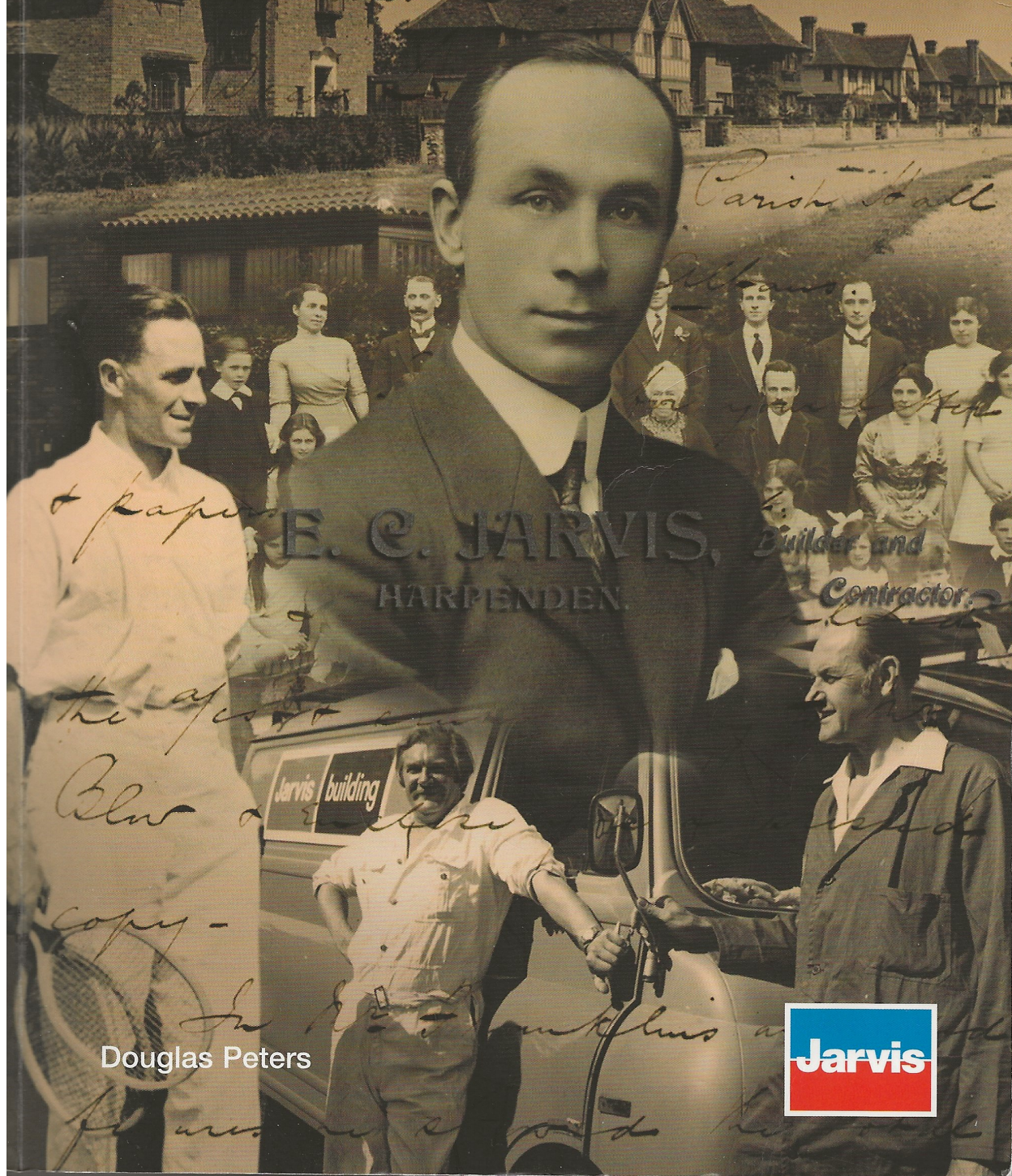


The Harpenden Jarvis

The Story of a Family and its Building Company

1905 – 2005



E. C. JARVIS, Builder and Contractor
HARPENDEN

Douglas Peters





Early in 1905, a young man of 23 cycled to Harpenden to see if it offered prospects for housing development. His name was Ernest Charles Jarvis.....



