

From Zlín to East Tilbury: a New Start with the Bata Men

by Patrick Wright

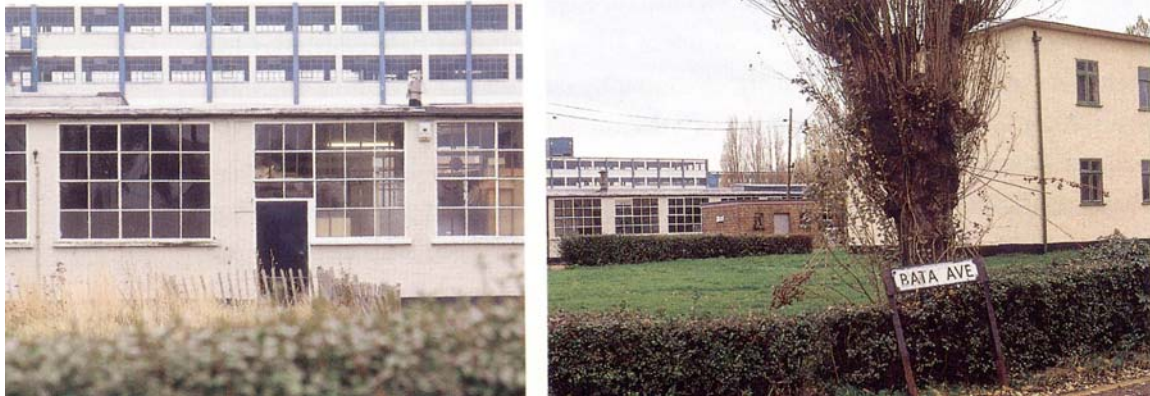
(extracted from Patrick Wright, *The River: the Thames in Our Time*, London: BBC Worldwide, 1999, pp. 50-59).

'And this also has been one of the dark places on earth'. Those lines were spoken by Marlowe, the sea-going narrator of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. He was imagining the Thames estuary as it appeared to the Roman, advancing in his trireme to land in a swamp, march through unyielding woods, and feel the 'utter savagery' of the wilderness around him. You can still sense that remoteness on the shore at Coalhouse Point, even though there is nothing left of the four Romano-British huts of wattle and daub, which archaeologists once found in this vicinity. It has been suggested that the Romans had a ferry in this place, and even that Emperor Claudius crossed the Thames here shortly after the Roman invasion of AD 43. But there is no evidence to support the latter speculation, and it seems most unlikely considering the width of the river, and the fact that Claudius came with elephants as well as the Praetorian Guard.

Yet it has not only been for the Romans that the Thames was a distant northern outpost at the far-flung edge of a disintegrating empire. Even in our century, East Tilbury has been colonised by a tribe of people who called themselves Batamen, and who built their main encampment a couple of miles inland.

To reach it we must head north past the squat fortifications of Coalhouse Fort, constructed in 1861 on the orders of General Gordon who was then responsible for the estuary's defences, and also the battered church of St. Katherine. The latter is a weird-looking building thanks partly to the cannons of the Dutch warships which knocked down its tower in 1667, and partly to the voluntary endeavours of the soldiers who were stationed here during the First World War. Having set about rebuilding the tower, they were apparently ordered to desist when some officious V.I.P. came by and started enquiring after official permissions.¹ Their dedication stone is in place, but the tower that was meant to rise above it never got much higher than the first window. Capped off at about the height of a modern bungalow, it can be counted the first of East Tilbury's many flat roofs.

The Batamen's main centre of activities lies further inland. Visible over hedge and fields, it is a factory complex. The many large and assertively modern blocks are painted white and blue, and the word BATA is emblazoned in red letters on the water tank above the most prominent. The clock above the gatehouse marks the importance of Time to this industrial enterprise, and there are many fine trees in the grounds, including poplars, which the early Batamen are said to have planted in order to disperse the water that still gathered in their stretch of former marshland.



If cheap mass produced shoes are your thing, as they have been for countless people in Essex, then East Tilbury is a place of greatness. Wellington boots and school shoes once poured through the gates by the ton. In the fifties and sixties, British Bata broke new ground with high-stepping, fashion models like Streamline or High Jink, which could be purchased in white, honesty or bone. But you would search in vain now for a sensible ladies shoe called 'Top Form' or for the popular Bata football boot that was once sold as 'Cup Tie Continental'.

