

My memories of Achille Serre

By Michael Gilbey ([email](#))

I remember Achille Serre very well, my mother used to work for the company as a skilled ironer, a skill unfortunately that did not pay large wages. In the 1950's an ironers wage was based on piecework and relied on the amount of items ironed. When specialist items like ballet skirts or deeply pleated dresses needed ironing, it was usually my mother that was given the task.

In 1953 my mother and my siblings lived with my grandparents in Leyton. It was a large house and several of my mother's sisters and their families also lived under the one roof. Unfortunately my grandfather, (a wonderful man), and a controlling influence passed away and family relationships became increasingly stretched. It was not the happiest time of my life.

One day as I left junior school, I knew something strange was afoot as my mother was waiting at the school gates, something she had never done before. My mother told me I was not going back to my grandmother's house and instead she took me to a new home which was the living accommodation located above the Achille Serre shop in Hoe Street, Walthamstow where the rest of my family were waiting. It all happened so quickly I never even got a chance to say goodbye to my school friends.

I suspect that as a long term employee of Achille Serre, they probably came to some form of peppercorn arrangement to allow my mother to live there. Although the shop and the living accommodation were completely separate with different entrances, the company would have had the additional benefit of knowing their premises were secure as any intruder into the shop below of a night-time would easily be heard. We lived there until Achille Serre closed down. It was clear to us that once their Walthamstow shop closed, the company would soon follow suit.

I recently looked at the living accommodation of these premises on Google Maps and they now look very dilapidated. I cannot help but wonder if the window curtains still there are what my mother left there over fifty years ago when we moved.

As an aside, about one year ago, I was finally able to contact my best friend at junior school that I was never able to say goodbye to. Sadly although he remembers our class teacher and given events, any memories he may have had of me vanished years ago in the swirl of childhood memories.

As a child, I do remember going to the Christmas party at Achille Serre along with many other children of the parents who worked there. It was the only time children were allowed on the premises. My mother once showed me where she worked on one of these visits and I recall a large room with row upon row of table like ironing boards. Each table had a gas fired iron which looked very heavy and much deeper than domestic irons. Hanging down from the roof like creepers from jungle trees was a forest of flexible gas pipes that led to every iron.

The walk to the hall where the party was held was like walking through a large estate that seemed to take forever. Apart from the delicious food, there was always a sing-song, magician and films. Most of the films were cartoons which were still reasonably rare in the 1950's.

After the party, large number of parents and children queued up at the bus stop in Blackhorse Lane opposite Achille Serre for the homeward trip. As we waited, a smartly dressed gentleman slowly walked down the queue wishing each employee by name a merry Christmas. My mother spoke to him in almost reverent tones and when he was out of earshot, said he was a very educated man who owned Achille Serre. I do not know his name, but he had the similar facial features and hairstyle as the actor Liam Redmond.

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