

The Eley Family in Dedham

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

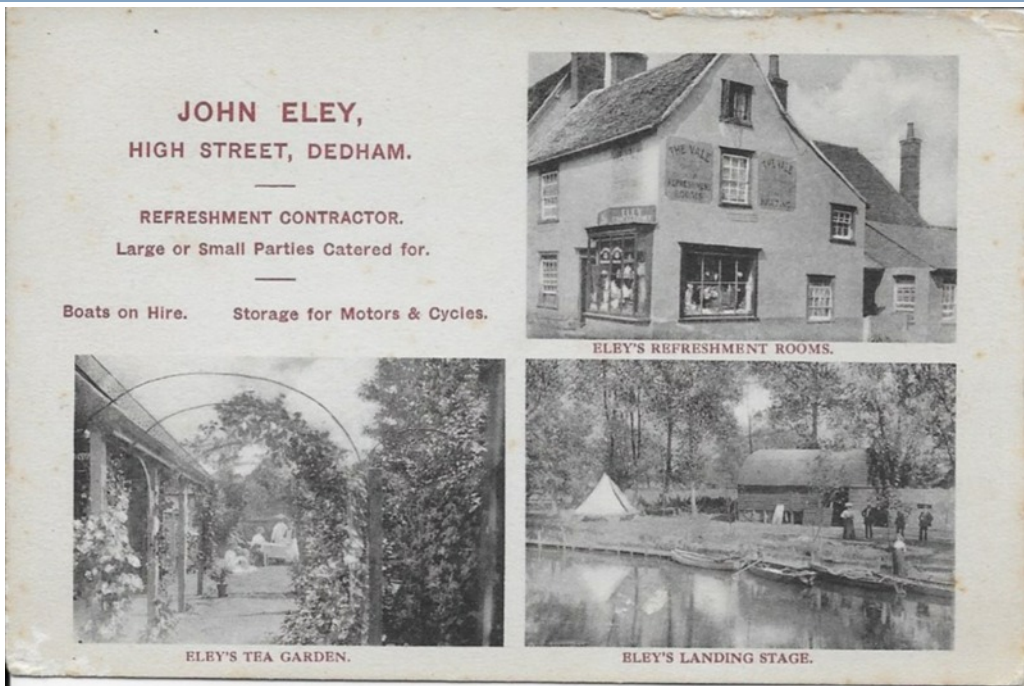
Part 2: Eley's Tearooms and Boatyard

Eley's bakery established in 1891 provided refreshments besides selling bread and as late as the 1950s the left hand side of the High Street premises was still being used as a tea shop. However the new business opportunity which opened up around 1900 was providing teas on a larger scale for the day trippers who were beginning to arrive in the village. Many of them were cyclists and the Cyclists Touring Club badge mounted on the side wall of the bakery, seen in a photograph dating from the 1920s, indicated that members were welcome and would get preferential rates. Horse charabancs brought the first tourist numbers. Tea gardens were very popular and John Eley's first one was in his orchard off Princler Lane. Then he bought London House across the High Street, where some of his employees lived, and its south-facing garden became the Eley's Tea Garden seen in a publicity photograph with a pergola and cascading roses. He faced direct competition when a former employee borrowed money from him and then shocked him

by setting up doing teas himself next door. Another rival was Henry Gammer whose tea garden behind Ivy House offered light refreshments and teas between 1907 and 1913.

John Eley described himself as "a refreshment contractor catering for large or small parties." Judging by a surviving menu dating from the 1920s the tearoom and garden provided substantial fare and must have been fairly spacious because Ted and Connie remembered that no fewer than five charabanc loads came on the day when Jim Eley was born in 1925. Providing so many teas put an extra strain on the Eleys' water supply which was needed for the horses drawing the delivery vans as well as the bakery itself. In summer the well tended to run dry; so on Saturdays when there was a water cart in Royal Square they employed a boy to come and go all day fetching water and pouring it into the tank above the bread oven. They paid £100 to have their well deepened, only to be told that the water was not pure; so they went on to the mains just as soon as it was possible.

Then, as nowadays, a particular lure for visitors was the river but there were no rowing boats for hire in the late nineteenth century. The Stour was still a working waterway at that time with barges plying between Sudbury and Mistley but by 1900 river traffic was dwindling. A serious drought in 1901 caused problems with the flow of water and barges were increasingly losing business to the railways.