Nowadays, the buildings are run down and mostly empty. Yet Bata's production continues, albeit on a much reduced scale. It begins in a small design studio where a couple of men with the demeanour of preindustrial craftsmen carve the originals for a gloriously freakish gumboot - perfect for any child who ever suffered the urge to wear a frog's face or a dinosaur on each foot. Nearby, a small conveyerised production line is in the process of 'slush-moulding' a batch of pink children's boots for a well-known retail chain. Sugarlike granules of plastic are turned into a bright running liquid, which is then poured mechanically into appropriately sized moulds, heated, and then pulled out by a man with an air pump. Other Batafolk sit further down the line: putting in the lining, attaching the all important Barbie stickers, or perhaps cutting a patch out of the new boots so that the all-important bought-in replica of Mickey Mouse's face can be mounted in the toes. Here was the industrialised system of mass production often known as 'Fordism', but it seemed to have dwindled back, almost to the level of a primitive folk art. I asked a Maltese worker called Vic Attard, what was distinctive about a Bataman. 'Because it's conveyor work,' he answered, 'and its repetitious and fast, so you become a Bata-ite. You think like a Bataman. Because production has got to move on...'

Back in his office, the Managing Director of British Bata, Peter Nicholls, explains that the East Tilbury operation is now only 'a pimple on the bum' of the global Bata operation. He employs 150 workers now, not the three or four thousand of old. Indeed, he was in the process negotiating the sale of the factory and all its associated land to a developer. New gates were being installed to mark off the modest cluster of buildings that British BATA will continue to rent from the new owner, but despite the best efforts of everyone involved, no one can prevent the long-term future of British Bata from curling up into the shape of a question mark.

You would have to be blind to drive through East Tilbury village without recognising that something quite extraordinary has happened here. The

houses of recent provenance could be anywhere, but Peter Nicholls, who offered to show me around, headed straight for the streets making up what is still known as the 'Czech Village'. Built to accommodate the 'Batamen', these are laid out on a grid system, and their houses are unmistakably middle-European and Modernist to boot. Each of these identical flat-roofed industrial boxes sits in its own little garden, but the slightly bigger ones intended for managers have balconies and built-in garages too.

At the centre of this unconventional settlement stands a vast rectangular block called Stanford House. Now given over to flats and shops, this was once BATA Community House: a considerable works hotel, which also included accommodation for single people, several restaurants and a spacious ballroom, where Bata people used to dance in the formal manner of their times. The preserve of Mr. Thomas Bata himself, the penthouse on the top floor is said once to have been fitted out in sumptuous Art Deco style.

Sadly, new worlds are overwhelmed and die just as easily as old ones. A caved-in carpet shop just around the corner turns out once to have been a purveyor of the milk shakes and 'Espresso' - a 'coffee bar' which was prominently featured in the leaflets with which the company once sought to attract young workers. There's a war memorial, sports grounds, a medical centre, and a school, now run by the council. But Nicholls also points out many amenities that no longer exist.

As the man in charge over recent years, he's had to put an end to flower beds and children's play areas. He's had to fill in the swimming pool, close down the Bata College where the art of conveyerized shoe production was once taught, and demolish empty properties in order to clear sites for sale. He's had to implement huge rent increases and then dispose of those modernist company houses - selling them to tenants at preferential rates, or unloading them on private companies or housing associations. It's a hard business, this thing that upriver types might lightly call 'managing change', but it had to be done - notwithstanding the fact that Thurrock council came along and, to Bata's amazement, declared the Czech village a conservation area and made the oldest of Bata's redundant factory blocks a listed building.

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One thing that has not been disposed of is the statue mounted on a grey stone plinth among formal hedges near the factory's main gate. The bronze hero who gazes out from this vantage point is Tomas Bata - the Czech 'artist of action' who initiated the East Tilbury settlement.

In the words of a company historian, it was Tomas Bata who did for the shoe what John D. Rockefeller did for oil, Henry Ford for the motor car, and Alexander Graham Bell for telecommunications.² Said to have been descended from nine generations of artisan shoemakers, Bata was born in the Moravian town of Zlín in 1867. Dreaming of gentlemanly prosperity, he started with two sewing machines in a small rented house on the town square. An idealist who once claimed to have become a socialist after reading Tolstoy and Zola, he came to see industrialisation as a means of achieving social reform as well as enormous personal wealth.

