

# Nigel's Webspaces News

A newsletter distributed by [Nigel's Webspaces](#), a website dedicated to the history of English football cards 1965/66 to 1979/80.

## Special Edition – Life inside A&BC Chewing Gum – The Del Smith story

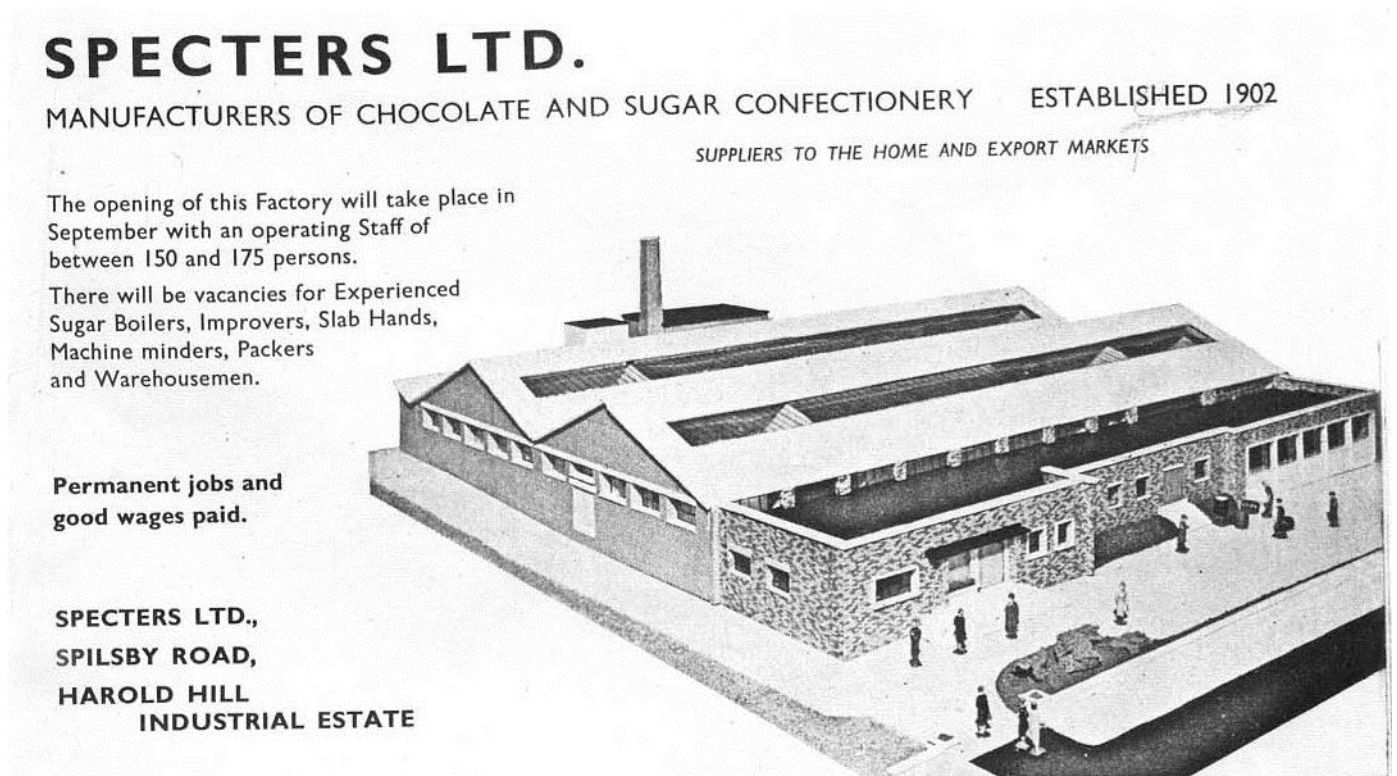
[Nigel's Webspaces](#) has been very fortunate over the past 10 or so years to be able to tell some of the story of A&BC Chewing Gum, producers of perhaps England and Scotland's best ever football cards (as well as much other non-football gum memorabilia). Click to read [the story of A&BC Chewing Gum](#).

Del Smith worked in the A&BC Chewing Gum factory (known locally as 'The Gum') for a short while in the mid-sixties, and tells his story below. I am very grateful to Del for providing his story, and hope that it will encourage others to do the same.

**Nigel**

### Introduction (by Nigel)

After a fire at their premises in 1959 A&BC Chewing Gum began searching for a new factory. They looked in the Harold Hill Industrial Estate where factory space was available. Del has sent me the advertisement below.



**SPECTERS LTD.**  
MANUFACTURERS OF CHOCOLATE AND SUGAR CONFECTIONERY ESTABLISHED 1902  
SUPPLIERS TO THE HOME AND EXPORT MARKETS

The opening of this Factory will take place in September with an operating Staff of between 150 and 175 persons.  
There will be vacancies for Experienced Sugar Boilers, Improvers, Slab Hands, Machine minders, Packers and Warehousemen.

