

## **A LITTLE REFLECTION ON OXTON VILLAGE SHOPS AND SHOPKEEPERS.**

I had my first brief experience of Oxton Village in the fifties and sixties, as there were a number of landmark shops, known by reputation amongst my circle of young friends. In particular there was "Fred the Barber". Fred Edwards' tiny barber's shop no longer exists, as it was demolished at the same time as the old, forbidding Talbot public house. It now forms the right-hand end of the Oxton Bar and Terrace car park, next door to Adams excellent butchers. It was a tiny barbershop, entrance at an angle to save space, one chair and room for two or three waiting, as I remember. Apart from the hope of a "Tony Curtis" at a very economical price (1 shilling and thru pence) Fred was known for one other essential foundation of male social development in the 60's. For it was Fred who introduced innocent young people to consideration of whether they required or did not require "Something for the weekend". He reputedly greeted all customers with this question.

The other thing I remember from those days was the business being conducted in what is now John Collins Garage, in Village Road. In those days the building housed "Welding Services", employing men in dark overalls and face-enveloping welding masks, carrying blue flamed welding torches. Welding goodness knows what. We used to peep at these workers through a small wooden door at the back of the building, an entrance only two feet square and oddly three feet from the ground - perhaps a relic of days when the premises were used for horses and carts? We did peep in with great care and some trepidation, in fear of what the men could do to us, if roused to anger by our intrusion. We were swept along by the spirit of the time and thoughts of Dan Dare, as we were convinced that the business made objects to do with space exploration and travelling to the moon.

On to the birthday of the Oxton Society. By the time that 1979 had come round I was an Oxton resident and already enjoying the mix of shops and shopkeepers, characters and eccentrics that were proprietors of the businesses in Oxton Village, around the corner from my new home. It was a while ago now and some memories are a bit hazy. Hopefully those readers with better memories will correct or add to my impressions.

Coming up Christchurch Road, I do remember a betting shop. I think it was the right hand end of the Green Shop. Its name has faded from my memory but an Oxton resident thinks it was one of the Pluck family shops. I do remember going in there on one occasion to put a one pound, crisp, green note on a horse which was running in the Grand National. It was as betting shops were, dark and a bit dingy, the atmosphere thick with concentration and expectation and I felt immediately a mixture of naivety (just how do you put a bet on?) and maturity (only grown ups were allowed in here!).

A couple of shops up the hill, the Pharmacy was, as it still is, in number 53. In 1979 the shop was just as smart as it is today though in a very old-fashioned way - with dark wooden shelving, little drawers full of ointment and tinctures and support stockings and big display bottles with clear coloured liquid in them in the window. The bottles on the shelves were 'chemist colours' - dark green one with ribs on the body for iodine and blue ones for syrups. The shop also still had large scales in the centre of the floor with a blanket in it, in which you could weigh your baby. I am not sure if the affable and knowledgeable Bob (R.C.N.) Powell still owned and worked in the shop in 1979, but he is a man whose friendly face and white coat, I remember well.

And at the top of the road in number 55, it was B and L Mackie's selling wines and spirits - Threshers took over years later. And next door to Mackie's there was a

sewing and knitting shop, a haberdashers, selling sewing and knitting stuff, shoe laces, scissors and so on. I have a vague recollection of leaving and collecting my dry-cleaning from there too, served by two ladies was it? I can't remember what the shop was called.

On the other side of the road, where the hairdresser is now on the corner, unhurried and serene was Fred Harris, the tailor. The smartest of tailors and the owner of a beautiful roll top desk, which you could see from the door and which I always coveted. I was never a customer of Mr Harris', though I can see his distinguished figure in my mind's eye. (Birkenhead was home to several great tailors. I had a stylish lounge suit or two made by Stefan in Hamilton Street, one of the great smokers of the twentieth century. Beno Dorn and Hyman Jacobs too of course.

On the right side of Christchurch Road going up the hill, Stubbs the confectioners had a shop, at number 48 I think, where Bruce Stewart-Hess is now. Stubbs was an old-fashioned homemade bread shop, which had its main outlet at the far end of Grange Road West. Oxton was one of its satellite shops – lovely iced buns and pasties. And next door at number 50 was the little Co-op, in the days when there were lots of little Co-ops all over the place. A busy little local self service shop with nowhere near enough room for customers, because of the vast store of merchandise.