Ernest Charles Jarvis 1881 – 1966

Born in London's East End, "E.C." came from a family of builders. His grandfather founded J. Jarvis & Sons, now large national contractors.

After training in an architect's office, E.C. joined a firm of house-builders, but felt he could do better on his own. His brother told him that J. Jarvis & Sons were building a new Post Office in a small village called Harpenden which seemed to offer good prospects for housing development.

E.C. decided to cycle over to Harpenden from his Enfield home to look the place over. He was very impressed with what he saw, borrowed some money, bought a small parcel of land in Moreton Avenue and began to build there in May 1905.

Today, the one-man business he started has become one of the region's major construction companies. Over 75 years his name has become synonymous with building at its best.

We're told that more technological progress has been made this century than in the whole of previous history. When E.C. Jarvis started his company in 1905 the revolution hadn't really begun — certainly not where the building industry was concerned. Most work involved hard physical labour because few machines were available. And transport usually meant a trolley or horse and cart.

Building workers received little reward for their efforts. Craftsmen earned 8d an hour, labourers 5d. Working hours were from 6am to 6.30pm for most of the year, including Saturday morning. There was no sick pay, unemployment benefit or overtime. The only holidays were the five Bank Holidays—all taken without pay. And every man, even a labourer, had to provide his own tools.

But conditions were no less tough for the boss. There was great rivalry between competing firms and no mercy was shown. E.C. Jarvis often worked on the site with his men and completed his office work at home during the evenings.

In those days, most houses were rented, so the developer had to raise mortgages for all his new houses. He earned his living from the margin between the rents he charged and the mortgage repayments—plus all his other expenses.

As income tax was only 6d in the £, however, he could keep most of the profits he made.

TOUGH START

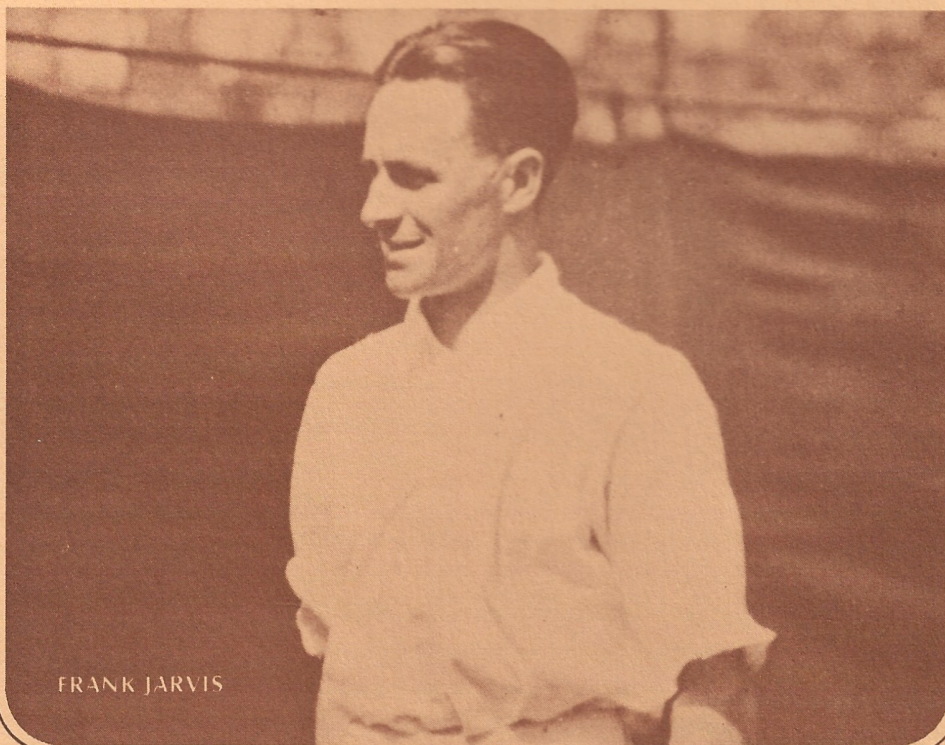
E.C. found it particularly hard to make a go of things at first. He had four houses under construction in Moreton Avenue—and not a client in sight. The story of E.C. Jarvis, Building Contractor, almost ended there.

