

Erith Ballast Wharf

It was in the early years of the nineteenth century that ballast began to be dug from the hill behind Erith.

This small beginning was the first step on Erith's path from being a riverside village to an industrial town. The fine loam which lay under the ballast was soon in great demand as moulding sand for the foundries of Tyneside. At first it was shipped from the "Lower Ballast Wharf" but in 1832 a special wharf was built further upstream. The 48" gauge railway from the pit to the wharf was probably laid at the same time. Horses were used at first but steam had taken over by 1881.

By the 1870's the workings extended nearly half a mile inland. At the height of the pit's prosperity queues of schooners are said to have lain in the river waiting to load. By this time the owner was John Parish.

In 1876, Parish moved to Walnut Tree House, a substantial house in fine grounds, where the family held their celebrated parties for the district's old people. The estate was acquired by Erith Council in 1900. They laid out Walnut Tree Road and built a generating station,(demolished after a fire in 1998), a tram shed (demolished in 1980) and a library.

In a worked-out corner of Parish's pit was the cricket ground, where, in 1884 and 1890, the locals took on members of the Australian touring teams. In 1891 Parish sold the land to Fraser and Chalmers for their engineering works. The pavilion was moved to a position near the wharf, where it was used as stables.

In 1932, the pit was sold to Talbot Estates. Although Talbot began phasing out steam almost at once, they went on running the 4'0" gauge railway until 1957. The lorries which replaced it were not licensed for road use and continued to cross West Street by the old level crossing.

Though it ceased working in 1971, the Ballast Wharf with its white lantern tower remained a land-mark for many years. The West Street level crossing also survived for many years with its control box and the standard gauge siding. The cricket pavilion was also a familiar sight with the engine shed and fitters' shop. This contained a fine old

forge and anvil - a reminder of days when engineering was more muscular activity.

For a full account see:

W J K Davies: **Parish's loam quarries, Erith** (Narrow Gauge Railway Soc. Handbook No 2)