

More Memories of Shipton - The Village Shops and Roundsmen

Dorothy Brookes

Mrs Brookes, born Dorothy Coombes, grew up in Shipton under Wychwood during the second two decades of this century. Her earlier recollections were published in Wychwoods History no. 7 (1992).

Most local villages were almost self-sufficient; there were family grocers, bakers, dress makers, wheelwrights, a butcher, several smaller shops and one or two public houses. Shipton was no exception.

When my mother's youngest sister Lily Longshaw left school, she went to day work at the Bankhouse. The owner ran a family grocer's business as well as a small bank. Her wages were two shillings a week and a bit of lard to take home to her mother. In those days grocers bought whole pigs and boiled the bacon for sale over the counter along with the home-made lard and brawn. The owner used a shovel to pick up the sovereigns in the bank and Aunt held open the canvas bags for him to tip the money into. She then had to clean the room for the next day's business. He told her he knew her father Robert had brought the family up to be honest, so he had no worries about losing any of the money.

While Aunt Lily was there, the then Prince of Wales called in one day for help with a hunting accident. He was out with the Heythrop Hunt and MajoeBrassey had been thrown from his horse.

The people who kept the grocery shops didn't inspire much loyalty. The one with the bank attached to it was well-stocked and always had good, smart staff and a regular delivery man. The owner, however, was not so popular as he was overbearing, noisy and could have a child shaking in its boots in seconds. His wife never deigned to speak to village folk; their only son was not allowed to mix with other children but had a governess instead of attending the village school. I don't think us school children ever envied him, we saw him as a lonely little figure forever muffled against the cold, the governess dragging him along when he looked over his shoulder at the 'working-class' children playing happily on their way to and from school.



High Street Shipton with (right) Bank House and Franklin Bros' shop and a distant view of Dee's shop (left) early 1900s.

The other big shop (now Shipton House Stores) had little railings to prevent children leaning against the windows. The maiden ladies who, with their brother (Ernest, Mary and Ellen Dee) kept this

establishment, just didn't approve of children window-gazing. They would come to the shop door and ask if mother had sent us down for something. But they never shouted at us and 'Miss Mary' was our kind Sunday School teacher who once organised a picnic for us. One side of this shop was given over to drapery sales, and near to Christmas a lighted Christmas tree appeared in place of the usual hats, stockings and rolls of cloth. The tree was surrounded by books, dolls, games, paintboxes and numerous small toys. Once the cry went up that 'Dees' had decorated, we tore out from school and spent the next couple of hours deciding what our Mam would ask Father Christmas to bring us. The grocery side was festive too, with huge mounds of dried fruits, cheese and sugared almonds. How we loved it all.

The village sweet shop was older with a distinctive smell and usually a couple of cats sitting on the counters. They stocked everything that was tempting to a child with a Saturday's penny to spend - lovely glass jars filled with boiled sweets, hundreds and thousands, broken toffee, sticks of barley sugar, long 'shoelaces' of liquorice and numerous other delights. They also sold the basic groceries. Woodbines, cheap tobacco and snuff. What was more important, they gave credit to poor families, and there were plenty of these. Neither did they mind weighing up two ounces of cheese or loose tea. If they could not pay their bills they borrowed a box of stores from a similar shop in the next village. The first imported New Zealand lamb was sold at the back of this shop and, later on, fish and chips.

A notice on the yard wall said 'Stabling and Horse and Trap for Hire'. This was a relic from the days when my great-grandfather Peter Townsend owned all this property. When my Granny (Eliza Coombes nee Townsend) was a child they lived in what is now the Doctor's house near the school. It was only a cottage then and her father did cobbling. (During later alterations the window he sat by was discovered, walled up in a passage). He also drove for people who did not have their own coachman. He bought property at the top of Church Street and opened refreshment rooms, a pork butcher's shop and had a horse and trap for hire, the stables being down where the gasworks were later built (now the site of 'Bowerham' sheltered flats). Her mother sold 'piece goods' (materials by the yard) in the room over the refreshment rooms. Most of the property was eventually sold except for the refreshment rooms which were turned into a grocery shop. Granny's sister Maria married Richard Avery from Burford and they lived there with their two sons.

Later on you could hire a car from here, and once we all went to Chippenham for the day for 42s. We started at eight o'clock in the morning with Mother, Dad, three children and the driver, all in a red Ford car. We had several adventures on the way: this was 1922 and the roads weren't quite as good as they are today. We got lost once or twice before finally reaching my uncle's house, and on the homeward journey the car had several punctures. A kind lady at a roadside cottage lent a bicycle for our driver to go to a garage miles away for help while my brother and I sat on a roadside bank watching several adders basking in the evening sunlight. Eventually we got home safely, my mother paid the driver and Dad gave him 2/6d. It was a good thing he didn't charge for his time!

Grampy Coombes had a brother (Henry) who was for several years the village undertaker and wheelwright, while his wife and daughters ran the post-office. I only ever saw them from the other side of the counter and was expected to call them 'Miss'. (These were Kathleen, later Mrs George Wiggins, and Miss Jessica Coombes).

There were several smaller shops where sweets were sold from tins, and like the others they had a tobacco licence and sold snuff. On their shelves were packets of starch, soap and blue bags. They also sold loose tea and sugar but not much else.



Hathaway's shop High Street Shipton 1930s. Originally Dees stores, the shop was built in 1919 when Mr Dee moved from his premises opposite Shipton Lodge. The drapery section was upstairs with the groceries below. Deliveries were made to surrounding villages by Stanley Gorton seen here with Mary Barnes and the Model A Ford van. The railings around the shop went in the war effort in 1940

All these shops suffered terrible losses when the Cooperative opened at Chipping Norton and started delivering twice a week around the villages - groceries, shoes, clothes, bread and cakes and, what was most useful, they also brought bags of pig food in the shape of 'toppings' and barley. The great attraction was the quarterly dividend; few women could resist this and many found it their first form of saving.

Besides the gypsies who came round the village with pegs and ferns, there were regular pedlars or packmen. They came every few months with lace, ribbons and cottons. There were no operations for bad hips in those days and one saw much suffering and quite a few crippled people. On the principle that everybody had to eat, most women kept back a few pence to spend with these unfortunates. One such old man rested his basket on the wall and gratefully accepted a cup of tea; he had a speech impediment too.

A reel of white cotton cost 21/2d; he took your shilling and counted out your change as follows: "uppence-'appeny, 'eppence, 'ourpunce, 'ipunce, 'ixpense and a 'illing'. Then there was the 'Thankyo' man who bought rabbit skins, rags and old iron. He always paid the best prices and when he left he would slam the gate with a flourish, loudly calling 'Thankyo'; that way the next housewife know he was on his way.

Another old couple brought gravy-salt, bar-salt and pepper. They sometimes brought lardy-cake and could be heard crying their wares 'lardy-cake and lamp-oil!'. These two old boys had wonderful hair which they said was due to them wiping their paraffin-soaked hands through it before serving the lardy-cake. If you were going out it was quite safe to leave the money on the door-step for the paraffin, shoe-polish etc. Fresh fish and fruit were brought to the door, the fishman meeting the early morning train to get the fish sent overnight from Yarmouth so that it reached our tables in less than twenty-four hours.

Reproduced from the WLHS Journal No 10 (1995)