

Eldon Smith Builder & Contractor

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Introduction

Farmer, Builder, Contractor, and Brick and Tile Manufacturer would be a more inclusive description of Eldon Smith, for he was in every sense a Victorian entrepreneur. This essay looks briefly at the scope of his farming operations before examining his building business. The brickmaking operation is described in a separate essay.

Eldon Smith

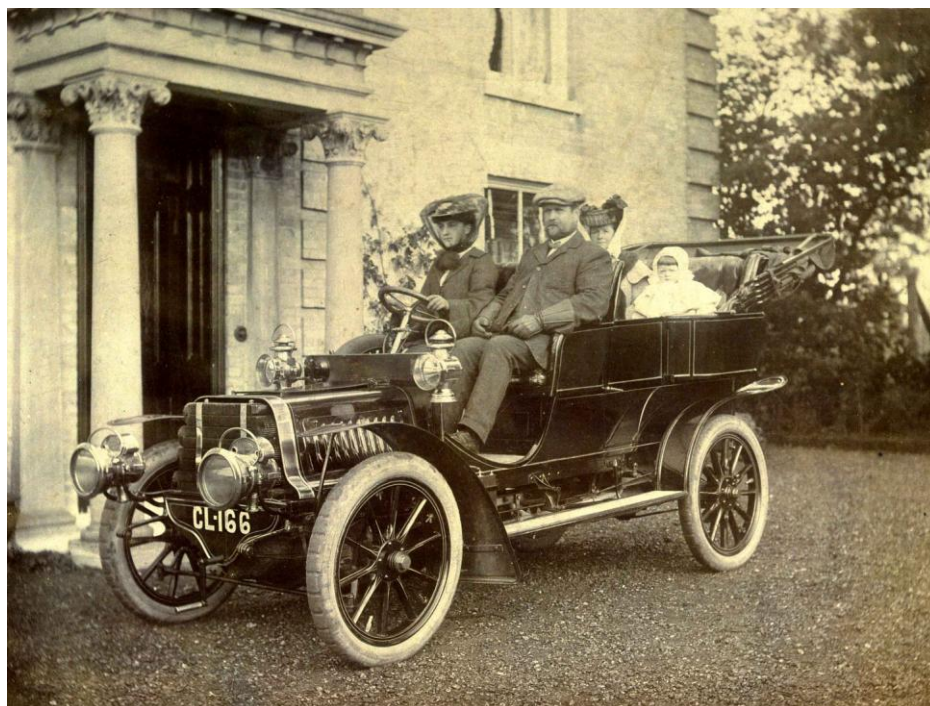


Figure 1 Eldon James Smith at Villa farm, his Daughter is Driving.

Eldon James Smith (1864-1936) was born at Bunwell, and lived in the village most of his life. He was often known as 'E.J.'. He was educated at New Buckenham Church of England School.¹ The earliest mention of his occupation was in 1881, in which year he was a builder and bricklayer, and probably worked for his father until the latter's death in 1886.² The Smith family had for some generations been bricklayers, brickmakers, and builders at Bunwell. His father had made provision for his two youngest sons: E.J. was to take over the brickmaking business, and Alfred was to have the building business.³ In the event, Alfred died young, and E.J. took control of both.

E.J. also farmed on quite an extensive scale for many years. He was successively tenant of Quaker⁴ and Wood Farms⁵, Bunwell. In 1900 he purchased Villa Farm⁶ in Bunwell and

¹ N.R.O. New Buckenham C of E School log book 1864-75.

² 1881 Census Bunwell

³ Norwich District Probate Registry 1886 Will No544.

⁴ Verbatim from Miss Mary Huggins grand daughter of E.J. 2007

Carleton Rode, and later bought several other farms: Hargate Farm⁷ in Bunwell and Carleton Rode, Double Bank's Farm⁸ in Carleton Rode, Borough Farm⁹ in Attleborough, and Bury's Hall Farm¹⁰ in Old Buckenham and Carleton Rode. E.J. also owned other small parcels of land and over two dozen cottages, mostly in Bunwell and Carleton Rode, but also at Pulham and Forncett.

Builder and Contractor

It has not been established where E.J.'s building business operated from in the 1890s. He may have used outbuildings at Quaker Farm and then at Wood Farm. He might have had shedding at his brickmaking premises on Brick Kiln Lane. Other locations are possible. After he moved into Villa Farm in October 1901, he based his building business there.

E.J. was contracted to undertake various building work at local schools in the 1890s: including drainage work at Aslacton School,¹¹ the enlargement of Forncett School,¹² and additions to Bunwell Board School buildings in 1893.¹³ When the builder constructing Great Ellingham village school went bankrupt, E.J. took over and completed the work in 1896.¹⁴



Figure 2. Eastern Counties Inebriate Reformatory Kenninghall.

He built four farmhouses on the estate of the South Norfolk M.P. at Roydon and Diss,¹⁵ the 'Eastern Counties Inebriate Reformatory' at Kenninghall¹⁶ and the Primitive Methodist Chapel at Attleborough.¹⁷

⁵ E.D.P. October 9th 1901.