John Eley's advertising postcard, before 1918, showing the shop, tea garden and landing stage

With manpower shortages at the outbreak of the Second World War it was decided to put down the tow horses and scuttle the remaining barges. Sir Alfred Munnings painted a derelict barge beside the river in 1924 and four years later Percy Clover's last barge made its final journey. Long after the navigation had lapsed the remaining traces of the tow path were finally obliterated when the river was dredged in the early 1950s and the spoil including heaps of oyster shells spread along its banks. As children we optimistically searched for pearls!

In the early 1900s John Eley realised that there was a new opportunity for leisure

boating and he bought a wharf beside Dedham bridge, which had been used for unloading chalk used in agriculture. He subsequently protected his monopoly by buying the nearby site of the gas works (now The Millstream and its garden) after it had closed down in 1923 because he feared a competitor might use it to establish a rival undertaking with access along the Black Brook to the main river. He set up his boatyard business around 1910, equipping it as economically as possible. There were no buildings on the site when he took it on. The weatherboarded structure with a corrugated iron roof, shown in a photograph taken c.1910, was an "engineering shed" bought from Courtaulds in Braintree; he had come to hear that it was being sold off because

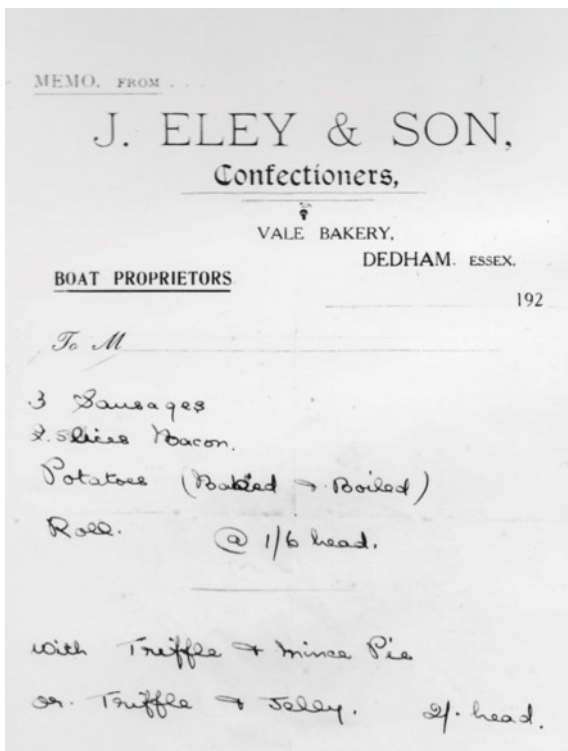
his wife's family lived in the town. He began making the boatyard setting more attractive by planting the chestnut trees which are such a picturesque feature now. The boats were second hand, made in Brightlingsea. There were two which came from Rowhedge and two from Ipswich and Mr Clementson at Langham sold him a canoe. Ted told me that two more canoes were left behind by fellows on holiday from Oxford, who sold them to Eley's rather than paying to take them home. The first four rowing boats were named Hilda, Amy, Peggy and Connie after John and Julia Minnie Eley's three nieces and their own daughter.

Conveniently the boatyard could be reached from the bakery by a path leading from the end of Princel Lane through to Mill Lane. Mr Banting, proprietor of the Sun told the Eleys about this right of way behind the High Street which must originally have been the night soil track, used before the days of mains drainage to gain access to the backs of the houses for emptying the residents' earth closets. The path then passed through the field behind the present Haywain (then a row of cottages), where the Eleys had a pigsty, an orchard and gardens for the use of their employees living at London House. They kept this land until Ted and Connie retired and closed the bakery in 1962.

The boatyard eventually shut down during the Second World War and was bought by a firm at Ipswich, who in turn sold it on to its next owner, boat builder Frederick Smeech. Since 2002 it has been run by Cameron and Claire Marshall, together with the popular Boathouse Restaurant. They have twenty-six rowing boats available for hire during the summer months.

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**Next time:
Part 3: Ted and Connie Eley**



Eley's tearoom menu, 1920s, offering meals at 1/6d or 2 shillings a head



Eley's Refreshment Rooms at London House in the early 20th century. The tea garden was behind the house.



The boatyard in the early twentieth century beside the new Dedham bridge installed in 1900. Note to its right the wooden planking of the surviving tow path across the tributary



John Eley's boatyard, set up around 1910. On the left is a tent belonging the recently-founded Dedham Scout Troop



The Boatyard with rowing boats and canoes in 1934. The round-topped corrugated iron shed was bought second-hand from Courtaulds in Halstead