Guard unit 1944

## An incredibly friendly place to work

By Chris Nutting

**I lived with my parents Vic and Gwen Nutting in Sedgemere Avenue, East Finchley, from when I was born on 4 May 1951 until I married on 18 September 1976. Since that time, I have lived in south-west London but have always kept an interest in East Finchley.**

I attended Holy Trinity Primary School and then Finchley County Grammar School. My father was a survivor of the sinking of the troopship *Lancastria* off St. Nazaire, France on 17 June 1940.

He joined Simms Motor Units on in November 1955 and on joining was given the book entitled *The Simms Story from 1891*.

You are absolutely correct that it seemed everybody in East Finchley had a member of their family or somebody they knew that worked at Simms. My father worked there until he retired in 1982 although in the last few years he worked in Colindale for a subsidiary and he said that the camaraderie of Simms had gone out of the window.

I have several vivid recollections. During the early part of December employees' children were invited to a Christmas Party and it was a very



Simms engineer: Chris's dad Vic on his 65th birthday

grand affair. I reckon somewhere in the region of 100 children attended each year probably up to being young teenagers. Party food, party games, entertainment and presents were the order of the day.

There were many clubs run by the employees for the benefit

of the employees. My parents had a neighbour who was of Italian origin. I knew him as Primo Berg (although his real surname was Italian and much longer) and along with his wife (who was not an employee) they ran the 'Olde Tyme Dancing Club'.

There were many clubs including tennis, dramatics, swimming, cricket (ladies and gentlemen), football and rifle to name a few. Apparently, it was an incredibly friendly place to work long before the adage of 'work-life balance' was ever thought of.

I walked home from my grammar school on the High Road, North Finchley, and often waited outside the front entrance of the company for my father to finish work, as it was on the way home for me. A hooter was sounded to mark the end of the working day and I was always astonished at the number of workers leaving the factory. They really were like ants.



Home from school: Chris Nutting and his mum Gwen in The Causeway, N2, in 1964.