One of my favourite shops was Longstaff's hardware. I knew the shop when Mrs Longstaff ran it on her own. The shop has been used for a number of purposes since then but now it has been converted into the excellent and welcoming Moose Coffee (already an institution!) In 1979 this shop seemed unchanged from Victorian times, with wooden shelves and drawers, a long wooden counter running from the window down the left-hand side of the shop, drawing one's attention towards the smell of paraffin. At the rear of the shop was an enormous paraffin tank, holding what must have been a thousand gallons of the stuff. Health and Safety today would have a duck fit with this, as one careless match could have taken out the whole block. Of course, in 1979 many people, including myself, still heated their homes with paraffin heaters and Mrs Longstaff did a roaring trade in paraffin, wicks and stove pipes. It was a sort of rudimentary B and Q from the dark ages. You could also buy the odd screw, bolt (Imperial not Metric), ball of string, Brasso, stove black and so on. Mrs Longstaff was one of my favourite characters of the Village, treating me not as a valued customer, but as a bit of a nuisance who had clearly come into the shop to disturb her. "Well, what do you want this time?" The twinkle in her eye revealed her real meaning and intention - customers were entertaining.

The shops and shopkeepers of the Village have long performed social as well as commercial functions. The Green Shop is an obvious example welcoming anyone who wants to come in for a browse, a chat, a smile, a sit down and even a cup of tea. At the bottom of Rose Mount in 1979 Abbey Antiques, where Oxton's own Tesco is found - Colin's grocery shop - also had a clear social role. Gilly Duncan was the "resident social worker". Long before Moose Coffee, wandering Oxton residents in need of a chat and a browse made a bee line for Gill's shop. Gill became a good friend and I miss her. On reflection though she always seemed quite normal in the mornings but for some reason began to unravel a bit in the afternoons to become one of the great Oxton eccentrics. I guess it was a long day. Most people around in 1979 will have bought some odd item or piece of furniture from her and I still have some in my house – a cigar cutter (I don't smoke) and the remains of a model of a galleon that has clearly been in a fire.

Round the corner in Claughton Firs there was an upholsterer. I believe his name was Bert Carter, though I never had anything upholstered there. The shop with its window

full of ancient sofas and suites, that had been awaiting restoration for 100 years, was demolished in order to renovate the flats. You can still see the line of the roof on the wall that now encloses the Mayflower. At number 7, where Oxtan Sunbeds is now found, there was a newsagent, one of three places where you could buy a newspaper and some Spangles in the Village at that time. And in now what is Oxtan Computers there was a splendid delicatessen.

Finally to Rose Mount. Villa Jazz was Premier Printers. Full of clattering old-fashioned printing presses. And I think at number 11 or perhaps number 13 Williams and Moore ran their electrical shop. Two good friends and good men, and the useful source of plugs and sockets, wires, two bar fires and needles for the hi-fi, that sort of thing. I do also remember, alarmingly, that their shop was once subject to a ram raid, a small family saloon being driven deliberately into their shop window for the purposes of burglary. Very upsetting at the time. There was a steady stream of customers.

In Oxtan, you could get your watch repaired at Frank Holmes, number 17. Mr Holmes was a lovely man, a senior citizen and a gentleman. Dressed more often than not in a blue blazer and smart grey trousers, and like so many others in the Village, always available for a chat, as well as doing watch and clock repairs.

The newly refurbished Edwards News is the twentieth century continuation of an institution. For me it was of course simply "Cottams" (and probably always will be!) A little way up the hill, past the row of sandstone cottages, now converted into a private residence, was Mike and Shirley's General Store. A little old convenience shop that was open all hours of the day and every day of the year (including Christmas Day, as Mike explained that he didn't want to let down his young customers who would need batteries for their toys). Mike was the politest shopkeeper of all time. "Thank you very much, Sir" was the phrase he invariably used, to impress on each and every customer that they were valued and should return! Shirley not only served in the shop, but looked after the children in the back. I recently went for a Big Mac in Mold, and found that Mike was the manager of McDonalds there. He was much the same as I remembered him and I am sure he would like me to send everyone who remembers him and Shirley best wishes.

Cookes Garage has always been there too - another institution. When did it start out? Mending horses and carts? With a similar air of efficiency and order? Mr Cooke did the work in 1979 without electric lifts, just a pit in the floor. Next door to the garage was the Premier Dry Cleaners. I think the Cleaners was in the building that now houses Brisigns. This building intrigued me for many years, as from time to time it brought forth, even during weeks of drought, large quantities of water and deposited it in the gutter. Have you ever seen that? A few years ago a thoughtful member of staff explained that under the building there is an old well. So that the building is not flooded, when the well is full, it automatically empties the extra water into the street.

In the reference library in Birkenhead, I couldn't find records of shops in 1979 to jog my memory for this article - but I did find a Kelly's Directory for 1966. In this street directory it lists the Cherry Café or Eleanor Gowns in Christchurch Road. G.A. Rowe the Fishmonger next door to Fred's barbers and William Richardson the Baker at the bottom of Rose Mount. Does anyone remember them? I also realise that being a man I tended to go to some shops and not others - the hairdressing shops for instance. Perhaps reflections from an Oxtan woman, who remembers that time would help restore this balance. Over to you.....