Then his first client came along, took No. 1—and from then onwards, things began to improve. But even so, those first nine years up to the start of World War I turned out to be one long, hard grind.

Running the firm entirely on his own, E.C. continued to build houses in Harpenden and a few more in St Albans and Potters Bar. He also built shops in Station Road, made several alterations to St George's School—in fact, managed eventually to build up a business which became one of the most efficient and competitive in the area.

Many of his longer-established rivals felt envious of this young man who had moved into the district, started with nothing and was now doing far better than they were.

But tough as conditions were during this period, they couldn't compare with those from 1914 to 1918.



FRANK JARVIS



Harpenden at the turn of the century.

THE WAR YEARS AND AFTER

The Great War, as it was then called, brought tragedy to many families, and trouble and change to most businesses.

Just before it started, E.C.'s younger brothers, Cyril and Frank, had started a building concern in Hampstead. But when Frank went into the Army and Cyril became seriously ill, E.C. took charge. He also supervised a large contract at Vauxhall Motors, Luton, on behalf of his father's company.

So although his own firm dwindled to less than a dozen men, E.C. was kept at full stretch right through the War.

At the end of it he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He felt very gloomy about this country's future and planned to emigrate to Canada. He offered Frank an equal partnership in the business so that he could take over eventually.

But after a three-month tour of Canada to weigh up prospects, E.C. and his wife couldn't find anywhere they both wanted to settle. However, the break produced a remarkable change in his health and he decided to return to Harpenden and start all over again with Frank as his partner.

The two men were complete contrasts in many ways. E.C. was a forthright man of action who spoke his mind—a "rough diamond" with few social graces. Frank was a more rounded character, widely known and liked. He was good looking, dressed well, made many important contacts. A great sportsman, he twice reached the fourth round of the Wimbledon Championships.

For many years he was also the World Champion breeder of white fantail pigeons, winning two Dairy Show gold medals. Between the Wars he switched to breeding racing pigeons and won both the Queen's Cup and King's Cup. The Jarvis strain is still nationally renowned.

Together the two brothers made a highly effective team, taking the firm successfully through the tricky period between the Wars—which started with the 1920's boom and lapsed into a world slump during the 30's.

This period—"the golden years in the firm's history"—was important for several reasons.

In 1923 the Jarvis's became estate developers when they bought the Elliswick Estate at the top of Station Road. This was followed by the 60-acre Carisbrooke Estate where they built small houses qualifying for a Government subsidy and sold them for £525 to £575.

But probably the most important transaction in the firm's history was the acquisition of the West Common Estate from the Earl of Verulam during the 1930 slump. The 350 acres were bought for less than the cost of a single plot today.

The superb quality of the property built there confirmed Jarvis's reputation as Harpenden's top house builders. West Common still remains a uniquely attractive estate, clearly demonstrating that "Jarvis built" means houses of outstanding quality.

