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EPSOM HIGH-STREET 50 YEARS AGO

“The good old days recalled”

Few old names remain

Another austerity Christmas, with its shortages and restrictions, its scrambling to obtain even a little extra, and its high prices, made the minds of many old people turn back to half a century or more ago. They were the bad old days no doubt that from the view point of this lean year of grace, they appear almost super abundant.

“Shop early” was a phrase no one had thought of. There was plenty for all – except the poor – and Christmas week was soon enough to think about buying the turkey.

The shops, kept by a past generation of Epsom tradesmen, were as well-stocked as any in the district. They served the nobility and gentry – a fact they never failed to mention in their advertisements – and their stock, and perhaps their prices, were in proportion.

And who were these men who were the backbone of the town at the time? writes a correspondent. A walk along the widened High-street tells us little; the multiple store, the street improvement scheme, have reaped their harvest.

Gone are most of the old names, but a few remain on the fascia boards of a few shop fronts, and here and there the sons of old tradesmen carry on the tradition of individual and personal service.

Beginning an imaginary walk from the railway bridge on the north side and working westwards we find Chuter Bros, builders, where later was built the long, low, noise-ridden Cinema Royal and Arnold’s china shop – later the premises of G. J. Beams, a prominent Epsom figure. It was George Beams, many years chairman of the Epsom Urban Council, who asked “Why should Epsom wait?” – and did not wait for an answer.

Miss Hislop’s wool shop was conducted by Miss MacLean before being transformed into the Railway Inn, now the Charter Inn. Next door was the old-fashioned firm of Hope, butcher, taken over by E. Davis, Bookham farmer, whose successor was Mr W. F. Skilton.

An open-air showroom was a feature of the antique shop of E. Vassie, one of the Volunteers of the period.

Then there was the fine old house of Theodore Bell, solicitor, occasionally used as a courthouse, and an umbrella shop, afterwards Boothman’s and the Adams Bros.’ boot shop, and a house occupied by one Cuthbert Wood.

Somewhere about the middle of the east section of the High-street, Miss Wood, still alive and with us, had her dressmaking business, and from there Philip Parr later dispensed tobacco and cigarettes.

Nelson Hales’ drapery emporium was close to the library which became Vassie’s showroom, later Keeling and Dyer. Churchill’s saddlery was followed by a piece of wasteland – now International Stores – and then some cottages where Kelly pursued his tonsorial art.

It is not confirmed that Kelly was the original of the song “Anyone here seen Kelly?” – but it is a fact that after lathering a customer he was in the habit of slipping across to the Spread Eagle tap for a pint of beer, which are dispatched with such expedition that he could be back in time to knock off the offending whiskers before the soap had dried.

The names Harvey, Tailor, Tottle, chemist, Bliss, butcher, come to mind at this point. Then Andrews, bookseller, whose sister was postmistress.

Crossing Waterloo Road, where the Westminster Bank now is, was ironmonger Burn, and immediately after Snashall's and the post office came a row of cottages, superseded by the present post office building.

An old-fashioned and picturesque workmen's eating house was kept by a German, Schmuck, who also had a canteen at Horton Hospital. Kind of heart, he was ample in girth and had no need of a court order to reject unwelcome customers. No were his customers over particular, for on one occasion they attempted a small matter of arson, but his premises survived. A great draughts player, Schmuck's chief opponent was another German, who was curiously of the same name, but unrelated.

Next to Tom Skilton, the vet and farrier, was Sheath, grandfather of the present owner of the bakery, where even to-day 2lb. loaves come from the same oven as did the quartern loaves of 90 years ago. Adjoining is the house, where a grandfather clock, made by Huck, of Epsom, ticks in exactly the same position as it did 85 years ago.

A great Epsom character at this point was Tom Miles, the greengrocer and market gardener, one of whose sidelines was selling large rhubarb leaves to act as sunshades for racegoers.

Where Longhurst's now stands was a tailor named Swinson, and it is interesting to recall that the alley way leading to the station was at that time a source of revenue to the London and South Western Railway, who charged for its use. A fee was paid voluntarily, if not willingly, by the traders at the west end of the town in order to encourage customers to make use of that narrow thoroughfare.

On the Wandsworth Gas Co.'s site was the little china shop of George Snashall, a little old man with a beard, who delighted in running out of his shop to open the carriage doors of his more socially acceptable customers.

Following a farrier, then George and James Furniss, builders, Bance, a cooper, Gerard Miles, the last named an active fireman in the days when Maunsell Reeves was chief of the brigade. Reeves was drowned when the G. E. Railway Co.'s ship, the "Berlin", went down off the Hook of Holland in a gale.

Next to Roast's lived another "character" - "Raspberry Sayers", the cab driver. Possessed of a red nose, hence the soubriquet, and a hot temper, he was not always kindly disposed towards his potential fares if they called him out in bad weather. But one, as choleric as he, was the late Lord Chief Justice Russell of Killowen, whom he used to drive to his home at Tadworth.

A very celebrated trader in this area was Robert Dearle, the tallow chandler, who saw 60 Derbys. Towards the end of his long life a custom grew up of his going to the races in Lord Rosebery's carriage, and on one occasion he was graciously presented with £50 by the noble lord when one of the ex-prime minister's horses won the Derby.

W. H. Hicks, another devotee of the tonsorial art, carried on business and about here, before moving his premises, and his successor was Frank Duplock of the A.1 Boot Stores.

One recalls other names in this region: Alfred Barrett, baker, Chamberlain, Wooldridge, licensee of the George Inn, and a relation of Billy Wooldridge, Urban Council sanitary inspector and formidable bowler of "daisy cutters."

