

Ledbury Shopping In The Late 1930s

Written by Pip Powell

Thursday, 15 November 2007 20:52 - Last Updated Thursday, 04 March 2010 15:03

I refer to an era before the advent of superstores, fast food merchants and ridiculous cryptic shop titles, and before half the premises in the main thoroughfare became restaurants, building societies and offices!



To me, past housewifery and housekeeping was not only an occupation; it was an art, a science and a discipline. The male side of the outfit provided the money, the housewife/ keeper ran the household.

Sophisticated electrical household equipment was rare and expensive. The microwave was only a dream.

Pre-prepared and oven ready meals weren't even dreamt about. Preparation, ingredients, timing, mixing were the science; the acquired arts. So with laundry, cleaning and sterilisation.

There was the discipline entered into regarding shopping times. Being involved in shopkeeping all my 77 years, I can claim a little authority. All shops were required, **by law**, to close at 5:30pm. Early closing in Ledbury was Thursday, 1:30pm. No Sunday shopping at all except for newsagents and a restricted variety of goods.

Careful planning was needed on Bank Holidays, particularly Christmas, to ensure all provisions were at hand. No last minute rush was possible, and shops remained shut the whole holiday.

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Ledbury was always busy on market day every Tuesday. Farmer's wives accompanied their husbands to town to do their weekly shop, and most did their workers' and workers' wives' shop too.

The other busy shopping day was Saturday. Before working hours per week were radically reduced, the only shopping day for workers was Saturday and, for some, only Saturday afternoons.

All shops boasted the traditional shop-front: gleaming windows and neat displays. Food staff didn't wear the twee uniforms worn today, but white, crisp aprons and jackets. In each establishment staff and owners vied with each other to provide their courteous expertise.

Each morning the shop-front would be swept and cleaned and salted in the winter.

Winter Christmas shopping was a nostalgic experience. Much more relaxed, hardly any traffic and the streets lit by gaslight - quite bright, but mellow - an exciting warm experience: the climax of the year!

There was the warm smell of roasting coffee that pervaded the High Street from Wilkes the grocer (now Spar). Shopping at Burton's (now the gift shop) you saw a long line of Peak Frean biscuit tins with glass lids, and you could choose a biscuit and have it free.

At Bebbington's (now TSB) Harper Bebbington, the owner, was a bald, slim, upright gentleman with glasses and a permanent smile, breeches and gleaming boots and gaiters. Always polite, never condescending, even to us kids who went there. Outside his shop were always immaculately turned-down sacks of dog-biscuits, meal, grain and blocks of cattle-cake. Every now and again Mr Harper would throw a handful of grain for hundreds of pigeons that rested and fluttered around the The Homend and Market House.

Almost next door was Harry Barnard's (Treacles). Shopping there was fascinating, but would not be permitted now. Surrounding the complete frame of the shop-front was always an amazing array of game: pheasants, partridge, geese, poultry... you name it. All drawn, but not

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plucked. The choice was yours.

One half of Barnard's shop-front was dedicated to general groceries, the other to wet fish. This side had shutters instead of a glass window. Each day Mr Barnard would place a wooden crate on the pavement, draw out a large marble slab, upon which would be placed a splendid display of sea and freshwater fish and all sorts of marine edibles. In warm weather he would pop out and sling a bucket of cold water to keep it fresh. What price health and safety visitors? No-one became ill.

Taylor's in the High Street was one of the two biggest shops in town. Very high-class provisions, very posh and the only one in town with a van and **two** errand boys.

Gorin's of New Street was an intriguing family business. They also ran a boxing club on the premises. Before and after the Second World War, I remember, were a line of barrels on the pavement outside. These contained rabbit skins, others blackberries. Needy customers went rabbiting and sold the skins to Gorin's for 10d each, and in the season went picking wild blackberries which Mr Gorin would buy for 2d or 3d per pound. There were very few handouts in those days.

Churchill's the butchers (now Gurney) killed their own beasts on the premises. A large family of butchers and farmers, they were delightful people.

As well as the traditional established gents outfitters, in Church Street there lived a be-spoke traditional tailor, Mr Purney, who plied his trade in the time-worn way, cross-legged on his table.

Mr Gabb, in the years just before WWII and on a little further, was the baker where Frydays now operates. Remember the shops closing for Christmas on Christmas Eve, if you'd forgotten it or underbought, Mr Gabb was your saviour. He would bake early on Christmas mornings, take out the batch of bread to supply latecomers. Also waiting in the alleyway would be several housewives with the Christmas beef (turkey in those days was expensive). As Mr Gabb removed the bread from the red-hot oven, he would put the roasting pans of meat in. As all this occurred Christmas morning, the meat was delightfully, thoroughly cooked in time for dinner. Mr Gabb would charge a few pennies for this service.

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The Scene is Set

Saturdays and Tuesdays were the main shopping days in Ledbury. Always busy on market day, Tuesday.

Farmers' wives accompanied their husbands to town to do their weekly 'shop' and most did their worker's and workers' wives' 'shop' too.

The other heavy shopping day was Saturday. Before working hours per week were radically reduced, the only shopping day for workers was Saturday and for some, only Saturday afternoons.

Oliver Howe ran a private bus company, which served the country areas on Saturdays and Tuesdays. Their rear-loading Morris commercial small coach parked outside the Seven Stars. Arrival and departure times when the passengers were good and ready. The driver was the ever amiable Mr Davies.

There were **No Supermarkets**

A quick description of the town of my youth and childhood.

All shops boasted the traditional shop-front, gleaming windows and neat displays, food shop staff didn't wear the twee uniforms seen today, but wore white, crisp aprons and jackets. In each establishment staff and owners vied with others to provide expertise and courtesy.