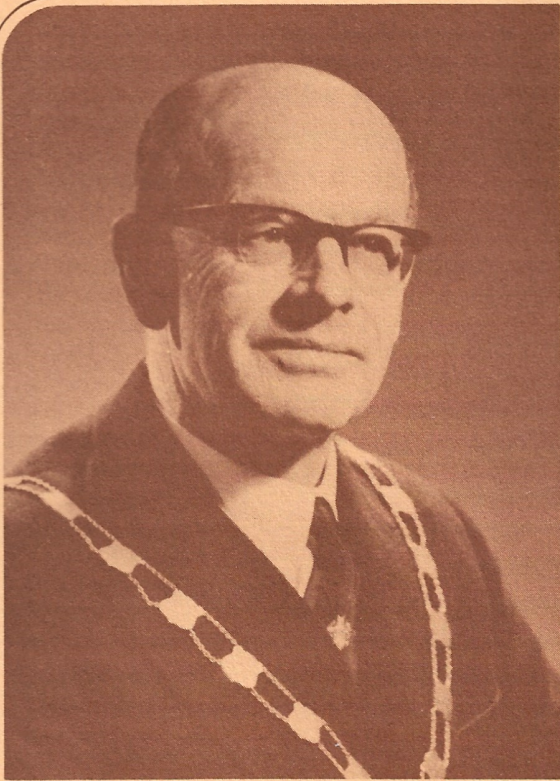
NEW ENTERPRISES

In 1931 the firm set up a brickfield using the fine quality brick earth on the West Common Estate. But they were inundated with complaints when the sulphurous smoke drifted across nearby gardens. The whole operation was closed down after a year but in that time managed to pay for itself.

An earlier enterprise in the 1920's came about through Frank's love of tennis. It was a fair weather game then, played only on grass. Frank invented a hard court with a clinker bed surfaced with brick dust and other materials. The Premier Hard Court Company was set up as a subsidiary and built dozens of courts locally and as far afield as Bath and Sheffield. But eventually the Jarvis's decided to concentrate on building and the enterprise finally expired during the War.



Little Manor, Harpenden designed by Frank Jarvis.



GEOFFREY JARVIS, son of E.C., joined the firm in 1928. With his cousin, Tony, he was made a partner in 1936, and the two later became Joint Managing Directors. Geoffrey was a qualified Quantity Surveyor and for four years was Junior and Senior Vice-President and then President of the Eastern Region of the National Federation of Building Trades Employers.

There were particularly important developments in 1928 and 1933 when Geoffrey and Tony Jarvis, sons of the original partners, joined the firm.

Tony took over the designing of houses—which still formed the principal part of the company's business—while Geoffrey concentrated on quantity surveying and estimating. Both became partners in 1936 and the two generations managed to work together as a team.

One of the guarantees of success for E.C. Jarvis, Building Contractors, during this inter-wars period was Harpenden itself. It was the most popular area north of London for top businessmen who wanted to live in the country and work in the capital. It still had its village atmosphere, the Common and Rothamsted Park. It was also separated from Luton and St Albans by the huge estates of Sir Julius Wernher and Mr J.B. Joel.

In this attractive little town, Jarvis acquired the best land and concentrated on building top-quality housing for senior executives while their rivals squabbled over smaller sites.

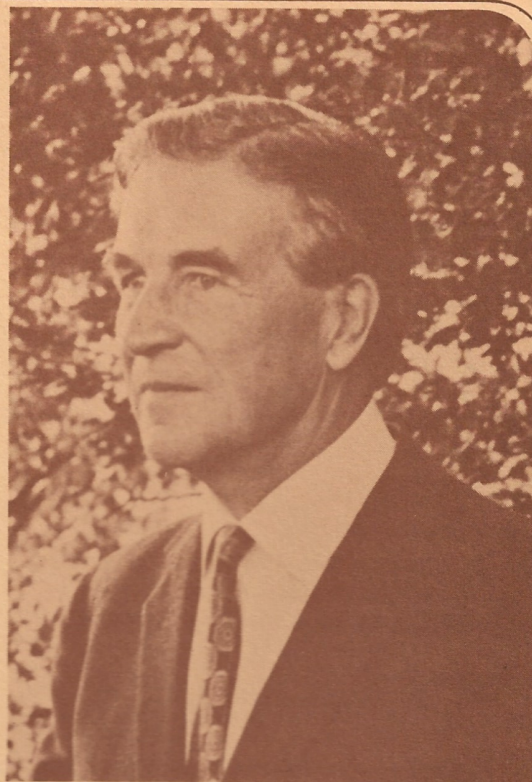
ANOTHER WAR

When World War II started in September 1939, Tony Jarvis, a Territorial, was called up immediately into the Royal Armoured Corps. Geoffrey Jarvis continued to run the company, serving part-time in the Civil Defence Corps, and E.C., now nearly 60, joined the Home Guard.