Permanent jobs and good wages paid.

**SPECTERS LTD.,  
SPILSBY ROAD,  
HAROLD HILL  
INDUSTRIAL ESTATE**

The advertisement features a large, detailed illustration of a multi-story industrial factory building with a prominent chimney and a paved area in front with several figures. The text is arranged around the illustration, providing details about the factory's opening and job opportunities.

Del tells me that the advertisement appeared in a brochure promoting the Harold Hill industrial estate published in 1956 by the Harold Hill Industrial Association. What is interesting is that this is the factory that A&BC moved into in 1959, and the one that Del worked in. Del is not sure whether or not Specters Ltd. ever opened or operated or, if they did, perhaps A&BC took them over or bought them out.

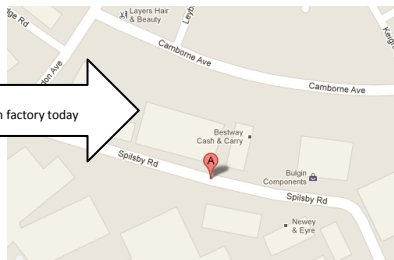
### Del's story

The A&BC Chewing Gum factory, "The Gum", was situated on the edge of the huge Harold Hill Council Estate. The housing estate and its associated industrial estate were built in the late 1940s and early 50s. The whole estate was populated from London slums and inadequate housing following the Second World War. I moved there with my parents and younger brother at the age of three in 1951 and I stayed for fifty five years.

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The schools were all single sex, they were huge and overcrowded. We left school at fifteen in the main and streamed out into factories, building sites etc, we were mostly labouring fodder. The Harold Hill Industrial Estate had a large number of factories, amongst many others there was Lee Cooper Jeans, Lovable Bra, and of course The Gum. There was no unemployment and most factories had permanent vacancy boards displayed. I could and did walk out of one factory and into one next door on several occasions, wherever you worked you would meet people you had known from school or off of the streets.



The Gum had a reputation as being another one of the "dead end jobs" The jobs were boring and dirty (sugar dust got everywhere, we all came out with permanent waves) and some pretty disaffected boys worked there. The pay was a bit above average without that I don't think they would even have got us no-hopers in there. I worked there for several weeks in about 1964/5. I had friends in there and they described working there as "a laugh". Looking back I think this meant you could do a lot of dassing about and you didn't have to work too hard.

That seemed to suit me at the time. Interviews were rudimentary; I simply lied about my work record. I know I did that because I always did. It was never checked.

A foreman took me onto the factory floor and my main job was to be on the ball gum machine. It was the most tedious mind numbing job I have ever had. I had to stand behind a chest high conveyer belt. At one end four continuous small tubes of pink gum would be extruded on to the conveyer, these lengths would be chopped into manageable lengths of about 300mm as they came towards me. The belt wasn't fast and my job was to roll these 300mm sausages across the conveyer and then down a slope whilst trying to make sure that they rolled down horizontally. At the bottom of the slope was a large revolving stainless steel screw or worm, tight against the slope and parallel to the conveyer. The round strips of gum would be drawn into the screw and balls would be ejected at the bottom into a tray. If the gum didn't go down the slope parallel to the screw it would bounce about on top of the screw eventually rolling up with the succeeding strips until you had a huge ball of pink spaghetti that couldn't get into the worm. I would then have to stop the conveyer, walk round to the worm and remove the spaghetti so that the worm could do its job. I often did this deliberately to break the monotony.



When the tray was full of balls I had to carry them up to the sugar coating tumbler. If the balls went through the worm close to its spindle they would get a coating of black grease, I took delight in sending these up for sugar coating along with the rest.

I did this every day for eight hours a day, after the first few days on my own initiative I acquired a couple of wooden pallets and balanced a chair on top so that I could at least sit down as my brain grew numb. After a while the foreman spotted me and said sitting down wasn't allowed, I said why not, and a lengthy argument developed, he got more and more irate and eventually stormed off saying it wasn't allowed and it was his last word on the matter. I ignored him and carried on with my high chair system and it was never mentioned again, though every morning when I came in I found that my structure had been dismantled and I had to rebuild it.

I carried on like that for a month or so with the odd day off sick. Then one morning as I was perched up on my chair rolling the gum off with one hand whilst the other one propped up my head I realised I couldn't face it any more. When along came my favourite foreman, he told me to use two hands (you need to use two to get the gum to roll down level) I was as unpleasant as I possibly could be, saying no, my arms ached and I needed to take turns, I was

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sure I would be sacked but no he eventually walked off in a huff. I clocked out about five minutes later and my career in The Gum was cut short. I was walking on air all the way up Spilsby Rd, whistling as I went.

