

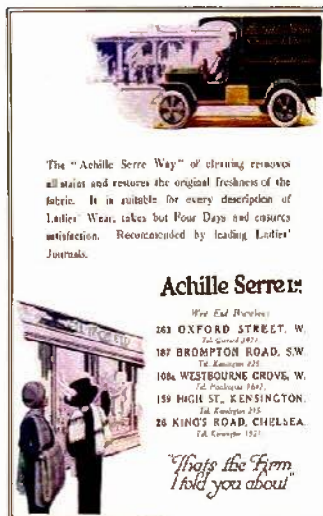


Achille Serre of Blackhorse Road, Walthamstow

The company was formed by French born Achille and Eugenie Serre who left France in 1870 to set up a company to 'dry clean' clothing with chemical solvents, a process that was popular in France but was virtually unknown in England. This process was continued by their son, named Eugene, who developed and expanded the company.



At one time in the 1930's, the Achille Serre Limited company had some 400 dry cleaning outlets in the UK. The Company was based at Blackhorse Lane in Walthamstow and at its peak employed some 1700 people, the majority of these being at Walthamstow. Indeed the company was so big that it ran its own fire brigade staffed by women fire fighters.



Recognising the need for a high public profile, Achille Serre carried out deliveries to their shops in smart green van with gold letterings. One of their sales promotions was to initiate an scheme by which you could hire a Achille Serre umbrella for the day if it rained!

During WWII the Walthamstow factory suffered from the effects of a High Explosive bomb that caused substantial damage. Trade was bad and the company got into difficulties and went into 'receivership'. It was bought by Portland Estates who wanted to diversify into the contract laundry business. Many of the now redundant shops were acquired by Sketchley who kept those in the profitable locations and closed the rest.

They now specialised in contract cleaning and much of their work was in the laundering of 'bag wash'. From the 1950's onwards, many housewives would put their washing into a bag and take it to a local shop to be laundered. The laundering was actually carried out by companies like Achille Serre who would send their vans to the shops to make bulk collections of the bags, launder and deliver them back to the shops. As a child I didn't mind taking the empty bag of washing to the shop but I wasn't too keen on collecting the much heavier damp bag.

By the 1970's the Walthamstow factory was equipped with the latest equipment for laundry work on a huge scale. Each machine could wash 700 sheets in 35 minutes and dry and fold them automatically. It wasn't too bad a place to work in the winter but on a hot summers day temperatures inside the factory became intolerable.



Unfortunately, the costly mechanisation came too late to save the company. Since the late 1950's the business had come under threat from the competition of dry cleaning companies like Sketchley and also from the increasing availability and affordability of individual home washing machines. This process accelerated in the 1960's with the advent of cheap twin-tub washing machine sold by companies such as Rolls. (This was formerly the Rolls Razor company that was acquired by an entrepreneur named John Bloom)

The Achille Serre Factory in Blackhorse Lane



Twelve months of War have proved the importance of our Service to many men who never before quite realised the advantages and practical economy of having their suits cleaned and pressed in the "Achille Serre Way." We can convince you if you will send us *one suit as a trial*. Free collection by nearest Branch. Inclusive charge 3/9. Interesting Booklet on request.

Achille Serre Ltd.

Head Office: Hackney Wick, London ("East 3710"41 lines)
Branches and Agents Everywhere.

The WWII attack on the factory

Whilst I was going out with Fay I found myself a better job for a firm of Dyers and Cleaners called Achilles Serre in Black Horse Road, Walthamstow. My job was to clean fur rugs and to nail old fur coats that had been dyed. I was working there for six months. This was when the dreaded V2 Rockets were being sent over London every day. The manager in my department was a sour faced looking individual and by the look on his face I imagined he wished I was some place else. One day it happened that the manager told me to go to the stores and bring back some more soap as we were running short - and make it snappy. He did not like shouting I suppose. I went to the stores to get the soap from the store which was situated at the other end of the factory. Before I got there I decided to go to the toilet. While I was in there an enormous explosion occurred. I quickly realised that what I dreaded had happened. A rocket had hit the factory. The only place that was undamaged was the toilet. People were lying everywhere. Some were bleeding badly others were in a state of shock. I did what I could to help. I arrived home very late that day and as I opened the street door my mother shouted at me "Why are you so dirty, can't you wash yourself". I said "Mother my place of work has received a direct hit from a rocket, that's why I am so dirty". She then put her arms around me and said "I am very sorry but I am glad that you are unhurt. I care for you just as much as all my other children"> I suppose being war time was a very great strain on her, she was living on her nerves.

This is from the memoirs of a partially deaf Jewish man who Worked at the Walthamstow as 'Fur Nailer'. This was a man who stretched out and pinned (Nailed) fur coats etc so that they could be altered, dyed and cleaned . I heartily recommend the full version that tells of his part in defence of Brick Lane from the Blackshirts.

<http://www.haimovitch.co.uk/haimovitch.com/The%20East%20Ender%20-%20Sydney%20Haimov.pdf>

An extract from Les (Raymond) Cole's extremely good Walthamstow memoirs that were published in 2001 at: <http://www.walthamstowmemories.net/pdfs/Les%20Cole.pdf>

I moved further down the road to Achilles Serre, to learn all about dry cleaning and Hoffman pressing. I was there quite a long time and enjoyed working for them. They became a dying breed, as most of the dry cleaning was being done by "Unit Shops." Soon after I left, they closed their doors for ever.

Bill Bayliss, February 2012