Bata built up a massive factory at Zlín, becoming one of the greatest industrial capitalists in the Czech Republic. He imported American working methods, agitated his own workers into forming a union, and drew up a 'Moral Testament' which placed the enterprise at the centre of the commonwealth and declared it responsible for uplifting the countryside around it. Business was projected as a service for the democratic age. Governed by the edict that 'the customer is king', Bata's enterprise would give dignity to ordinary men and women, offering them cheap but stylish shoes that would wear well and increase the wearer's status and self-confidence.

'The Bata System' is said to have resembled 'the organisation of a modern democratic state'. Convinced that industry should be the spreader of 'the Good Life', Tomas introduced profit-sharing systems and claimed proudly to pay his workers better than any other company in the country. Convinced that 'modern industry cannot be built by proletarians', he developed his own college for young employees. The Bataman was never a boy, so Tomas Bata insisted, but a man who earned his keep from the very start.



Not content with creating a factory that he hoped would produce 100,000 pairs of shoes a day, Tomas Bata stood for election as Mayor of Zlín and then set about rebuilding his town from scratch. It was a bright vision of a new industrial order, pursued with impatient disregard for tradition and also for the Communist critics whom Tomas Bata reckoned were more interested in magnifying misery than in bringing about authentic renewal. It was one of his credos that 'You cannot raise strong children in an apartment house'. Moreover, as the town architect F. K. L. Gahura is said to have told his colleague, Vladimír Karfík, 'The Chief believes the man who has a flat in a building with a garden is more stable, and instead of following politics would rather potter about in the garden or sit out on the lawn, so he doesn't go to the pub or political meetings'.³

Zlín became a modernist garden city, unique to this day as the only Constructivist city in the world. The plan was full of straight lines, reflecting Bata's belief that 'Whoever shortens roads stretches life'. Determined that buildings should be cheap, quick to build and disposable after their time was done, he used the same industrial principles he had applied shoes - developing a 'total concept' and a set of architectural blueprints which could be employed over and over again. The British Bata factory at East Tilbury was reputedly full of philosophers in its heyday. But none of them will have rivalled Tomas, who had his sayings inscribed in three foot letters on the wall surrounding the factory in Zlín: 'A wise man does at the beginning what a fool must do at the end'. Or again: 'Buildings are but heaps of bricks and mortar, machines are but piles of steel; only men can give them life'. That one was written at the top of the central electrical plant which powered some 20,000 machines throughout the factory.

At the Bata Celebration of May 1 1931, Tomas called urged the assembled Batamen to think globally: 'Let us not be afraid of the future. Half of the people in the world are walking barefoot and barely 5% of mankind is well shod'. He reiterated the point the following year: 'Millions of people are still barefoot in this world! It is to be regretted that we do not yet know how to create trade relations with them!'

It was with that mission in mind that the Batamen started to travel from Zlín. Tomas, who was an early exponent of flying, cruised around over Italy and North Africa, Palestine and India, eyeing up the bare-footed masses and selecting likely places for markets and factories. He and his pioneering Batamen favoured open sites, where they could set up their own total system from scratch: factory, industrial village, distribution and retailing operation and all. The buildings and industrial methods may have been identical from one country to the next, but Tomas favoured autonomy for the plants in different countries and regions. His empire was generated according to the unconventional principle he called 'world-wide decentralized business'.

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'Today this nation buried its hero'. That was the sentiment with which the Czech Republic buried this airborne Icarus of the modern shoe, after he fell from the sky in a fatal air crash in 1932. However, the migration of the Batamen was not arrested by this unexpected disaster. Thomas, the son of Tomas, took over, and in 1933 the company bought an old steamship, which had been rusting for several years in Marseilles, filled it with shoes, manufacturing machinery, equipment for retail stores, pigs, chickens and a vast boiler for vulcanizing shoes. They then boarded 43 graduates from the Bata School for Young Men at Zlín, and sailed for India and then Java. Other Batamen were transported to the West Indies, where they were soon fighting off an invasion of cheap Japanese plimsols. Wherever the young Batamen went, they took capital from the home company in Zlín, along with machines, building plans and technical skills. It is said that they sang old Moravian folk songs as they and their local labourers worked. They founded 'Batanagar' in India, 'Batawa' in Canada, 'Batapur' in Pakistan, 'Kalibat'a' in Indonesia - building up 'a sort of civilisation somehow different from the commercial and industrial civilisation of the time'.