I don't know if there was a union at The Gum, if there was it didn't seem to work, I doubt it existed. I doubt we would have cared.

Working at the gum was not a pleasant experience most of the boys had not the slightest interest in the company, boys would pick up spilt gum from the floor and return it whence it came and on occasion some would spit in the gum mixers and I heard rumours of worse. Bullying was common place, an extension of school really. On one sad occasion at lunch in the firm's canteen a fight broke out between two particularly dim boys. The place was packed with many adults included, the fight was not particularly brutal, but the response of the diners was to egg them on cheering and even when one was reduced to tears he was jeered and cajoled to continue the entertainment. I do remember thinking it was all out of order but I did nothing. Stealing from the firm was not considered wrong, though thefts from the actual factory floor were minimal because the last thing you wanted to do when you got out of there was to chew. I occasionally took some home for my little brother.

I had one friend, Peter Storer, who unbeknown to the rest of us had joined a lucrative business on the side. He worked in the loading bay, a good job out of the main factory area. Whilst there, I suspect following an existing practise, he would overload the lorries. The delivery drivers would then sell the products to retailers on their rounds. They were all eventually caught and sacked, Pete, who was the youngest, got fined. I can't remember what happened to the others. We all wondered why he had stayed at The Gum for so long, we put it down to it being a good little number in the loading bay. Obviously his side-line had something to do with it.

As time moved on, we moved on, grew up, adopted the morality of our parents, got married and trained into proper jobs. We mostly became responsible. As for me I trained as a carpenter, got involved in politics and trade unions, eventually serving 12 years as a Councillor for Harold Hill and exiting as the first Socialist Mayor of the London Borough of Havering. I am now living on a remote hillside in Scotland with my wife of 42 years where we grow some veg and keep a few hens. I never eat gum.

I said to you earlier the boss might not want to read this. He obviously worked hard and cared very much about the company, for all I know he may even have cared about us. The reminiscences are all mine, about forty seven years old and of a very short period in the company's history. The reason I am reticent about publishing them is because taken alone they may well not be a fair representation of life in The Gum. I am sure that there were many people who forged careers and even enjoyed working there. I simply don't know them. I have no desire to remain anonymous; I am not ashamed of it nor am I proud of it, it's just how it was.

Del Smith

Scotland, 2012

[email: Click here to email Del](#)

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**Nigel:** *I asked Del whether he ever collected A&BC Chewing Gum football cards. His response is below:*

As you can imagine as schoolboys all of the cards would be collected mostly in a haphazard way, but undoubtedly the better cards were prized. If you wanted gum you didn't buy the big cards because the gum to card ratio was low and you could get more gum for your penny with say a Bazooka or a Chix. I suspect that to the card collecting boys the gum was secondary; the small thin flat slab of gum was a bonus. I was never particularly interested in football so I paid little attention to those cards but many of the depictions of cards on your site look familiar to me. It was not unusual for young boys to climb over the back fence and steal gum from the bins, cards would also have been taken but those cards were discarded for a reason, mainly because they were spoiled. We didn't mind grubby gum but

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grubby or creased cards were not favoured. The back fence eventually looked like a stockade with rolls of barbed wire along the top of a six foot chain link fence. The only factory on the estate that defended its dustbins.

*Del kindly contacted Ken, another worker from The Gum who sent in his memories of working on the gum production line. Ken also sent in the photo below, which is the front of the old A&BC Chewing Gum factory as it is today.*



**Ken:** I've attached a pic of the factory, it used to be a red brick building and it's now rendered and painted. The workers' door was the one furthest away where you see a bit of handrail. We used to eat our cheese rolls sitting on the steps there.

Ken remembers 'I worked at the A&BC factory for about 6 weeks whilst waiting for my apprenticeship to be sorted out. My dear Mum was a forelady there in the packing dept. and we were never short of chewing gum! I was mainly involved with making ball gum but did a bit of work on the Bazooka Joe machine too. The radio would be played through loads of speakers dotted around the factory and loads of songs remind me of that time, *Everyone's Gone To The Moon, I Got You Babe* etc.etc....Really great days!

When you worked on ball gum did you do the job where you had to straighten and spread out the pencil shaped strips or rods before they fell into the two rotating drums which formed the balls? Once the balls were formed they would fall into a wooden tray and you would have to keep an eye on the level in the tray and then when it was full and before it overflowed, you would hop down from the wooden platform you'd be standing on and pick up the tray then place it on a pallet with the others you'd put there earlier. You'd need to be quick as the strips of gum (about 12" long 'rods' - 5/8" in sectional diameter) would be nearing the drums all the time so you'd need to get yourself ahead a bit with the straightening and spreading out before leaving the platform and you'd need to be quick to get back again. The big clock could be seen straight ahead of you and never seemed to move, though it did of course!

Ken  
2012