Throughout the War the firm's activities changed completely. No new houses could be started but those already under construction were finished off. Then the depleted labour force was switched to building war factory extensions and working on Army contracts. Later, after German bombs and "doodlebugs" dropped in the area, Jarvis was called in by the authorities to repair bomb-damaged property.

Quite early in the War, the firm acquired its first concrete mixer, having relied for 36 years on horse and man power! This incident was a portent of the great changes to come in the post-war period.

TONY JARVIS, son of Frank joined the company in 1933. He served as a tank commander in the Royal Armoured Corps throughout the last War, campaigning in North Africa, Salerno and Normandy, and winning the Military Cross. Tony designed many Jarvis houses and was instrumental in setting up Jarvis (Heating) Ltd.



THE DIFFICULT YEARS

When it was all over in 1945, Tony Jarvis and the staff who had served in the Forces returned to face a housing crisis. Materials were scarce and there were strict price limits on repair work and on new developments. At one stage only Council house building was allowed.

Although E.C. and Frank Jarvis still played an active role in the firm, their sons took control for the future. It was this second generation who had the problem of adapting to the tremendous changes which occurred in post-war building. What had always been a craft gradually became a management industry—largely through mechanisation.

Machines eliminated many of the old hand-skills and the hard labour. The growth in transport meant that workers were more mobile. Factory-made components made large joinery shops uneconomic. So gradually the tight community of the compact building team disappeared and some of the old values vanished with it.

A NEW START

A new Government in 1951 swept away rationing and licencing. So the firm began to build Jarvis houses again on West Common and later at Wood End. These included improved heating and ventilating systems due to Tony Jarvis's interest in the subject. A new subsidiary, Jarvis Heating Ltd, was formed to advise architects on heating systems for industrial projects.

This experience was useful when the decision was made to extend activities outside house-building. As a result the firm took on contracts in factories, offices and laboratories—which was to set the pattern for the future.

In 1962, Frank Jarvis died suddenly at the age of 76. E.C. died four years later, aged 85. The Company they built up continued to expand during the first half of the 1960's but later struck a bad patch—probably the most difficult period in the firm's history. Like many companies in the building industry it had work but was failing to make sufficient profit.



DOUGLAS PETERS

Geoffrey and Tony Jarvis began to look well ahead at this time. Both would reach retirement age in the 1970's yet there was no new generation of the Jarvis family to follow them. The Company needed a future Managing Director.

NEW LEADER

They found him in Douglas Peters who joined the Board in 1966 and was appointed Managing Director in 1969. Under his leadership the Company has introduced new directors and staff, new methods of working and a broadening of its activities. These include contracts for houses, flats, schools, factories, offices, hospitals, warehouses and hotels.

Geoffrey Jarvis, who officially retired in 1974, died four years later; Tony reached retirement age in 1976. As there are no sons to follow them into the business, Jarvis will no longer be a family firm, when Tony ceases to be actively involved.

Today, it's very much a company of the 80's. Forward-looking, employing to good effect all the aids of the modern building industry. Yet, at the same time, deliberately retaining that reputation for quality it acquired in the days of the old craftsmen.

"In years to come, the personalities who founded and developed this business may not mean much to the generations who come after them. But if no disaster destroys this part of our country, maybe in the distant future our buildings may become antiquities. And people might still describe them with some reverence as being "Jarvis-built".

GEOFFREY JARVIS

Jarvis

building

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