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It was partly with an eye on Britain's imperial markets that Bata first came to East Tilbury in 1932, acquiring a considerable stretch of marshland with a few houses that were soon disposed of and, as one elder remembers, 'nothing but a few pea-fields' for anybody to work in. Tomas Bata is said to have approved the site and come to terms with the farmer who owned it, but East Tilbury's factory and 'Czech village' were built after the founder's death. The Batamen arrived, recruited some young natives from Grays and other nearby towns, and set to work communicating by sign language as they constructed a new world. Here, as at Zlín, the garden village was built under the slogan 'living separately - working together'. Everything was designed, right down to the cherry trees planted in every Bataman's front garden; and life in this dramatically renovated pocket of Essex was soon being conducted in the proven Bata way.

There were town meetings, sports facilities, and company shops that sold produce from the Bata farm. There was a Bata fire brigade and even a Bata milkround. *The Bata Record* reported on Bata sports events, celebrated the marriages of Batamen and Bata girls, and printed such things as the BATA ABC - 'A is for ambition by which we are fired. B is for Bata by which it is inspired'. It is said that just about everyone in Thurrock has worked at Bata at one time or another: some hated the mixture of industrial routine and social paternalism and left as soon as they could, but the others stayed for a lifetime, settling for a secure job, a place in the envied Bata village, and a wage that didn't seem at all bad by local standards.

Bata's industrial community became a bastion of Czech liberty in the approach to the Second World War. In September 1938, the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, responded to the news that Hitler had annexed the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia by saying that it was 'horrible, fantastic, incredible' that Britain should be preparing for war because of a quarrel in 'a far away country' between people 'of whom we know nothing'. Had he followed Elizabeth I's example and visited Tilbury, he would never have been so foolish. By that time, Thomas Bata, who had yet to relocate in Canada, was already running raids into the newsreel theatres in London, accompanied by Batamen who would ensure loud boos for Germany and even louder cheers for the Czechs. When the French government seemed to take a strong line against Hitler shortly before Chamberlain's broadcast, the Batamen made banners announcing 'We welcome our French Allies', and went to greet their representatives at Croydon Airport. As the war continued and the whole of the Czech Republic fell to the Nazis, *The BATA Record*, signed up to the words of Jan Masaryk, then the Czech Secretary of Foreign Affairs, who had told the assembled Batamen in Batawa, Canada, that 'Everyone outside of Nazi slavery must consider it his holy duty to fight for victory'.

British Bata's business thrived through the Second World War, thanks partly to conveyorized production of the British army boot. East Tilbury formed its own 'Bata Army', a detachment of the home guard in which the managing director of that time, John Tusa, served as a private. There were galas and concerts for members the Czech forces in Britain, and the ballroom at Bata House resounded with the 'songs of the homeland'. Hospitality was also

extended to foreign Batamen: in February 1943, a Canadian Bataman now serving in Britain came to East Tilbury and reported that he felt entirely at home for the first time since crossing the Atlantic: ' he was surrounded by the things that he knew, the same type of time clocks, the same sounds, the same machines, the smell of leather and the same five storey buildings...'

That same pattern of national loyalty would be resumed in 1968, when Czechs fleeing the Russian tanks, were welcomed at East Tilbury and given work and assistance. By then, British Bata had a workforce of some 3,500 recruiting from all over the world - elsewhere in Britain, Ireland, Europe, India, Pakistan and South Africa. Vic Attard puts his arrival down to a company recruiter called Mr. Ives, who came to Malta looking for workers in 1966 - a few friends signed up, and decided to follow as soon as word got back about the Beatles, miniskirts and other attractions of 'swinging' London: 'Here I come I said... You can't stop me'. And so Vic too became a Bataman, and settled into the 'big happy family' at East Tilbury. Before long, he was in the habit of surreptitiously picking dark red Bata roses from the flower beds outside Bata House as he walked home at the end of his shift, and presenting them to his wife - not a Batagirl, as it happens, but a Maltese woman he happened to meet in Grays.

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Just across the road from the old Community House, the Bata Cinema used to run three different programmes every week. In May 1962, it was screening 'The World of Suzie Wong', with an 'emotional' American drama called 'Back Street' due to top the bill on Sunday and a 'much more interesting' picture called 'I Passed for White', coming on Wednesday.