Conveniently situated between two public-houses was a pork butcher, and at the rear of the Tuns tavern was a four-penny doss house.

Up to the Marquis of Granby was Shorts' laundry, George Bradnam, butcher, and further on was Jonathan Gray, a big built man, one of whose daughters still conducts a private school at the Lecture Hall.

Across the end portion of the high street facing the clocktower was Wyeth Bros., grocers, Crocker, a saddler, and the Albion public-house.

Mrs. Beachamp, Mrs. Lodge, a draper, Randall, mineral water manufacturer, Simon Barton, forage merchant, and William Barton, grocer. One remembers what good friends the Bartons were to the children, who generally came away from their respective shops with either a biscuit or sweets.

The south side of Epsom High-street has not undergone the great structural alteration that has obliterated so many landmarks on the north side, but time has been at work among many fine businesses.

Few to-day will remember bearded, frock-coated Wilkins, the watchmaker, an important figure in the temperance work.

Bristow, Oldridge, Nash, a tailor, Jones, a butcher, and Young, grocer, were old-established businesses at the west end and near to them were Langlands and the firm of Chadband. The last named, now Mackintosh, made suits for Epsom men for a hundred years. Then came Harsant, the chemist, in his smoking cap.

There followed the Kings Head, John Wood, grocer – his daughters were drapers – Jennings, pork butcher, Barnards, bakers and confectioners, Weston's music shop, Daniell, newsagent, H. Skilton, dairyman, and Thompson, another draper. The last named was followed by "Squeaker Wells," so called by reason of a thin, high-pitched voice.

Another noted figure in this part of the town was Charles Barnard, an eccentric whose favourite walking companion was a Bible. Many old people to-day will remember stopping "Cranky Barnard" and asking him to read them a chapter from the book – which he always did with great courtesy. His "revenge" was to place pennies on a wall after they had trotted up the street. Equally noted for his sartorial style, Barnard always wore a silk or satin suit differently coloured on each side. These he had periodically reversed, with startling effect, whilst his hair was born in a long plait screwed up underneath a smoking cap.

Crossing Ashley-road, one passed the Spread Eagle to where 20-stone George Nye, the builder, worked, and then came Charman, the watchmaker, Williams and Blomfield, tailors, Lewis, ironmonger, Waglan, Bostridge, Marshall, Lock, pork butcher, Hales' toy shop, Chambers, watchmaker, Tresize, fishmonger, Fensome, greengrocer, and Beauchamp, bootmakers.

The firm of Beauchamp made boots for many famous figures on the turf, including the great Fred Archer, who, having a reputation for racing with one foot over the rail, no doubt had need of strong leather. Archer rode his first Derby in 1877. The firm closed down in 1939 after being in existence nearly a century.

Other shops were Norman Stores, oil chandlers, C. J. Waters, Turner, grocers – whose board from a distance read "Eggs for nothing" – Slatter, coachbuilder, Hicks, hairdresser and umbrella shop, Miss Roses' confectionary shop, Busbridge's wine shop, Tarr, a butcher, Brandt, a barber, Ede (father of Mr. J. Chuter Ede), grocer and baker, and Oxley, a chemist. Oxley pulled out many a tooth for a shilling, and finally David Bristow's secondhand furniture shop.

Doubtless many old residents will remember more of these ancient names. If they do, or if one has made a mistake, perhaps they will write and say so.

Another local paper article (undated, but apparently of the same vintage)

Both because of his having spent the whole of his now somewhat long life in Epsom, and because of his having been actively interested in the work and inhabitants of the place, Mr H. W. Saunders, who possesses a good memory, is able to speak informatively about the history of Epsom during many years. On Friday the Epsom Rotarians listened to him telling about "Epsom as I have known it," and they were entertained by his description of some of the things that happened in his young days. Then the sending or receiving of a letter was an event, he told his hearers. He described the laboured process of getting a stamp.

"One had," said Mr. Saunders, "to go along the passage next to the staircase now leading to the offices of Edward and Sharpe, auctioneers and estate agents, High-street. There a small knocker was carefully rapped, and eventually an elderly lady (Mrs L. W. Andrews) Would open the trap-door, enquire your business, and after a reasonable time had elapsed, or a customer served, or some conversation completed, the precious article, the stamp, would come to hand."

In Mr. Saunders' earliest days, Epsom was an agricultural town. The Surrey Agricultural Association's ploughing match and dinner was a big annual event for such a farming district as this then was. But London has thrown out its waves of buildings since then, and the Association is finding, on its approach to its hundredth year, that it must retreat or die. It finds that to avoid the prospect of extinction it must gain support from the south of the county, and this explains why, for the first time in its long existence, the ploughing match and annual dinner will this year be held at Dorking. Never before has the dinner taken place other than at Epsom, and here, it is to be hoped, it will be held next year - the centenary year - even if it should be the farewell dinner to it as far as Epsom is concerned.

On sentimental and other grounds it is fitting that the centenary should be celebrated in town which gave the Association birth, and in which it has had its headquarters or just close on 100 years. Year by year farmers, huntsmen and Epsom tradesmen have foregathered after the ploughing match and spent a jolly evening together. Speeches have been delivered, and songs about John Peel and other celebrities have been sung by men upon whom silence now rests. Since the Association was started generations have passed away, but the Association still lives, and though it continuing to live depends upon its migrating south, at any rate it would be ingratitude on its part to spend its 100th birthday other than at the place of its birth. The ploughing match this year is to take place on October 3rd, and the annual dinner on November 7th.