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It seems inconceivable now, but one could possibly complete one's shopping in an area from the Cross to the Old Hospital.

There is no time to individualise (except later in a couple of cases) but just imagine this: In just the space of the High Street, New Street, Bye Street, The Homend and the Southend there were:

- 12 Grocers
- 14 Pubs
- 5 Butchers
- 5 Cobblers and Bootmakers
- 5 Cycle shops
- 4 Cafés
- 4 Hairdressers
- 4 Bakers
- 3 Stationers
- 3 Banks
- 3 Haberdashers/Drapers
- 3 Tobacconists
- 3 Ironmongers
- 3 Electrical/Radio Stores
- 3 Garages
- 3 Builders
- 2 Dentists
- 2 Tailors and Outfitters
- 2 Fishmongers
- 2 Furnitures Shops/Makers
- 2 Saddlers
- 2 Clothiers
- 1 Blacksmith
- 1 Post Office
- 1 Optician
- 1 Delicatessen
- 1 Dress Maker
- 1 Drug Store
- 1 Sculptor
- 1 Ladies Outfitters
- 1 Reporter
- 1 Jewellers
- 1 Cinema

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1 Wine Store
1 Co-op
1 Farmer's Co-op

All within 10 minutes of one another.

Shopping Nostalgia

Mr Basil was cheese and bacon. Behind the counter in general groceries, a whole bank of wooden drawers containing all the dried herbs and spices, of which you could buy any weight you required. When you walked in, the affable Mr Basil would insist you had a taster (free of charge) of cheese.

Mrs Brace, owner of quite a large establishment in Bye Street, also ran a Market House stall personally on Tuesdays and Saturdays; a very good business lady, down to earth, more than a match for any smart Alec who disparaged the goods. A Brace broadside was very much to be avoided!

Crossleys, a smallish, but distinguished fishmonger, was also proprietor of the once splendid cinema. Always up-to-date programmes.

Mr Shirvington, who not only repaired shoes but made them too, specialised in riding boots for the well off and people with odd size feet!

Mr Ford in New Street, a brilliant saddler and harness maker, was a retailer and manufacturer of leather goods. His ex-apprentice, also a brilliant craftsman, John Kington, is still in business keeping this splendid ancient skill alive with his son, near Dymock (Four Oaks).

Devereux the Greengrocer grew his own goods. The shop was in the High Street, the growing premises now Queen's Court, Bye Street.

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So too Manghams, who grew most of his own. He had a shop in Church Street and growing premises at Upper Hall Nursery, next to the old grammar school.

A splendid premises in my childhood was Mrs Chadd's Ice Cream Parlour (Second Thoughts). She made her own product; I remember the circular wafers.

In the early 30s we had a foretaste of the superstore, Woolworths (**Ed**: following the demise of Woolworths nationally, the shop became the independent Well Worth It). This occupies what was once Austin Maddox, corn and feed merchant. Woollies advert over the shop was 'F.W. Woolworths 3d and 6d Store'. Inside everything cost no less than 3d and no more than 6d. To us a new innovation. Between the doors inside there was a monster ice cream fridge. You could purchase a vanilla/strawberry cornet or wafer. These were ready-formed, not scooped. Also for sale were freshly roasted peanuts and broken biscuits.

When in need of sustenance or company there was Sherwood's Café, over their drapery store; Bruton's in the Southend, Cliff's Café (near TSB) and of course a 50s addition, the Milk Maid Milk Bar, situated where the café is opposite the Market House. There was a branch of this outfit in every sizeable town in England. An American style set-up, one could purchase practically any refreshing drink or snack imaginable. Also a strategic position for us callow youths to sit on bar-stools and lech through the large windows at passing talent. Much later, when we thought we had lost it, an ex-navel Commadore and his wife took it on and ran it for many years. An absolutely lovely couple, Mr and Mrs Furness made brilliant sarnies, milkshakes and soup.

In New Street was Davies' Ice Box, homely nourishing and I swear they invented the ice lolly! Above them, next door to the former Ring of Bills pub, was Short's Café.

Up on St. Katherines Terrace, operating from her home, an old lady, Mrs Wetson I believe, ran a shop supplying pins, needles, cotton and fabrics. Also on St. Katherines Terrace, a Mr Jimmy Smith, a notable and well known photographer, plied his trade. As well as making his living this way, he would go out in his own interest to record many of the changes occurring at the time, including photographing the varying stages of the building of the Clock Tower. His son Roy Smith continued the family business, but sadly is now retired.

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A well known butcher, Mr Bill Summers (now Llandinabo Farm Shop) specialised during the war in producing sausages and faggots. Comprising chiefly of offal, these were unrationed. From very early each Saturday morning, Mr and Mrs Summers and daughters, Sylvia, Ruby and Pearl and their boyfriend/spouses would work flat-out producing these goods. There was always a queue 2-deep all the way down the street until they ran out. So popular were they that they attempted to be fair by selling only 2 pounds to each family. This was overcome by sending the kids as well as Uncle Tom to buy more!

As well as these strictly localised shop, there were many more serving the nearby area, such as Maddox on Victoria Road (bakers and grocers); Jones on Victoria Road (the Post Office) and Norwich House in Oatleys Road, and so on, as well as self-employed seamstresses. One I can remember well as a child, who made me and my brother Paisley blouses, was Miss Goodacre; and Mr George Bosley in Church Street, who was responsible for teaching piano and music to probably thousands of local and not-so-local kids. He also accompanied the Ledbury Operatic Society (of which I was a member) at our rehearsals.

I must mention my cycle shop. Dad started it in 1923. Sadly, he died in 1960, and I have carried it on since - eighty-four year in total, of which my total is 47 years. In the 40s there were five cycle shops serving a population of around 3,500!

Ed: Thanks to Mark Broadbent for transcribing this article.