

Mullberry Harbour Model - Gordons Joseph Taylor Story

About Bassett- Lowke.

Bassett-Lowke was founded by Wenman Joseph Bassett-Lowke around 1899 in Northampton. This famous company specialized in model railways, boats and ships, construction sets as well as buildings. They could make models of anything that was wanted to whatever scale was required. The smallest models were Waterline ships that could be as small as 1/1800 or one inch to 150 feet.

The models that were made were sold all over the world and are still re-sold to this day, some for quite vast amounts of money. This was in the day before plastics and if you wanted a model made it had to be made from wood and/or metal.

Of all the factories and properties that Bassett-Lowke owned around that time in Northampton, only 78 Derngate Street in is left. This was the home of Wenman Bassett-Lowke. It survives mainly because the inside was designed be Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the famous architect and designer. It is the only building he is supposed to have designed outside Scotland.

It is a museum not only to Rennie Mackintosh but also to the models that were made by the Bassett-Lowkes company. The company went out of business in 1966.



The picture above is the RMS Queen Elizabeth taken in 1939.



Photo of one of the workshops.

Gordon Joseph Taylor

As for my grandfather, when at school he was told he needed to do a job where he could use his hands, as he seemed to have a talent for building things. So, in 1928, when he left school at 16, he took a metalwork apprenticeship at Bassett-Lowke and became a part of the team that made models out of metal.

During the September 1938 crisis, he felt, with others, that he should do something in the role of National Service. Thinking back to his youth and his love of an active life, the idea of fulfilling a boyhood dream of being a fireman came to life. He joined the Auxiliary Fire Service and became a part time fireman and, in the September of 1939, just after the start of WW2, he left Bassett-Lowke and became a fulltime fireman.

In February of 1940, after a winter of sweeping away snow from the fire station yard and not much else, Gordon was called back to Bassett-Lowke to do work for the war office and the Admiralty. His war time work had him making many different models. Models like waterline ships, battleships, including the Scharnhorst and the Gnausnaue from the German navy and Japanese and Dutch ships too.

Some of these ships were so small that they could be carried in your pocket. These were used by the RAF for recognition purposes.

He also made models of the 'Bailey Bridges' to enable engineers to recognise how the components fitted together before they worked on the real thing.

Bassett-Lowke also made a model of an armoured trench digger, one of Winston Churchill's ideas. This was known as Cultivator No. 6 and by its code name, white rabbit. I don't think my grandfather had anything to do with this project as it was made in a Bath hotel which was a secret navel place. One of his colleagues had to travel down there to make the model under the strictest security.



Gordon standing in the middle, not wearing a hat. The picture should not have been taken because at the time the model was regarded as secret.

The above picture shows a brass ship that was made for the RN damage control school since it had been shown that there wasn't enough training on how to keep a ship trim after torpedo or bombing attacks. It had valves that could be opened and closed to different compartments so trainees could practice keeping it trim and not let the model sink. This model was so successful that after the war Bassett-Lowke made similar models for different types of ships till the 1960s.

Bassett-Lowke was so busy during this period in their history that they had to move to bigger premises and employed girls to help with the making of the models, which was unheard of before the war.

Gordon's most important project was the top-secret model of the Mulberry Harbour. He was one of three men selected for this job. He was responsible for making the concrete casings. He had no idea what the other two men were doing at that time. But all the parts were taken into a room and placed together and sealed in a wooden box by only one man and then sent by a lorry to Churchill to show the Chiefs of Staff.

When he got married to my nan, whilst on their honeymoon in Wales he met a bunch of men who were learning how to float concrete. He also believed this had something to do with the mulberry harbour.

Whilst doing all this modelling he also remained as a part time fireman. But he was not allowed to go to the most dangerous of fires like the ones in Coventry, where the rest of his fire crew went.

At the end of the war, Bassett-Lowke made Churchill a fleet of all the British waterline battle ships as a thank you. I'd like to think Gordon had something to do with that. He stayed on with Bassett-Lowke until 1955 and attended Wenman Bassett-Lowke's funeral in 1953.

For many years my grandfather did really talk too much about what he had done during the war. I knew he was fireman but not too much about his model making work. He had his hobbies like mountain and hill walking around Britain and he was in the Northampton male voice choir. But I think he had a certain amount of shame for not becoming a soldier or something like that.

This was until he visited the D-day beaches in France. He had never been abroad before and when the coach guide was talking about the Mulberry harbour and its model, Gordon turned around and said he had been a part of the team that made the Mulberry harbour model.

By the time they reached the museum where the model was on display, the curator of the museum had been informed about my grandfather and came out to meet him and took him to the model. He explained to my grandfather why the model had been made and how Churchill had shown it to the Admiralty and that it had made a difference to the outcome of the war...and as Gordon put it 'they generally made a bit of a fuss over me'.

They even gave Gordon a medal that they give to veterans who visit the museum. After this experience, Gordon was more open about what he had done during the war.

He was interviewed by some local papers about his time at Bassett-Lowke.

I even put his story up on the BBC people's war web page (most of which is on here). The BBC wanted to interview him but by the time they tried to interview him he was in the early stages of dementia and he could not clearly give them the information they wanted.

When I look back on my grandfather, I remember the last November the 5th at my house the year before he died. Me setting off fireworks in the garden for my kids, Gordon and my mum were there as well. He told me that he had also met Churchill, not once but twice whilst doing the Mulberry harbour. Churchill had come up to Northampton to see how the model was coming along. I asked him what he had said to Churchill but Gordon just told me, with a serious look on his face, it was more like "what Churchill had said to him." It was mainly about where he wanted ladders and other things put on the model. This was all news to me.

Gordon died in 2008 at the age of 96 and at his funeral, the church was full. The Northampton male voice choir and a female soloist sang for him. I wish I had known who she was.

As his oldest grandchild and the one he seemed to talk to most about his war time history, I wanted to keep objects that made this history. His knife and harmonica, from when he was a scout, his fireman's helmet and his tool kit that he used at Bassett-Lowke.

To me these items meant more than anything else he had.

References

BBC WW2 Peoples war, Article ID A2070550, Mulberry Harbour: My Part in the War.

The Bassett Lowke Story by Roland Fuller

www.78derngate.org.uk