⁶ N.R.O. MC1807/45. Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette July 14th 1900.

⁷ E.D.P. July 9th and 11th 1910

⁸ The Diss Express, and Norfolk & Suffolk Journal June 12th 1925.

⁹ The Diss Express, and Norfolk & Suffolk Journal July 13th 1923.

¹⁰ The Diss Express, and Norfolk & Suffolk Journal August 24 1923

¹¹ N.R.O. C/ED3/4

¹² Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette August 11th 1894

¹³ N.R.O. C/ED3/39

¹⁴ See Note 4

¹⁵ E.D.P. Jan.6th 1906

¹⁶ Verbatim from Miss Mary Huggins and Owen Stewart James

He was awarded contracts for repairs on several landed estates, including Shadwell Hall, which was owned by the Buxton family, major landowners in Bunwell.¹⁸

When his men were engaged in building works around the villages, E.J. accommodated them in former railway carriages. The carriages were taken to the building sites on large timber jills.¹⁹

When the owner of the largest building business at Wymondham died in 1912, E.J. asked an auctioneer & valuer to look it over and report to him what he thought the value to be. It seems E.J. was interested in expanding his business 'empire' at that time, though in the event he did not buy the Wymondham business.²⁰ In view of later events, that was probably a wise decision.

In 1917 a Tivetshall builder and contractor gave up business in consequence of the shortage of labour, and E.J. purchased some of his stock-in-trade.²¹ All employers were losing men to the armed forces, and E.J. would probably have been no exception, though he seems to have been able to carry on business throughout the Great War, and indeed he obtained contracts from the Government.²² He was involved in the construction of the airship station at Pulham.²³

At Harleston County Court on 29th June 1917 an arbitration was heard under the Workmen's Compensation Act, in which Ellen Edith Cooper, widow of Fred Cooper, of Bunwell Hill, on behalf of herself and two children, aged 13 and 6, sued Eldon James Smith, builder, of Bunwell, for £300. The court heard that Fred Cooper had been a bricklayer employed by Eldon at a weekly wage of £2, and that, whilst boring a hole in a wall, a nearby gas explosion so injured him that he died. Eldon had not been present. Judgement was awarded to Mrs. Cooper in the sum of £300.²⁴

In 1921 E.J. was employed to take down a building at Thetford Aerodrome, and sent his men and 'working appliances' to do this. They had to lodge in the town until the work was done. His client failed to pay him, and he had to take the man to court, where judgement was in his favour.²⁵

E.J. being an 'expert in that line' was appointed to the Building Committee of Depwade Rural District Council.²⁶ His advice on building matters was frequently taken by that council, and also by the Depwade Board of Guardians. Years of service to both as councillor and guardian no doubt helped him when tendering for council contracts. At their meeting on 28th December 1914, Depwade R.D.C. discussed the reported shortage of houses in the district, including the need for four more at Bunwell. E.J. Smith stated that farmers ought to build

¹⁷ See Note 4

¹⁸ E.D.P. Nov.3rd 1936

¹⁹ See Note 4

²⁰ W.T.A. (SB box. Letter April 27th 1912 from W. H. Salter to R.V. Reyner)

²¹ The Diss Express, and Norfolk & Suffolk Journal Dec. 21st 1917

²² See Note 18

²³ See Note 4

²⁴ The Diss Express, and Norfolk & Suffolk Journal July 6th 1917

²⁵ The Diss Express, and Norfolk & Suffolk Journal May 12th 1922

²⁶ E.D.P. May24th 1910

houses for their labourers, as they did sheds for their cattle. He said that the Council had to build them because farmers and landowners did not do so.²⁷

Just after the Great War he built 40 houses at Sunnyside, Diss, for Diss Urban District Council.²⁸ In 1920, Depwade Rural District Council awarded a contract to E.J.'s son to build 32 houses in six villages. (E.J. himself had not tendered for this contract as he was a district councillor and was on the council housing committee). The houses were of course built by E.J.'s building business: his son worked for him.²⁹ In 1926 E.J. built 24 more houses for Depwade council, including two pairs of cottages in Bunwell.³⁰

Employees

Some of the employees of E.J. in his building & contracting business:

ARNOLD. Three young men of this family were apprenticed to him to learn building trades.³¹

CATTERMOLE, Robert, *carter*, who lived at Diss.³²

COOPER, Fred, *bricklayer*.³³

ELLIS, Ernest Wilfred, *foreman*.³⁴

HALES, Frederick, *builder's manager*, who resided at Diss.³⁵

HEWETT, Harry, *carpenter*.³⁶

HEWETT, Robert William, *carpenter & joiner*.³⁷

SMITH, Blanche, Maud, and Gertrude, daughters of E.J. who successively ran his office.³⁸

SMITH, Eldon James, son of E.J.

Others who were probably employed in E.J.'s building business:³⁹

William DAWSON, *bricklayer*, William DAVEY and William LEVERETT, *bricklayer's labourers*, all of Low Common, Bunwell.

