

SHOPPING in STATION ROAD the 1920s and 30s

Although there were shops all along Station Road during the 1920s and 30s, there were still some private houses, with their front gardens and with their walls still topped with iron railings, particularly between Eastfield Road and the Sea View Hotel. On the other side of the road, there was a large stand of trees where entrance to Woodford House School, where 'Alpha Carpets' shop etc. have since been built.

When you entered any of the shops, you went and stood in front of a counter, which always seemed very high up, and waited your turn to be served. Sometimes there were wooden chairs to sit on, with bent cane backs and perforated wood or plaited cane seats. Mostly old ladies used these, but occasionally children were allowed to perch on them, which often made it possible to see onto the counter, because the chairs had quite long legs. Many of the shopkeepers wore aprons, while some also wore caps or hats, and the butchers all seemed to have a pencil permanently fixed behind an ear.

Commodities we now buy pre-packed, such as butter, were sold from giant slabs and the one or two pounds you asked for would be patted into shape and wrapped in greaseproof paper. Eggs were sold loose and were often stacked in quite high piles in a basket. It was amazing how few of them got cracked or broken. If there were any in this condition, you could buy them more cheaply.

Most of the stores were locally based, but there were a few of the newer 'chain' stores appearing by 1930, shops like, the Co-op, (which was originally where the 'Bandbox' now stands), Greensted's Butchers, D.T. Evans (the Chemists), Vye & Sons (the Grocers next door to the Queen's Head in the Square), and the International Tea Co.'s Stores where Martin's (again, in the Square) now stands. If you had an order made up in certain stores, the assistant would quite frequently wrap up your parcel neatly and tie it up with string. The string was kept in a large pot with the 'tail' hanging out and the scissors were often hung from the assistant's apron or overall belt. Banks like Westminster and Lloyd's had arrived by 1910, but Barclay's did not arrive until late in 1937 and the Midland Bank not until after the demolition of the Wayside Café in about 1962. This site had our first Woolworths store for about 10 years.

In grocery shops, sugar was sold from a large brown paper sack and shovelled into a strong, blue paper bag. Biscuits were also

sold loose and stood in large square tins in front of the counter. Many of the tins had a glass 'window' in the lid, so that you could see which ones you wanted. Broken biscuits were often available at greatly reduced prices, but you didn't get much choice as to which pieces you got! This was probably just as well, because most children would have chosen the cream ones, and left the uninteresting ones for the grownups!

Green grocers were excellently stocked and there were always marvellous displays of colourful fruit and vegetables. The smell of fresh fruit and vegetables was a real treat as you stepped inside the door. We didn't realise it at the time, but they were also all strictly seasonal, so you only had strawberries between June and August, and oranges and tangerines only appeared in the wintertime. At Christmas, these shops were festooned with holly and mistletoe and would display dates in fancy 'paper lace' lined boxes, and as well as loose nuts of every kind. Dates, apart from those expensive ones in the boxes, were sold loose from huge blocks and were very cheap, especially considering how far they had travelled to reach our little Station Road shops. Most of the vegetables were locally grown and were always very reasonably priced.

There were about five butcher's shops and they frequently had large pork, beef and lamb carcasses, together with rabbits and chicken hanging in their open windows. At Christmastime, turkeys and other more exotic game birds joined these displays. The three fish shops, too, had open windows, displaying a huge selection of different types of fish. These were all sold off very cheaply on a Saturday evening, probably because they did not have refrigeration facilities in those days. The smell of the fish shops was one of my least favourite ones!

Baker's shops were a joy to visit, with a glorious aroma of new baked bread and doughnuts wafting into the street to tempt you inside. The selection to choose from was probably not as great as it is today. Some of them were on display on the open counter at what would now be considered knockdown prices. All these open displays of uncovered food were a great draw to wasps and flies, so to counteract these, almost all the shops had yellow sticky fly papers hanging from the window frames and the ceiling.

Another of the lovely smells that greeted you, particularly when you went into Vye's or The International Stores, was that of freshly roasted and ground coffee. There was also one part of the counter where your *nose* told you the spices were being stored. Tea was

mostly bought loose from huge wooden tea chests, which had silver foil linings to them. These chests were much coveted when you were moving house!

In Thurgood's, where Peter Newman's Shoe Shop later stood for a long time, they had a most ingenious system for sending the money from the customer to the cashier. The assistant put the bill and your money into a small cylinder, which was suspended from a taut wire above her head. She then pulled a lever, which sent the cylinder speeding across the store, up to the first floor where the cashier had her office. She then took out your money and bill, receipted the latter and returned it to the cylinder, together with any change you required and with a quick pull on the lever her end, sent the cylinder speeding back to your assistant. Pure 'Magic' to a child!

One last smell that always seems to pervade the earlier end of the 1920s was horse manure. Looking at old photos of Station Road, taken during this time, the reason is all too clear. There were still quite a few horse-drawn carts going up and down during the day, and while the carter stopped to deliver his parcels, crates, or sacks of coal to his customers, the horses made equally good use of the stop! This evidence was all cleared by the following morning, some of it by the road sweeper, but local gardeners and allotment holders collected much of it.

One of the shops that arrived in 1931 was Gardner's Corn Merchant's, on the corner of Albion Road. This was another one with some very interesting smells within its fairly dark interior. Smells like oil and paraffin, paint and candles, were accompanied by the smell of newly chopped firewood and the slightly musty smells from the different sacks of grain and huge bulging bags of potatoes.

One last category of shops that we children all loved to frequent was the sweet shop. The long shelves that reached up to the ceiling, all lined with big square glass jars of boiled sweets made the mouth water just looking at them. You also got a crick in your neck as you tried to see where your favourite one was on the top shelf. Jelly babies, humbugs, liquorice, butterscotch, toffees, fudge, raspberry drops, sticks of barley sugar, nougat, lollipops and, most yearned for of all, sugar-mice, were among the vast array that greeted your every visit. And many of these cost less than one old penny. Happy days!