But Bata's age has passed; and the cinema, which has been restored with a grant from English Heritage, is now East Tilbury Village Hall, where the Bata elders meet for tea, Bingo and sometimes line-dancing too. The day I called in, they didn't need much prompting to start looking back fondly on life as it was before, as one lady put it, 'the whole world changed'. They remembered the Christmas voucher, adding that, of course, it did have to be spent in the company's own outlets in Community House. There would be £5 in a money box for every new born Batachild, and no-one had objected to the fact that a penny for Dr. Barnadoes was deducted at source from the wage. They remember how children who lived elsewhere in Thurrock envied them for their swimming pool and their gala days. The safety of the old Czech village had been so taken for granted that people going away on their annual holidays would leave their back doors unlocked. The 'Top Czechs' may have ruled with an 'Iron fist', but though the discipline had been strict, there is no doubt as one woman volunteers, that 'the youngsters today could do with it'.

The Bata system involved a profit-sharing scheme which, according to a company handbook from the fifties, was 'based on the assumption that in course of time the enterprise will be owned and largely controlled by the people who work in it'. But somehow, that never happened. Nobody likes to moan, but one man, who had put in 40 years of service, counted up his entire annual pension and arrived at a sum that would hardly buy a meal for two at a fashionable London restaurant.

These Batafolk may be adrift in the ruins of a community that once promised to see them through to the end, but they are not inclined to engage in public lamentation. They are making a go of living without Big Brother and tend to keep a concerned eye on one another. Yet, even the most optimistic of these retired Batafolk can't help feeling a little sad as they look back. Mr. and Mrs. Purkiss sit in the porch of the Bata house that they bought for £15,000 when the company unloaded it. He became a Bataman in 1936, and was among those who went to Zlín to be trained in industrial methods and also the Czech language. On his return, he helped to introduce conveyerized production at Tilbury, and then went on to do the same in Australia and elsewhere. 'I saw the world', he says from his chair, adding that he's glad he bought his house in East Tilbury, since some of the former Batafolk who couldn't or wouldn't are now paying large rents to private landlords.

Reg Fields sticks to his patch too - indeed, his life is so localised that he has to struggle to remember his area code. Yet he too was sent out to Zlín, as a lad in 1933 - 'a fantastic place', as he says, still shaking his head in amazement at the fact that he, a lad from Thurrock, should ever have learned how to ski. As for East Tilbury, he looks regretfully at the ordinary housing estate that has since been built on the fields he used to see from his window in the Czech village: 'we were a little world of our own... You might call it sweated labour, but it was a team thing...' There was no trade union in the early days, but as a member of the works advisory council, he had managed to get the company to install drinking fountains in the hot factory areas. And yet being a Bataman had 'nothing to do with creeping or blue-eyes... not in our little crowd. We had grown as a team'. So what happened to pull all this apart? 'I don't know, none of us really know. I got made redundant'....

The man who does know is Peter Nicholls, the managing director who lives in the real world in which idealistic businesses fall as well as rise. To begin with, he suggests, the amount of national autonomy fostered in Bata's world system, probably stood in the way of developing truly global brands of the kind that have become so important for other manufacturers. Bata was once proud to describe itself as the 'largest exporters of footwear in Gt. Britain', but the colonial markets which were once so profitable, dried up thanks partly to the policy of global decentralization under which new Bata plants were opened in Africa and the Caribbean. Perhaps the Bata name also fell too far down market as it reached out towards the masses. As for the Bata shops that once traded across Britain as family stores, they were sold off to Sears, and not very advantageously.

Asked what the future holds for East Tilbury, now that it is no longer sustained by Bata, Mr Nicholls hopes that it doesn't revert to type as 'the dumping ground of England' - a no-go zone in which 'they sometimes dig a hole and call it Lakeside'. This may sound excessively gloomy, but Thurrock has long been so seriously devoted to waste disposal that it is hard to go for a walk without falling into a rubbish tip or landfill site. As for its main town, having been so thoroughly demolished by its council in the sixties and seventies, Grays is freely described as 'a dump' by its own disappointed inhabitants. One of the few guidebooks written about this southern stretch of Essex even suggests that Thurrock may not have been named after 'Thor's Oak' after all. The alternative root is 'thorrocke' - said to mean the place in the bottom of a ship 'wherein ys gathered all the fylthe'.⁴

As for the old radar station down at Coalhouse Point, Nicholls imagines that a new road bridge might one day land in that place where the Romans are said to have made their crossing. I must have raised an eyebrow at this, because he insisted that East Tilbury would be an excellent site for crossing the Thames - perfect for those who wanted to skirt London and get through Thurrock in a hurry with the help of a new outer peripheral route connected to the M25.