Ernest HOWLETT, *bricklayer's labourer*, James KEMP and his son Alfred KEMP, *bricklayers*, who all lived at Prince of Wales Road, Bunwell.

It is likely that E.J. would also have used employees of his farming or brickmaking businesses to carry out carting or other general tasks for the building & contracting business when extra hands were required.

Premises

By 1915 E.J. had a Steam Joinery,⁴⁰ and by 1918 E.J. was using a building near Spooner Row railway station, now the site of the village hall,⁴¹ as the timber store for his building & contracting business.

²⁷ E.D.P. Dec.29th 1914

²⁸ E.D.P. Nov.3rd 1936, The Diss Express, and Norfolk & Suffolk Journal March 7th 1924 et seq.

²⁹ The Diss Express, and Norfolk & Suffolk Journal April 16th 1920

³⁰ The Diss Express, and Norfolk & Suffolk Journal May 21st 1926

³¹ Verbatim from Frank Charles John Arnold 2007

³² E.D.P. Sep16th 1926

³³ See Note 24

³⁴ See Note 9

³⁵ See Note 32

³⁶ Verbatim from Gerald Hewett of Carleton Rode 2007

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ See Note 4

³⁹ Bunwell Census 1901

⁴⁰ W.T.A. Bill, dated Dec 15th 1915 from E.J. Smith Bunwell Steam Joinery Builder and Contractor etc.

By 1928 E.J. had a Steam Joinery Works at Double Bank, Carleton Rode.⁴²



Figure 3 Beswick’s Cottager Beehive
Part of a flyer advertising one of the Steam Joinery’s products

His main premises for the building & contracting business were adjacent to the then turnpike road near The Villa, Bunwell. They included a single storey building, which still stands, and which once housed a steam engine. This engine, an 8hp Ruston and Proctor, powered an iron saw bench, surface planer, thicknesser planer, spindle moulding machine, tenon machine and a bandsaw. A stream flowed behind this building and where it entered a culvert just behind the building a wooden shutter could be lowered to raise the level of the stream so that water for the steam engine could be pumped from it.⁴³

Norfolk Agricultural Shows

E.J. tendered successfully for the contracts to supply the shedding, grandstand, offices, hurdles for animal pens, etc., for no less than twenty five Norfolk Agricultural Shows, which were held in a different town each year. Fulfilling these contracts necessitated the employment of many men, and the transport of large quantities of materials to the site of each show. A typical description of the erections needed:

The shedding, which extends to nearly a mile in length, is so constructed that there is a covered passage in front of all the stalls, boxes, pens, etc., so that visitors can go from one end to the other under cover if the weather should happen to be wet.⁴⁴

After each show E.J. had the materials auctioned off. A typical auction included:

About 90,000 Feet of Deals, Boards, Battens, Rails, Posts, Scantlings, etc., as used in the erection of Sheds, Stalls, Offices, etc., on the Show Ground ; also about 30 doz. Sawn Hurdles, 4 doz. Riven Hurdles, 2 New Portable Fowl Houses, Corrugated Sheeting, Tables, Doors, Gates, etc., also a quantity of New Canvas Stack Cloths, in the following sizes : 10yds. by 8¹/₃yds., 7yds. by 6yds., 6yds. by 5yds., and 6yds. by 4yds.⁴⁵

⁴¹ N.R.O. C/ERO 1/273, and verbatim from Miss Mary Huggins 2007

⁴² N.R.O. DC2/2/1

⁴³ Verbatim from William Easton 2009

⁴⁴ Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette June 14th 1905.

⁴⁵ The Diss Express, and Norfolk & Suffolk Journal June 22nd 1906.

Closure

E.J. moved to live at Bury's Hall soon after Michaelmas 1923,⁴⁶ and concentrated on his farming business. He let his son, Eldon James Smith, junior, run the building business, and Eldon junior moved into The Villa.⁴⁷



Figure 4 Eldon James Smith Junior b. 1895 at Bunwell

The building and contracting business remained successful for a while, probably overseen by E.J. However, after he obtained a contract to build several council houses at Bunwell (beside the Turnpike), and others near Carleton Rode church and at Mill Road, Tibenham, the business became overstretched. Owen James recalled the words of his father,

Young Eldon had the reins, but he couldn't organise labour and the work got behind. There was a penalty clause. Young Eldon tried to complete the build in time, keeping men working after dark in candle light, and using boys after they finished school for the day. This was unsuccessful, and the penalty clause kicked in. Old Eldon went bankrupt.⁴⁸

At the beginning of 1928 there were three sales of bankrupt stock from the steam joinery works, many hundreds of lots, 800 in the second sale alone. These included; tools, timber, finished joinery products, an Essex Six Coach 1927 model, a Ford Ton lorry (new in October 1926) and a Wolseley Touring Car.

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⁴⁶ The Diss Express, and Norfolk & Suffolk Journal August 24th 1923

⁴⁷ See Note 4

⁴⁸ Verbatim from Owen Stewart James 2007.